Judging Ball Handling

During a match you will have hundreds of ball handling contacts that you will have to judge. At varsity level, most will be legal, many will be illegal, but a lot of the ball handling will fall into what is commonly known as the "grey area". This requires you as the R1 to make a decision about whether to judge the contact legal or judge the contact illegal. This is not an easy task. Especially at the beginning when you are developing your own personal level and judgment of ball handling. The following points may help you in your development and in the task of judging legal and illegal ball handling.

First I strongly encourage you to work with other veterans who have the reputation of having good ball handling skills. Most of these referees do not mind passing their wisdom and experience to referees that want to improve.

Next, no matter your level of calling, keep your ball handling consistent. Even if you do not have the experience or the level of ball handling you want, nothing upsets a coach more than someone who is inconsistent with ball handling. So try to maintain the same level of consistency throughout the match. What often happens to many referees is they start with a certain level of consistency. Then as time goes on, their consistency becomes much "looser". This could be because of fatigue, distractions, trying to even the playing field, or for any other reason. This must be avoided. Your first ball handling call should be at the same level as the last ball handling call. Officials who cannot maintain a consistent level of ball handling calls may not get requested or assigned to certain matches because of this weakness.

Only the contact with the ball should be used when judging ball handling calls. You should never use the body position of the player, the sound of the contact, the flight of the ball, or an assumption that something was not right as the basis of judging the legality of the ball handling. Many times an unusual looking contact will be legal. Remember (especially at higher levels, the speed of the game is faster and the players are more athletic. You must be certain you saw an illegal ball handling contact. Just before the contact, focus on the part of the body that is going to make the contact.

The ball can be played with any part of the body and most parts of the body are usually resilient enough that the ball will bounce off quickly enough to avoid the ball coming to a rest on the body. You are looking for a catch or a throw to make the illegal ball handling call. Playing the ball with parts of the body such as the shoulder is most likely legal as it is difficult to catch or throw a ball.

Remember multiple contacts are permitted on the team's first contact each time the ball crosses the net. The ball can contact more than one part of the body in succession as long it is only one play of the ball. If the ball rolls up the arms on the first contact, the play is usually legal as long as the ball keeps moving and does not come to rest at any point. This play is considered a multiple contact even though the ball never stopped contacting the body during the roll.

When doing a two-handed set, the player's hands must contact the ball simultaneously. If you see even a slight separation in moment of contact with each hand, double contact should be called. This is a difficult thing to see when you are starting out, but as you call more games and learn to focus on the contact, you will get better with more experience. While the spin of a ball may be an indicator of a double hit, it is possible for the ball to spin after a legal set. Focus on the hands right before contact to make sure there is a legal contact or not.

Certain sets, sometimes called "Deep Dish" sets can be difficult to judge the hands follow the ball down to the set and up after the set. It appears sometimes as if the setter is touching the ball high over her head and bringing it down and then pushing the ball up above her head. This may be happening in which case it would be illegal because she would be catching the ball and then throwing the ball. Many times this is not the case, especially with talented setters. They can follow the ball down and make contact at the last second and instantly set the ball and have her hands follow the ball without any additional contact. This is hard to judge unless you have trained your eyes to follow the hands.

Players will also try what is called a "tip" or "dump" at the net. The guideline here is the players hands should already be in motion before it comes in contact with the ball. If the player's hands stop the ball before attacking the ball, the call should be illegal because the player caught or threw the ball. A clean play happens quicker than a caught/thrown ball.

Another tool for judging ball handling is to divide the player's actions into quadrants. If the ball handling goes from one quadrant to another you may have a good case for an illegal ball handling. For example, the player contacts the ball behind her head and releases contact when the ball is in front of her head, you would most likely have an illegal ball handling and should be called.

Finally, avoid making "automatic" calls. For example, the receiving team plays the served ball using finger action. Many officials in the past would automatically call this illegal. Yet the contact was as quick as if she had played the serve off her arms. There are no automatic calls.

There is no substitute for actual experience so do not shy away when you are assigned to the R1 position. Your job is to call ball handling consistently and fairly. Coaches understand we are human and will not catch everything, but even if you do not call as tight as they would like you too, they still would prefer consistency over tightness. But at some point in your developing years, you should get to the optimal level of consistency and tightness. For additional information, contact the trainer(s) in your chapter.