

The Dreaded Correctable Error

Correctable errors under rule 2-10 in the NFHS code (2-11 in NCAA) do not occur in every game. If they did, officials would probably be more apt to handle them correctly. Officials often joke with the scorer about avoiding them because the vast majority don't understand the rules.

Yet there are many times when bonus free throws should be awarded and the scorer fails to inform the floor officials before an erroneous throw-in. Confusion about whether a goal is worth three points or two is also common. Knowing how to handle correctable error situations can be critical to your success as an official.

Don't think so? Just wait until one happens to you.

The rule is the same for both NFHS and NCAA codes. It has evolved over the years. And many times the error results from nothing you've done wrong as an official. But you have to be the one to clean it up. Know it and prepare yourself.

A correction might result in a team being awarded merited foul shots plus additional benefits. But when it involves rectifying an error, is there really any way to make it uniformly fair? Probably not.

To apply the rule correctly, you must get the terminology right. Floor officials make errors, some of which are correctable under rule 2-10. Table officials make mistakes. Mistakes in scorekeeping can be corrected anytime during the jurisdiction of the officials. Mistakes in clock operation and in the direction of the possession arrow are correctable under certain circumstances, but are not relevant to Rule 2-10 (or NCAA 2-11).

There are only five correctable errors. Of the five, four involve foul shots. They are (1) awarding an unmerited shot; (2) failure to award a merited shot; (3) letting the wrong player shoot; and (4) shooting at the wrong basket. All of those occur when the ball is dead and the clock is stopped. They are correctable if discovered before the end of the first dead ball that occurs after the clock is properly started.

The fifth error is to count or cancel a score erroneously. That error includes a floor official failing to signal a three-point goal. Since that type of error occurs while the clock is running, it can be corrected if discovered before the ball becomes live a second time after the error. In a college game with replay capabilities, the video might be used to determine whether a shot was in fact a two- or three-point goal.

The limited time frame for corrections is to avoid a major impact on subsequent play as a result of the error.

Clearly officials have to know when the ball becomes live and dead to apply the rule properly. The ball becomes live when it is at the disposal of a thrower-in or foul shooter, or tossed for the jump. It becomes dead when a goal is scored or when a whistle is properly sounded to stop play and a try is not in flight.

Rule principles. There are several principles to consider before looking at specific cases. The first is that if the error occurs while the clock is stopped, the clock must start before the “statute of limitations” begins to run. The ball becoming live for an unmerited foul shot is not one of the live balls counted in the “statute.” The clock starts properly when a throw-in or missed foul try is touched. The ball is already live. Once it becomes dead, the error must be discovered before the ball next becomes live to be correctable.

If the error happens while the clock is running, it usually involves a successful field goal, so the ball is dead. The first live ball occurs when the ball is at the disposal of the thrower-in and play continues for a time until the ball becomes dead again. To be correctable, the error must be discovered before the ball becomes live a second time. The terminology “before the second live ball” describes the limit for correction in that case.

Note that any activity which occurs before the error is discovered, such as points scored, time consumed and fouls committed, which is not the subject of any correction, is not nullified.

Play is resumed at the point where the game was interrupted by the discovery of the error, with one exception. The exception is that if the error is the failure to award merited shots and team A still has possession, then the shots will be awarded and the rebound will be left in play as per a normal foul shot. That is to prevent team A from being awarded both the shots and the ball after the correction.

Team control by team A is not the criterion for possession in that situation. If team B has not gained control, the exception still applies. Thus, team A can launch a try and get the rebound, be entitled to a throw-in for a team B violation or have the arrow when a held ball is called and still have possession under the rule.

Another subtlety is that if the error involves unmerited shots, shots by the wrong player or at the wrong basket, non-intentional and non-flagrant fouls committed during the shots are cancelled. Obviously it pays to know when a foul shot ends to deal with that unenviable situation.

Play situations. Let’s start with some simple situations and progress to the more complex.

Play 1: A1 is fouled while dribbling. It is team B’s seventh foul in the half, but the officials erroneously award a throw-in to team A. B1 intentionally kicks the throw-in pass, at which point the error is discovered. **Ruling 1:** The error was discovered in time, team B had not gained possession, so A1 will be awarded the bonus free throws with players lined up to play the rebound.

Play 2: A1 is fouled while dribbling. It is team B’s seventh foul of the half but the officials

erroneously award team A a throw-in. A2 catches the pass, dribbles the length of the floor and scores. The error is discovered (a) before, or (b) after B2 has the ball at his or her disposal for the subsequent throw-in. **Ruling 2:** In situation (a), the error was discovered in time for correction. A2's goal counts. The point of interruption is that team B is entitled to a throw-in following team A's basket. A1 will be awarded the bonus with no players on the lane, and the ball given to team B for a non-designated spot throw-in. In (b), it is too late for correction because the ball became live when the throw-in started.

Play 3: A1 is fouled while dribbling. It is team B's seventh foul in the half, but the officials erroneously award a throw-in to team A. A2 catches the pass and dribbles the length of the floor, but misses the try. A3 grabs the rebound and also misses a try. B1 knocks the ball out of bounds. The failure to award the merited foul shots is discovered at that point. **Ruling 3:** Again the error was discovered in time for correction. Although team A lost control twice in that sequence, team B never had control. Thus, A1 will be awarded the bonus free throws and the ball will remain in play as after a normal foul shot.

Play 4: A1 is fouled while dribbling. It is team B's seventh foul in the half, but the officials erroneously award a throw-in to team A. A2 catches the pass and dribbles the length of the floor, but misses the try. B3 grabs the rebound and dribbles upcourt. B1 is called for an illegal screen. The failure to award A1 the bonus free throws is then discovered. **Ruling 4:** Since the ball had not yet become live again, the error is still correctable. Team B had obtained possession and the point of interruption was that team A was the victim of team B's team-control foul. A1 is awarded the bonus free throws with no players on the lane and then awarded the throw-in for B1's foul nearest to where the foul occurred.

Play 5: A1 scores a field goal from behind the three-point line, but neither official signals to score three points. The scorer marks two points in the scorebook. Team B inbounds the ball and scores. Before (a), or after (b) team A has the ball for the throw-in the coach of team A requests a timeout to discuss the error. **Ruling 5:** In (a), the error is correctable because it was discovered before the second live ball occurred after the error. One point is added to team A's score and no timeout is charged. In (b), it is too late to correct the score because the ball became live a second time when team A started the throw-in. Team A is charged a full timeout. Note: If the floor official did signal a three-point goal, but the scorer still recorded two points, that mistake could be corrected anytime.

Play 6: A1 launches a successful try with three seconds left in the first half from a spot near the arc. Two points are recorded. When the officials return to the floor to start the second half, team A's coach informs them that the video showed the last shot to be a three-point try. **Ruling 6:** The statute of limitations for correction has not expired. NCAA officials can consult the video. NFHS officials will charge team A with a technical foul for using the video for coaching purposes. The bottom line in that situation is you have to have definitive knowledge that an error was made. If you didn't know when the play occurred if A1 was on the line or not, you cannot change the call. The error correction will only be made if your partner provides additional information to change the call.

Play 7: A1 is fouled with two seconds remaining in the first half. Team A inbounds the ball and time expires. When the officials return to the floor to start the second half, the scorer informs them that A1 should have been awarded bonus free throws at the end of the first half. **Ruling 7:** The error is still correctable. The first dead ball just happened to include the intermission. A1 will be given the merited free throws with no players on the lane and the second half will be started with the alternating possession as normal.

Play 8: A1 is fouled in the act of shooting and awarded two shots. Inadvertently, his twin, A2, is given the ball for the shots. The first shot is successful. While the second shot is in flight, B1 fouls A3. The wrong shooter is then discovered. **Ruling 8:** Both the successful shot and the foul by B1 are cancelled. A1 is given the two shots with the ball remaining in play after the second. Note: If the foul by B1 had been intentional or flagrant, it would not have been cancelled.

Play 9: B1 commits a common foul on A1. The scorer tells the referee that is team B's 10th foul of the half. The official awards two shots. The first shot misses and the second is successful. While B2 has the ball for a throw-in the scorer reports that the foul was only the ninth on team B. **Ruling 9:** The error is correctable. The second shot is cancelled. A1 got the merited shot and missed. Since there was no team control at that point, play would be resumed with an alternating possession throw-in along the endline.

Handling the request. The coach who wishes to discuss a correctable error is supposed to go to the scorer and request a timeout. Some coaches get excited and chase after an official. That means the coach may be violating the bench conduct rule. It pays to listen to what is being said rather than reflexively give a technical foul. The recommended procedure is to get both coaches at the table to discuss the situation. If a correction is in order, make it and resume play as outlined above. If there is no correction, charge the requesting team with a full timeout regardless of the length of time needed to decide the issue. To avoid a technical foul for excess timeouts, a 30-second timeout may be used if no full timeouts remain.

Even when confident in your rule knowledge it is still wise to avoid correctable error situations through good communication with the table, good court coverage, the use of proper signals and increased awareness as bonus time approaches.

Written by Bill Kenney, Florham Park, N.J., who is the rule interpreter and clinician for IAABO Board 168 and serves on the IAABO Rules Exam Committee. He has refereed high school basketball for more than 40 years and college games for more than 25. This article previously appeared in the 3/09 issue of Referee.