

An Official's View
The Pursuit of Excellence and Conflicts
By Dr. Azmy

A successful and smoothly run U.S. Open took place at Charlotte, N.C. The venue, the Hotel, and the hospitality of the people of the city added charm to the atmosphere.

Thanks and appreciations are due to all those who contributed to the tournament success: the volunteers, the USATT president, staff, administration, the tournament committee, the officials, the umpires, and the players. However, one problem disrupted the atmosphere, a conflict between players, coaches, and umpires.

The players are trying to reach the highest level of play, in order to be chosen to play in International, World, and Olympic competitions. The umpires are performing at their best to meet the higher standard of evaluations, in order to be chosen to umpire at the International, World, and the Olympics competitions.

The umpires found themselves in a dilemma. On one hand, the umpire is under the gun. Either he/she has to strictly enforce the rules or he will be released from umpiring. On the other hand, players and coaches would like to have a relaxed atmosphere where they can enjoy the matches and the game. This is the root of the conflict.

Evaluation of umpires is done by qualified international evaluators. Usually the evaluators do not evaluate umpires of their own association. The system of evaluating umpires was started by the USATT Officials Committee long ago, and is used to move umpires from one level to another (club, regional and national). The ITTF-URC adopted the system and extended it to the international and Blue Badge levels.

We are fortunate to have foreign umpires in both our Nationals and U.S. Open every year. These umpires give our players a taste of the way umpires enforce the rules at international tournaments

More conflicts erupt from a misunderstanding by players and coaches that, as long as the players are not complaining, the umpire should not enforce the rules. That is nice and sweet for the winner. But the loser often complains vigorously after the match, believing the umpire did not enforce the rules. The situation is more critical when a player asks for an umpire because he believes his opponent is serving illegal. When the umpire goes to the table to enforce the rules, he finds that the player who asked for his presence is not serving legally either. Once the umpire calls a fault, all hell breaks loose.

There is also another assumption that the umpire should not call faults when the score is close near the end of a game. However, this is when players are concentrating on winning the point and often forget to serve correctly, falling back on bad habits.

The umpire is there to adhere to the rules regardless if the violation is at the beginning or the last point of a game. The end of a game is critical for both the player and umpire. If the player pulls out a new, clearly illegal serve, it should be faulted. However, if it is a marginal serve that the player has used before in the game, the player should be given the benefit of the doubt.

One can state that the cause of many of these conflicts is the lack of adequate training by players. Many players do not enforce the rules while training or practicing.

Coaches sometimes ignore the faults their players are committing as long as they are winning. Some coaches concentrate only on the mastery of play and ignore the behavior of their players.

I apologize for this long introduction, but I find it necessary to come to the points below.

1. There has to be adequate communication between coaches and umpires. The Umpires Committee and Coaches Committee should work together.
2. Umpire meetings, briefings, and seminars should include the coaches at the tournament.
3. Coaches meetings should dedicate an essential segment to cover the rules of the game, with an emphasis on new rules.
4. The Umpires Committee can send a representative to cover any new rules.
5. Coaches have to enforce the rules strictly during training sessions, especially with young players and beginners.
6. Coaches have to agree on the ways and means of training, to deal with behavior problems, self-control, discipline and acceptance of losing. These are the basic elements of creating champions.

Let us work together to develop the best players, coaches, and umpires in the world.