

Ask a Soccer Referee

Answers to Laws of the Game
and Practical Refereeing Questions:
Jim Allen, National Instructor Staff/National Assessor

GAINING AN ADVANTAGE THROUGH HANDLING

Your question:

In an article about the U.S. women vs. China game in Australia, April Heinrichs stated that if a player intentionally handles the ball or gains advantage (in the event it wasn't deliberate) the foul should be called. I was always taught that gaining advantage had nothing to do with calling the foul. For example, player 'A' is moving up the field with his back to the ball and the player behind him kicks the ball and it hits player 'A' in the arm. Even if it falls to player 'A's feet since it was not deliberate no foul should be called. Any help in clarifying this would be appreciated.

USSF answer (September 27, 2000):

With all due credit to Ms. Heinrichs for her coaching ability, she is not a referee and therefore not as fully aware of the Laws of the Game as she might be. The key to calling deliberate handling is contained in this excerpt from the USSF publication "Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game":

12.9 DELIBERATE HANDLING

The offense known as "handling the ball" involves deliberate contact with the ball by a player's hand or arm (including fingertips, upper arm, or outer shoulder). "Deliberate contact" means that the player could have avoided the touch but chose not to, that the player's arms were not in a normal playing position at the time, or that the player deliberately continued an initially accidental contact for the purpose of gaining an unfair advantage. Moving hands or arms instinctively to protect the body when suddenly faced with a fast approaching ball does not constitute deliberate contact unless there is subsequent action to direct the ball once contact is made. Likewise, placing hands or arms to protect the body at a free kick or similar restart is not likely to produce an infringement unless there is subsequent action to direct or control the ball. The fact that a player may benefit from the ball contacting the hand does not transform the otherwise accidental event into an infringement. A player infringes the Law regarding handling the ball even if direct contact is avoided by holding something in the hand (clothing, shinguards, etc.).

A lengthier discourse on the matter was recently written by Robert Evans, former USSF Director of Referee Instruction. It will soon appear in your local bookstore in a new book by Dr. Evans:

QUOTE

Handball

It was over the issue of handling the ball that two different versions of football developed. In the early games, some sets of rules allowed a player to knock the ball down with his hand or arm, but not to carry it or throw it forward. Then an over-enthusiastic young man named William Webb Ellis picked up the ball during a match at his school-Rugby-and ran with it. "Rugby Football" was born, and shortly after that, handling the ball in any way was banned in the other football--our football, "Association Football", or soccer, as it came to be known. Rugby, as though unable to decide what it wanted to be, evolved into a variety of forms: Australian Rules Football, Gaelic Football, Rugby League Football, Rugby Union Football and ultimately, American and Canadian Football. All those corrupt versions of the original game involve some form of chucking the ball about with your hands, but the delightful game of soccer retained its simple purity. It is a game to be played with the feet, the body and (especially for referees) the head.

The law states quite simply that a player should be penalized if he "handles the ball deliberately." The law once included the phrase "carries, strikes or propels the ball with his hand or arm", but most people involved in the game don't need to have all that spelled out. We understand that no part of the arm below

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the shoulder can be used, so our problem is simply to learn how to recognize deliberate handling, as opposed to accidental handling. Accidental handling is never penalized!

From our observations of officiating in youth soccer, we estimate that twice as many "handballs" are penalized as should be. Many inexperienced referees are over-zealous, but if you then add the problem that parents and spectators unfamiliar with the game shout every time the ball touches a hand or arm, the tendency for the official is a compulsion to blow his whistle in response. This only makes matters worse, because the lack of knowledge by the spectators is then reinforced by the action of someone who is in their eyes a (presumably) trained referee. He's got a badge and a uniform; he must know what he's doing. On top of that, the players, hearing all the appeals when they make hand or arm contact with the ball, react as though they are guilty of touching something sacred, a holy relic. In such a case, it takes a great deal of strength and conviction for an inexperienced referee to be deaf to hundreds of voices baying in unison, and to ignore the horrified expression of a player who acts as though guilty of a cardinal sin. What they need is knowledge and an understanding of clear methods of determining whether a player "handles the ball deliberately". We are about to describe those methods, so stay with us.

The most evident handball is where the player reaches out to touch or control the ball, or moves his hand to intercept it and change its path. Examples might include: the defender who reaches up to knock a ball down that was going over his head; the player who while trying to deal with an awkwardly-bouncing ball, flicks out his hand to put the ball in front of him; and the really obvious ones, like stopping a shot going into the goal, or using a hand to stop a pass that might produce a scoring chance. These latter two are punished very severely in the latest versions of the laws, and are therefore becoming less common. All these examples are covered in the first part of that familiar old refereeing question: "Was it hand to ball, or was it ball to hand?" You will still hear that question at training clinics and courses, and the answer supposedly will tell the new or inexperienced referee what to do. In many cases it will help you make a decision, and some of those decisions will be correct. But in an equal number of cases it will be wrong!

Here's why:

In the cases we described, the player does deliberately move his hand towards the ball in an effort to touch it or move it. There is no doubt he moved "hand to ball", as the old saying goes. If he succeeds in touching the ball with his hand, he should be penalized (assuming there is no advantage, or that the infraction is not trifling). But many times a player as part of a natural running or jumping motion appears to move his hand towards the ball. There may have been no intentional touching of the ball with the hand, yet still he will get penalized-incorrectly, we should add.

And then there are cases where the hand doesn't move, and yet the handball is nevertheless intentional. Think about a wall at a free kick near goal. The kicker plays the ball hard towards the goal, aiming to curve the ball around the end of the wall. The player at the end of the wall has his hands down to his side, but sees that the ball is going to hit the arm on the outside of the wall. He leaves the arm in that position even though he knows the ball will strike it. He has time to move it, but chooses not to, and as a result, blocks the shot on goal. If we stick by the old saw "ball to hand", the player has committed no infraction. And that is why this old piece of refereeing wisdom-like so many of them-is useful up to a point. Because it does not cover every situation, it should be used with care.

So in the case of supposed handball, ask yourself these questions:

1. Did the player move his hand with the purpose of touching (handling) the ball? If the answer is "yes", then you have witnessed an infringement of the laws, and you may penalize. If there is no advantage situation, or if the player gains some benefit from his handling, then give a free kick to his opponents. If the answer is "no", then allow play to proceed. If the answer is "I can't decide", then look for something else to help you make the decision. If the handled ball goes straight to an opponent, then you don't have to decide. You can just allow play to go on unabated.

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2. Did the player have time to move his hand out of the way, but chose instead to leave it where it was? If the answer is yes, then you have witnessed an infringement of the laws, and you may choose to penalize. If the answer is "no", because you can see that (for example) a shot was taken so close to the defender that he couldn't possibly have had time to get out of its way, then there is no breach of the law, and no matter how many people shout about it, you must let play go on.

3. Was the movement of the hand or arm an instinctive act of protection for the face, the groin or (in the case of young female players) the breast? Young players especially deserve the benefit of the doubt in these cases. Their instinct is to protect vulnerable parts of their body, especially ones that hurt when struck hard. Older players learn to turn their head quickly, or deflect a ball with their shoulder, rather than take a hit in a place that would be painful.

4. Was there some other factor that could have caused the contact between the ball and the hand or arm? On a lot of fields in youth soccer, the surface is not as smooth as we would like, and as a result the ball pops up unpredictably. When in such cases the ball makes contact with a young arm, could it have been the playing surface and not the action of the player that created the "handball"? We describe one such case in the sidebar.

One final point of great importance: In the case of accidental contact between the ball and the hand or arm, even if the ball drops to the benefit of the player who made contact with it, you must not penalize. Where there is no infraction, no infraction must be called!

SIDEBAR

WHY WOULD THE PLAYER HANDLE THE BALL?

During an invitational tournament in Dallas, Texas in the fall of the year, when the fields are as hard as a rock, and have only a straw-colored mat of vegetation that passes as grass, two under-16 teams of skillful boys were going at each other with great enthusiasm. The ball was thumped out of one defense, deep into the opponents' half, bouncing down into the penalty area. The last defender chased back for it and tried to bring it under control off to one side of his own penalty area. He was not under pressure, because there was no opponent within thirty yards of him. On the rough surface the ball popped up after a bounce, struck him on the arm and dropped in front of him. The whistle blew, and the referee--from forty yards away--awarded a penalty-kick.

In this case, let's pretend we are the player penalized for handball. We know no opponent is nearby, which means we have a lot of time to get the ball under control, to pass it back to the goalkeeper, or to thump it back upfield. We have no need to handle the ball.

in order to accomplish what we are trying to do, especially so in our own penalty area. Handling the ball in an open space where everyone can see you would be the ultimate act of stupidity. What good can possibly come of it? Despite all that, and without thinking (and that is the real problem here) the referee saw the hand and ball come together, and chose to award a penalty-kick. A moment's reflection, as we recommend in item number 4 above, would have told the referee that this was a classic case of accidental handling brought about because of a rough playing-surface.

END OF QUOTE