



## **11 Points on Judging Ball Handling**

August 19, 2018

<https://www.referee.com/judging-ballhandling/>

Judgment. It's a word that referees use on a regular basis, and it is the key factor when making ball handling calls. While it is easy enough to say, it is much more difficult to apply. By definition, judgment is "the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions." While I am sure there are many coaches (and parents) who disagree that referees always make sensible conclusions, the first referee has responsibility for making the final decision on ball handling faults.

In any match, there are hundreds of ball handling contacts that must be judged. Most are clearly legal, and some are clearly illegal; however, there are many that fall into a "gray area" that require the first referee to make a decision about whether or not the contact is legal. Developing your own personal ball handling judgment is not an easy task, but there are some points that can assist in the task of sorting out the legal from the illegal.

1. The different rule sets have slightly different criteria for judging ball handling. In USAV and NCAA, the ball handling directive specifically allows referees to be less severe in their judgment on a team's second contact when a player is making a challenging or spectacular play on the ball. NFHS rules do not provide for that allowance.
2. Consistency is the most important factor when judging ball handling calls. That does not necessarily mean that the same number of calls will be made against each team, but it does mean that similar contacts should be judged the same way. The referee must set a level of ball handling that he or she is comfortable with and maintain that level throughout the match.
3. Only the actual contact of the ball should be used when judging ball handling. The sound of the contact, body position of the player, or flight of the ball should not be used to judge the legality. Especially at higher levels

where the speed of the game is faster and the players are more athletic, there are many unusual-looking contacts that are indeed legal.

4. Referees should avoid making “automatic” calls based on the type of contact. For example, a ball recovered out of the net is legal as long as there is no prolonged contact and the ball is not caught or thrown. In addition, it is legal to play the ball with an open hand even if the player’s follow-through is in an upward motion. The actual contact with the ball must be judged, and the contact is legal if the ball rebounds from the hand and is not caught or thrown.

5. It is legal to play the ball with any part of the body. A ball that hits the chest or shoulder is most likely legal, as it is difficult to catch or throw the ball with those body parts. It is also legal to play the ball off a foot, including kicking the ball.

6. Multiple contacts are permitted on the team’s first contact. That includes the ball rebounding from one body part to another as long as that is part of a single effort to play the ball. For example, a ball that rebounds from the forearm to the upper arm. Even though the other team may yell, “Lift!” that contact is nearly always legal, since it is difficult to catch/throw the ball on that play.

7. A ball that rolls up the arms on the first contact is usually legal, as long as the ball keeps moving. The ball is typically not caught or thrown, but likely several contacts instead. On the second or third contact, a ball that rolls up the arms should be called as multiple contacts.

8. When executing a two-handed set, the player’s hands must contact the ball simultaneously. If the first referee sees the hands contact separately, a double contact fault should be called. While the spin of the ball may be an indicator of a double-hit, it is entirely possible for the ball to spin after a legal set. For example, if a setter has his or her hands too close together when contacting the ball, it will often create back spin even though both hands contacted the ball at the same time. It is imperative that the first referee see the actual contact of the ball in order to judge those contacts fairly.

9. “Deep dish” or “beach” sets can be difficult to judge. If the ball is over-controlled or the ball comes to rest in the setter’s hands, an illegal hit should be called. If the setter initiates contact with the ball in the chest area and releases the ball from the same area, the contact is legal. However, if the contact is initiated in the chest area, and the setter lifts the ball significantly before releasing it, an illegal hit is the correct call.

10. Many one-handed sets come out with a great deal of spin unless the setter is extremely skilled. Those contacts should only be whistled if there is prolonged contact or the ball is caught or thrown. One-handed sets often come off the fingertips of the setter and should not be judged any more severely than any other one-handed contact.

11. Another type of contact that can be difficult to judge is a “tip” or a “dump.” The player’s hand should already be in motion before it comes in contact with the ball. If the player’s hand stops the ball before sending it forward, the result is a catch/throw action, which is an illegal hit.

If the player contacts the ball behind his or her head and brings it forward, an illegal hit has most likely occurred. Beware of when a player moves the ball sideways across the plane of the body. If the contact begins on one side of the body, and the ball is released on the other side, the contact is illegal.

Those points may help with your ball handling judgment, but there is no substitute for actual experience. Referees with experience as a player and/or coach may have an advantage when it comes to judging ball handling, but referees of all levels and backgrounds should spend time watching the game and working as a referee. The goal is to judge ball handling fairly and consistently.