

## **The New Service Rule:**

*From the start of service until it is struck, the ball shall be above the level of the playing surface and behind the server's end line, and it shall not be hidden from the receiver by any part of the body or clothing of the server or his doubles partner.*

## **An Officials' View**

**By Dr. Azmy**

### **Guardians of the Rules**

Once again we have to visit the new service rule. Many questions are raised, and many interpretations are circulated, not just in our Association, but also all over the world regarding the application of the rule.

Let me start by reminding ourselves that we are the ones who have to apply the rules objectively, regardless of our subjective sentiments toward them. During the last couple of years we have witnessed some changes in our sport. Some of us – officials, coaches, and players – accepted them willingly and others resented them severely. Rumors flouted about the fact that some associations are not adopting these new changes. Others claim that prominent teams are going to quit. Let me say that nothing of the sort has happened and the sport is still going as usual.

It is our responsibility and duty as officials and umpires to enforce the rules when they are changed. We may suggest further revisions, or ask for some reexamination to some aspects of the new additions to the sport. **But we have to enforce and perform according to the existing regulations and rules at a given time.** Umpires or officials have to understand that they have no right to make their own interpretations of the rules. If somebody feels strongly against the new rules, then he/she can relieve themselves of their duties for the time being.

With this harsh introduction I find myself compelled to share with you the messages as they are coming regarding the service rule. I feel I cannot summarize or edit them for fear of misinterpretations. I also hope that each and every umpire will read these correspondences before he umpires at any tournament. The reason for publishing all three emails is to give an opportunity to all umpires regardless of their level, IU – NU – RU – CU, to be acquainted with the new rule and its applications.

The first message is from Adham Sharara, President of ITTF, followed by ones from Aly Salam (Secretary of Umpires, Umpires & Referees Committee) and Colin Clemett (Chairman, ITTF Rules Committee).

---

Over the past two weeks we have received a lot of input regarding the new Service Rule. This was solicited by me and also by the URC Umpires Secretary. This input is very valuable but clearly demonstrates that a clarification is needed to ensure “uniform” implementation of the rule by the players and to ensure “uniform” understanding and application of the rule by the Umpires.

In my opinion, as President of the ITTF, I believe that the new rule as it is written by the Chairman of the Rules Committee completely and fairly describes the rule as it was intended. Unfortunately, in many cases due to translation into other languages the interpretation may vary. Many are ignoring the interpretation that was provided and focus only on the “letter” of the rule with false understanding. In my opinion this is a temporary problem and could be fixed in time by continuous education by our ambassadors (Committee members, staff, EC, EB, etc.) However, it is important that our ambassadors all have the same understanding. For this purpose

I enclose within this email a clarification prepared by Mr. Aly Salam, the Umpires Secretary, on behalf of the URC, to be published in the next ITTF Bulletin. Please read it carefully and propagate this information as much as possible.

I will also prepare an official statement to be distributed to all concerned as soon as possible. I am still sorting through all the emails received from various sources in the last 10 days. I am taking a leadership role in this matter in order to prevent the degeneration of this precious rule and to avoid any hardships in the future.

I am sorry if I have stepped on any toes in this process. This is a very important change in our sport and we must ensure that the rule as intended is applied correctly. The benefits I saw at the Korean Open of the new rule are immense. The danger is in the “non-uniform” application of this rule by players and umpires. Once we have educated the main protagonists I hope that this rule will be history as are now the previous two changes (40mm ball and 11-point games).

Following you will find the ITTF Umpires & Referees Committee clarification.

**Adham Sharara** (at your service!)

**ITTF President**

---

### ***Keep It Simple***

#### **Dear Fellow Umpires**

Over the last few months I have received numerous emails regarding the new service rules that went into effect September 1, 2002. Most were asking for guidance on how to apply the new rule of “The ball shall not be hidden from the receiver by any part of the body or clothing of the server or his doubles partner.”

Our objective should be “Keep it Simple.” There is no need to add personal interpretations or elements that are not written in the rule. Applying a worldwide standard that is consistent with the written words is absolutely critical at this stage.

The main purpose is to make the ball visible to the receiver at all times during service. The serving player or pair must not take any action which should prevent the receiver from seeing the ball from the time at which it leaves the server’s hand until it is struck. Consider the intent of the law rather than dwelling on specific words or terms used – primarily:

The ball must be visible to the RECEIVER at ALL times from the moment it leaves the free hand to the moment it is struck. That is it – no more and no less.

In applying the rule, when there is an umpire and assistant umpire at the table, then one of them surely will see the entire path of the ball. If in the “judgment” of either the ball is not completely visible to the RECEIVER, then a fault must be called – and an explanation must be given. Note, with two umpires present, there is no allowance for a warning as previously permitted.

When there is only one umpire, then he must “JUDGE” that the receiver sees the ball at all times during the serve, even if the umpire does not fully “SEE” the ball. If in doubt, then the umpire can give a warning and explain to the player why the service is doubtful. Whenever there is a clear failure, no warning shall be given and the receiver shall score a point. The ways to “JUDGE” whether a service is legal or not when the umpire cannot “SEE” the ball are contained in the “interpretation of the rule.”

1. As soon as the free hand and arm has projected the ball upwards, the free hand and arm must be “immediately” removed to the side. The free arm must not remain in any area between the ball and the receiver.

2. If the server could imagine a triangular space created by the ball and both net posts, then extends this space upwards to head level, the server must then ensure that no part of his body or clothing enters this space (or remains in this space) after he projects the ball upwards in service.

The best service ITTF officials can provide to the sport at this time is to study the updated rules and regulations – posted on the ITTF website ([www.ittf.com/service](http://www.ittf.com/service)) and mailed to every association in June; read the official text, view the purpose and intent of the rule, look at the pictures and sample videos of proper and improper service actions. Please pay particular attention to gallery photo 6 – that is LEGAL service – even though the free hand is within the imaginary triangle between the ball and the net posts, it is above the ball and the ball is always visible to the receiver.

In the few events that implemented the new rules since September 1, 2002, most players were complying with the wording and intent of the new rules. A few were pushing the window by going as close as possible to the limits – that is acceptable. However, it is when a player exceeds the limits that the umpire must act. Otherwise by not applying all of the rules – consistently and uniformly – the umpire is providing a disservice to the sport. ITTF umpires should pay close attention to all elements of a proper service – not only what is new. Just because the ball is visible to the receiver it does not mean that it can be thrown backwards or tossed less than 16cm.

The ITTF umpires and referees committee will release a set of video segments covering different aspects of service and behavior examples and expected uniform actions by all umpires. More information will be mailed to each association and placed on the ITTF website under the Umpires and Referees Committee section.

In the meantime, please share with us your ideas and suggestions on improving the process. You can find contact information at [www.ittf.com](http://www.ittf.com).

**Aly Salam**

**Secretary of Umpires, URC**

---

### ***The Service Law***

One of the commonest questions received about the new service law concerns a part which was not affected by the changes, and it is: “Does the umpire need to see the ball during service?” Since 1967 the service law has included the statement: “It is the responsibility of the player to serve so that the umpire can see that he complies with the requirements for a good service.” The umpire has to check that the ball is resting freely on the palm of the server’s free hand, that it is projected near vertically upwards, that it rises and falls without touching anything until it is struck and that during service it is behind the server’s end line and above the level of the playing surface. How can he be sure that these requirements are met if he cannot see the ball from the start of service? It may not matter if the ball is momentarily hidden during its flight by, say, the server’s free arm as he moves it away, provided the umpire is satisfied that the ball has not touched anything. There is nothing new in this; the situation is the same this season as it was last season and in the previous 34 seasons. The only change is that the umpire, instead of having to decide whether the ball is struck behind the rearmost part of the server’s body, must now decide whether it is hidden from the receiver.

It is true that with an umpire operating alone, the same service may be legal when the player is at one end of the table and illegal when he is at the other, depending on whether he has his back to, or is facing, the umpire. But, again, this is not new; it is why in 1983 the concept of an assistant umpire was introduced for international competitions. It has sometimes been suggested that players should have the right to ask the umpire to move to a position from which he can see the service better. With a single umpire, the only practical way to ensure that a service is legal irrespective of the player's position is to require the ball to be struck between the server's body and his end line, but this has repeatedly been rejected as being too restrictive. It seems to be a matter of choosing between two imperfect solutions, and so far the preference has been to accept the inconsistency that can occur when there is no assistant umpire.

**Colin Clemett**

**Chairman, ITTF Rules Committee**