

Officials' View

By Dr. Azmy

The Topic of the Hour: The Service Rule

Before I get to the issue at hand, I would like to cover a question that has been sent to me by an umpire who was just playing at a tournament. The question was, "I am an International Umpire and was participating in a tournament as a player. Can I interfere in a game and try to ask players to correct their serves or other mistakes violating the rules of the sport?"

It reminds me of the situation when an umpire is sitting watching a match in a tournament and suddenly the ball touches the net or the edge of the table, and the umpire finds himself almost jumping from his chair to say a net or an edge, etc. Or when a player is watching his best friend playing, and he moves with every shot his friend is hitting.

The answer is simply NO, as a player you are just a player like every other player in the tournament. You perform only your role. However, you can help if asked by the tournament Referee, Director, or Manager to help by umpiring during the tournament. I also have to add, you should umpire only the matches you are asked to umpire. However, if you are asked to keep an eye on all the tables at the tournament, which sometimes is the case in small tournaments, only then may you interfere and correct the play.

Now back to the topic at hand, the service rule. I have just returned from the World Team Championships at Doha, Qatar, after serving as a deputy referee. I have to say it was a very strong, successful, well-organized tournament. Qatar is a rich country and they did their best to show their generosity and friendship to all the players, coaches, umpires, officials, volunteers, delegates, spectators, etc. China dominated the play at the tournament with high level, superb performances. The level of play was high caliber. Most matches stretched to five games with many deuces in the fifth game.

Only one hitch kept rocking the harmony of the tournament and that was the new addition to the service rule: the removal of the free arm from the area between the server's body and the posts of the net. On one hand it seemed that some players and coaches, from some countries, did not hear about the new rule. Some knew about it but did not feel it necessary. And some kept asking about the reason for the rule, especially when it was clear the server's arm did not hide the ball from the receiver.

On the other hand, the umpires were under the gun. The tournament was preceded by a two-day workshop to train evaluators how to evaluate umpires objectively. Knowing that they were being observed and graded while umpiring, the umpires felt obliged to enforce the rule.

The result was a lot of conflict between some players and coaches, and the umpires. It took a lot of courtesy and convincing to some, and a lot of yellow and red cards to others.

The question is: Where to go from here? I have to say the umpires are facing a difficult situation. Many of them sympathize with the players, because they may agree with some of their points of view. But they have to enforce the rules for the sake of fairness to those players who are adhering to the rules. One has to look to it this way, we as umpires and officials have duties and responsibilities. Our duties as umpires are to enforce the rules, and that is what we have pledged when we accepted to serve at the tournaments these days. But as umpires and officials we have a greater responsibility to help the sport to grow and succeed and move to higher levels of harmony and cooperation between players, coaches, umpires, officials, etc. With that in mind we can raise our voices to suggest possible changes that may help the sport.

Voices have been raised enough in the ITTF Rules Committee to propose some positive change. It seems that other officials and committees have also raised their concerns. It is my understanding that Adham Sharara, the President of the ITTF, has announced that there will be a committee formed of officials, umpires, players, coaches, and some representatives from other committees, for the purpose of studying the service rules and come to a simpler and more applicable proposal to help alleviate the problem.

The USATT Rules/Officials Committee is proposing a modified version, and this may be the time for its adoption. In fact, passing the proposal to many delegates and officials of other associations, and discussing it at the Rules Committee meetings, has gained some approvals. The following is the text of the proposal:

“During the serve, no part of the server’s body or his partner’s will be above or between the ball (and its extended horizontal line), resting on his flat hand, and his end line of the table.”

Justification

1. This will guarantee the visibility of the ball to his opponent, umpires, and audiences (except those sitting behind the players).
2. The end line has been a focal point during the serve for years, as the ball has to be behind and above the end line.
3. It is easy for players to understand and apply.
4. It will give the player the flexibility to serve forehand as well as backhand serves.
5. It will create conformity to the rule on both sides of the table. As it is now, when we have only one umpire, a serve can be legal on one side of the table but could be ruled illegal on the other side of the table, because the umpire cannot see it.
6. It is easier for the umpire to apply, and see the ball all the time, regardless if he is working alone or with an assistant umpire.
7. The eyes of the umpires are already watching the end line to see that the ball has to be behind and above it.
8. It avoids all the confusion and misinterpretation of the rule regarding the triangle and the space above it.
9. Finally, the rule will stand on its own merit, like all other rules, regardless of who sees it and who does not.

We hope that this proposal or a similar simple one will be adopted by the ITTF in the near future. I also want to remind the umpires that we as umpires have to apply the rules as they stand at this time, regardless of our personal opinions.