

An Official's View

At Last the Service Rule is Here!

By Dr. Azmy

Yes, the new service rule was passed and the ITTF working group has finalized the wording. Many questions have been raised and I already received several inquiries about its interpretation. The best way to make it simple is to compare the old rule with the new rule and clarify the differences.

The Old Rule

2.6.1 At the start of service the ball shall be stationary, resting freely on the **flat**, open palm of the server's free hand, behind the end line and above the level of the playing surface.

2.6.4 The ball and the **racket** shall be above the level of the playing surface from the last moment at which the ball is stationary before being projected until it is struck.

The New Rule – Effective September 1, 2002

2.6.1 Service shall start with the ball resting freely on the open palm of the server's stationary free hand.

2.6.4 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.

There are several points of differences between the old and the new:

1. The word "**Flat**" is not in the new rule. All it says is "**Open**" palm. There was a lot of discussion during our Seminar, which we had at the US Open, about the interpretation of the word "**Open.**" How open is open? But the same could be said about how flat is flat.
2. There is no mention of the position of the racket. However, logically if the ball has to be above the playing surface until it is struck, then part of the racket has to be above the level of the playing surface when the ball is struck. The new rule does not require that the racket be visible to the receiver or the umpire. It may also be below the level of the playing surface before it strikes the ball.
3. The start of the service used to be from **the last moment** at which the ball is stationary before being projected. The new rule states that the service shall start with the ball resting freely on the open palm of the server's stationary hand.
4. The main concern of the new rule is to make the ball visible all the time to the receiver during the serve. When the ball is resting on the open palm, the receiver and the umpire or assistant umpire have to be able to see it. Because of this, cupping and turning the palm toward the body may make the serve illegal. The receiver is the focal point of the new service rule.
5. Sometimes when the server tosses the ball in the air it comes down between the server's free **hand or arm** and his body. At that moment the hand or arm is hiding the ball and it is not visible to the receiver and the umpire or the assistant umpire; therefore it is illegal.

All other aspects of the serve are still the same. Except that the umpire, **when umpiring alone**, may give a warning on the first time when he is doubtful about the legality of the serve. If there is an umpire and an assistant umpire, there will **not** be any warnings. That means from now on there will be less warnings on the service. Players, please be aware of the legality of your

serve. This is also one of the few times the ITTF mentioned the fact that an umpire may umpire a match alone.

I do not want to mention all the other rule changes, which were published in the last issue of the USATT Magazine, page 16. **All of them will be in effect starting September 1, 2002.**