

This article appeared in the November/December 2011 issue of USA Table Tennis magazine

An Officials View

Service 101: How Not to Lose Points on Serves

By Joseph C. H. Lee, IU

In racket sports, table tennis has the most complicated service rules. In tennis, one only has to be concerned with foot fault. No rules on how you hold the ball, how low or how high you should toss the ball. For table tennis players, there are many pitfalls that, if strictly enforced by umpires, would reduce the game to "whoever serves loses the point." This statement applies to world class players as well as it applies to you.

On this important topic, I have yet to read any articles by coaches in our magazine. Ray Cavicchio's article "Too Many Opponents" in the September/ October 2011 issue challenges coaches to place a greater emphasis on the serve. However, many players do not have the benefit of a coach. The responsibility is still on them, nevertheless, to study the rules and to practice the serve so that it conforms to every aspect of the rules.

For the complete official rules, the reader should consult the ITTF website, specifically, <http://www.ittf.com/ittfjandboolc/ittfjib.html>. This article will cover only the most frequently violated aspects of the rules and explain the proper and improper ways to serve. The relevant rules are selected and shown here. The focus is on the underlined words or phrases.

1. 2.06.01. Service shall start with the ball resting freely on the open palm of the server's stationary free hand.

a. Open. Unfortunately this rule does not give precise definition of what is considered open and what is not. It, then, is subject to the interpretation of each umpire. These illustrations indicate what I consider to be acceptable or unacceptable.

I have noticed that some players may start with an acceptable open palm. As the hand is raised for the toss, however, the open palm begins to close. That, in my opinion, is a faulted serve. Player must ensure the open palm remains open until the ball is released.

b. Palm. The ball must rest on the palm, not on fingers, nor the joints between fingers and the palm. As the player begins the toss, he/she must ensure the ball does not roll on to the fingers.

c. Stationary. The hand with the ball must be in a state of motionlessness momentarily before the toss begins. Many players bounce the ball on the table or the floor, and then immediately grab the ball and begin the toss. The hand is not stationary and, thus, the serve is a fault.

2. 2.06.02. The server shall then project the ball near vertically upwards, without imparting spin, so that it rises at least 16 cm after leaving the palm of the free hand and then falls without touching anything before being struck.

a. Near vertically. Again, this rule does not give a definition of what is considered acceptable deviation from the vertical, and, therefore, is subject to umpires' interpretations. To eliminate any risk of being faulted for not nearly vertical, the player should strive to toss the ball straight up.

Many players begin the serve near the centerline but the ball is struck near the sideline. Whether the ball is near vertical or not depends on the height of the projected ball. Even if the ball meets the minimum regulatory height, the toss would be unacceptable because the toss is not near vertical. However, if the ball is tossed high, near verticalness may be achieved; it all depends on the height of the rise. For the same distance the ball travels horizontally, the higher the ball rises, the closer the upward trajectory approaches vertical. See the illustration below.

b. Upwards. The ball must be tossed up with enough force so that the ball leaves the hand and rises to the minimal height. Less common but it does occur, some players drop their hand, instead of tossing upward, before the ball is released. Two aspects of the rules are violated: The ball does not travel in an upward motion nor does it separate from the hand with the minimal height. (Refer to the next paragraph, Para. 2.c., about the minimal ball height.)

c. 16 cm (or approximately 6 inches, or the height of the net). The most common fault of the majority of players is that the ball does not separate itself from the hand with a vertical distance of 6 inches. Some barely leave the hand.

Many players when warned or faulted by the umpire because the ball is not being tossed high enough would respond merely by raising the hand higher. But the ball still does not separate from the palm by at least 6 inches. How high the hand is raised is irrelevant to how far the ball leaves the hand. The hand must project the ball upward with enough force so that the ball leaves the hand and travels at least 6 inches from the palm.

Many players start the toss with the palm horizontal. During the toss, however, the palm rotates into a

vertical position. The rotation makes it difficult for the umpire to judge whether the minimum distance is achieved between the ball and the hand. The player, therefore, must make sure the palm stays horizontal throughout the toss motion.

3. 2.06.04. 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 the server or his or her doubles partner or by anything they wear or carry.

a. Above the level of the playing surface. Many players dip their hand before tossing up. If the player starts the "toss" right at the level of the playing surface, the dipping action would bring the ball below the playing surface—"Fault." If the player is in the habit of dipping, he/she must make sure the stationary hand is several inches above the level of the playing surface so the dipping would not cause the ball to drop below this level.

b. Behind the server's end line. It is acceptable for the serving arm or hand to be over the end line on top of the playing surface, but the ball must remain behind the end line. Many players would have their hand in such a position that the ball is either on or over the end line. That is a fault.

Though rarely seen, another tendency is the tossing trajectory of the hand is in the direction of the table. The curvature would also bring the ball over the end line and above the playing surface before being released.

c. Not be hidden from the receiver. From the umpire's angle, sometimes it is difficult to determine whether or not the serve is hidden from the receiver. It is the server's responsibility, however, to demonstrate to the umpire or the assistant umpire that the serve conforms to all aspects of the service rules. See Paragraph 5, below on this issue.

4. 2.06.05 As soon as the ball has been projected, the server's free arm and hand shall be removed from the space between the ball and the net.

Some players tend to let their arm linger momentarily after the toss. Strictly speaking, umpires have every right to call that a fault. Another tendency, though rare, is the arm acts like a pendulum. Even though it may move away immediately, but it swings back before the ball is struck—another faulted condition. The photo on the right illustrates an acceptable position for the hand after it has moved away.

5. 2.06.06 . It is the responsibility of the player to serve so that the umpire or the assistant umpire can be satisfied that he or she complies with the requirements of the Laws, and either may decide that a service is incorrect.

This rule now also gives the authority of calling fault to the assistant umpire. Therefore, either the umpire or the assistant umpire can fault a clearly illegal. In our three major annual tournaments (US Open, US National and North American Teams) frequently there is only one umpire umpiring a match. In this case, the server must make sure the umpire can observe the entire motion of the serve, including the moment when the racket strikes the ball. If the umpire is unable to observe the serve, he/she will give a warning and the server had better comply in subsequent serves.

6. Warnings. Many players erroneously think they are entitled to a warning before being faulted. On a questionable serve (for example, the ball height is marginal) the umpire will warn the server. On a clearly illegal serve (for example, the ball barely leaves the hand, or the player drops the hand) the umpire does not have to warn. If the server does get a warning on a clearly illegal serve, he/she should be grateful for the umpire's leniency.

Umpires are constantly trying to be more consistent in calling faults. However, before clear definition or guidance is given as to the openness of the palm and verticalness, there will always be different interpretations. There have been occasions that players' illegal serves were not called in earlier matches or in one tournament, but were faulted at later matches or at another tournament. These players should not be resentful or object to being faulted. Instead, they should consider themselves lucky that they were not caught sooner.

7. The final analysis is that the player is responsible to thoroughly know the rules, be conscientious and conscious about their serve to ensure that it is in compliance with every aspect of a good serve for every serve.

8. Coaches' Training Programs. To start on the road to solve the myriad service problems, every coach should be required to devote part of their training curriculum to teaching the rules and to require their pupils to practice proper serves. During practicing games, coaches should also pay attention on their pupils' serves. Our association should also mandate that before a coach is certified, this important part of the sport is included in the coach's syllabus.

Oftentimes, when a player was faulted for a serve, he/she had no idea what was wrong. The umpire, in effect, had to give the player a quick lesson during a game on what a good serve should be. Strictly speaking, this should not be the umpire's role because, in a manner of speaking, he/she is helping the offending player not to lose points.

Furthermore, some infractions are easy to correct on the spot, while others are not easily correctible because of entrenched habits. Frequently, a player's serve is illegal not just in one area but may involve several infractions. For example, a player may not toss the ball high enough and not near vertical enough. And he/she does not present the ball (that is, cause the ball to come to rest momentarily before serving). In the heat of a match, it is very difficult for the player to concentrate on serving a good serve. It is best, therefore, to learn the proper way of service early on before bad habits are formed.

Videotape your serve from different angles and compare it with the rules. Does it comply with every aspect as mentioned in this article? If you have an umpire friend, ask him or her to watch and evaluate your serve. Work on getting rid of the deficiencies so that in the match, you won't have to worry about losing points on serves.

9. If players lose valuable points due to improper serves, the fault lies with the player, not the umpire. Before each serve, the player should pause not only to decide what kind of serve will be employed, but also think about the proper way to serve. It does not serve the player's purpose of selecting the right serve only to lose the point for service infractions.

In conclusion, players need to be mindful that umpires do not make rules. Our role is to enforce them so that points are won or lost fairly. I, as an umpire, do not relish having to fault any players on technicalities of the serve; the results of a match should be based on skill, not technicalities. I am sure other umpires feel the same way.

