

Minutes of the USATT Rules Committee

Monday December 12, 2016, 10:15am, Las Vegas Convention Center room N251

Attendance: Kagin Lee (chair), Azmy Ibrahim, Joseph Yick.

The meeting was called to order at 10:15am.

1. Introduction

Han had indicated that he was unable to attend the meeting. Kagin apologized for the low frequency of meetings, due to recent health issues that caused his absence at major events. Kagin noted that all propositions to the ITTF are due in February.

2. Rule Interpretations and Precedents Document

Earlier this year, the committee had drafted a document that included a variety of interpretations and precedents that would serve as non-binding guidance to players and officials. The committee still desires review of the document by others, in particular the URC as well as the highest-ranking technical officials, before publishing the document. After publication, the document can continue to be updated with any new questions and resolutions that come up.

Action Item: Joseph will circulate the document to the URC and return with their feedback.

3. Clarification on Broken Balls

Kagin noted that there seemed to be confusion on what should occur when the ball breaks during a match; whether a point should be awarded or if a let should be called. He suggested that a memorandum be issued on this matter. The relevant law is as follows:

2.9.2.4 (Play may be interrupted) because the conditions of play are disturbed in a way which could affect the outcome of the rally.

The committee discussed the critical points of the law, and they agreed that:

- The most important decision the umpire must make is whether the ball is in play or not when the ball breaks. If the umpire judges that the ball breaks while it is out of play, the point should stand.
- If the ball breaks while it is in play, it is also important to decide whether the fact that the ball broke could affect the outcome of play.

The committee agreed on the following guidance:

- If the umpire judges that the ball broke after the rally was over, the point stands.
- If the umpire judges that the ball broke during the rally, then:

- In most cases, a let should be called, because a broken ball often affects play.
- In some cases, the umpire may judge that the outcome of the rally was not affected by the broken ball, and the point stands. For example, if the player hit the ball with the edge of her racket, causing the ball to break, and the ball flew backwards; the umpire would likely decide that the broken ball had no effect on the outcome of the rally.

Action Item: Kagin will draft a memorandum regarding broken balls, for distribution to officials and players.

4. "Net Visibility Rule" Proposal

Larry Hodges had sent a proposed rule change with a very detailed explanation, with the request that it be submitted to the ITTF for worldwide adoption. He sent it too late for consideration for the 2016 ITTF AGM, so the committee will consider it for 2017. The proposed change is as follows:

*2.6.4. 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, **or the net assembly and its upward extension**, by the server or his or her doubles partner or by anything they wear or carry.*

In summary, the rules require that the ball not be hidden from the receiver during service, but the rule is not being adequately enforced. Larry's proposal intends to solve this problem by requiring the ball to be visible not only to the receiver, but also to the net assembly.

The committee believes that it is very difficult to enforce the current rule requiring serves to be visible to the receiver. The primary reason for this difficulty is because the umpires are not at an optimal position to judge ball visibility. Larry's proposal would slightly change the technical requirements for the serve, widening the angle of visibility of the serve, but ultimately would not solve the problem of the umpire's perspective. In order for that problem to be solved, the angle of visibility must be widened much further, extending to the position of the umpires, not just the net posts. The committee believes that adoption of Larry's proposal would not change the situation, and that serves would continue to be hidden.

5. Potential Addition of Dedicated Service Judges

In a meeting in 2015, the committee considered the possibility of using additional officials on a court to help enforce service legality. At that time, the committee tabled the discussion, but reconsidered this option now.

It is generally agreed that the best position to judge service is from the ends of the court, rather than the current position of the umpires at the sides of the court.

Other sports, such as tennis, permit a variable number of officials (line judges and chair umpire) to be used in a given match, and give guidance to where those officials should be positioned and their roles. The rules of table tennis specify two umpires.

Action Item: Kagin will draft a protocol for matches to be conducted with three or four officials, to be tested at a major domestic tournament with many umpires on duty, such as the College Table Tennis Championships or the US National Championships.

The committee discussed initial principles for the potential protocol:

- If there are three officials, there should be one umpire and two service judges.
- If there are four officials, there should be two umpires and two service judges.
- The service judges will be positioned at each end, behind the coaches (if present).
- During service, only the service judge that is on the opposite side of the server is active. The active service judge will stand, in a position he or she decides is optimal to judge service legality. The other service judge is inactive during that service, and will sit.
- If the active service judge detects a fault, he or she raises a hand (to call the umpire's attention) and says "stop". The umpire will then call either "fault" or "let; almost always it should be "fault". The service judge will then use hand signals and verbal explanation, if necessary, to describe the reason for the fault.
- The service judge may stop play for any fault in serve. The service judge may not stop play for anything not related to service. Service judges may not be called to give an opinion on matters not related to service.
- After a legal service, the active service judge will continue to stand during the rally, to avoid disturbing play.
- The umpires retain the right to call fault.
- Service judges do not change ends.

6. Potential Re-Interpretation of Service Rule

Kagin noted that it could be judged that umpires worldwide are currently not enforcing rule 2.6.6.1, which gives both umpire and assistant the right to call a let or fault when they have doubt about the legality of a serve.

2.6.6.1 If either the umpire or the assistant umpire is not sure about the legality of a service he or she may, on the first occasion in a match, interrupt play and warn the server; but any subsequent service by that player or his or her doubles partner which is not clearly legal shall be considered incorrect.

The typical practice is that an umpire who cannot see the ball assumes that the other umpire can see it, and lets it go. However if umpires were to enforce the rules more strictly, exercising their right to call let or fault when they cannot see the ball (and therefore have reasonable doubt about legality), there would no longer be a problem with hidden serves.

Kagin suggests that the committee approach the ITTF URC about interpreting the word "may" as "should", and thus recommend that umpires worldwide be directed to be more assertive about serves that are not visible to one of the umpires.

Action Item: Kagin will approach the ITTF URC to see if they would consider an adjustment in interpretation and application of this rule.

7. "Boosting Rule" Proposal

Larry Hodges had submitted a proposal related to boosting, requesting that the committee present it to the Secretary General as a potential ITTF rule change. His proposal is as follows:

*2.4.7 The racket covering shall be used without physical, chemical or other treatment, **with leeway such that if there is a racket testing procedure at an event and a racket does not fail that procedure, it shall be considered legal for that event.***

The committee is opposed to this change. The rules are generally a set of restrictions and requirements; they do not at any point declare anything to be "legal". Once the requirements for something are fulfilled, it is implicitly permitted. For example, there is no clause that states: "once the ball hits the opponent's side of the table, it is considered a legal return." Introducing a clause stating that something is "legal" would bring a new paradigm into the rules, and in effect the entirety of the rules would become broken.

One example of a catastrophic failure of such a rule: If a racket goes to racket control and does not fail, it "shall be considered legal". The player then receives the racket on court, and proceeds to pour gasoline onto it. The racket has already been declared legal, and there would be no reasonable resolution for this problem.

The committee recognizes that there is currently failure in the sport regarding the enforcement of the racket rules; however there is still no reasonable solution. The equipment that can detect boosters is heavy lab equipment, is very expensive, and performs a destructive test in which the racket covering is no longer usable. It is difficult to craft a rule which permits relatively safe materials, while outlawing toxic chemicals.

8. Proposal to Apply Wheelchair Service Rule to All Matches

A member had submitted a request that the association consider requiring all serves to be long, similar to the wheelchair service rule. The current service rule permits service to all parts of the table, and permits the ball to bounce backwards toward the net. This is a disadvantage to shorter players who cannot reach a very short serve that bounces towards the net.

The rules committee believes this is a matter of preference on how the sport should be played; there is no urgent need to change the rules in this way, nor is there an overriding reason to change the rule. The opinion of the committee members is that we should not change the rules.

9. Status of the Coaching Rule

Kagin informed the committee that the USATT Board voted to adopt the ITTF coaching rule, effective immediately. Joseph noted that there has been little effect in major international tournaments. It will take years for us to see what the long term effect of this is.

Action Item: Kagin will re-send the guidance for coaching to the committee for review, before submitting it to USATT staff for wide distribution.

10. Proposal to Change Blade Materials

At this year's AGM, Hong Kong proposed that the rule that restricts the materials of the blade be removed entirely. This would mean that all current requirements for the blade (85% wood by thickness, fibrous reinforcement, etc.) no longer apply, and a blade could be made of any material.

The proposition was narrowly defeated at the AGM, with 73.45% in favor. Kagin believes that if it had passed, the effect on the sport would have been disastrous. For example rubber would become a legal blade material, rendering all requirements on racket coverings useless. More extreme examples could be found.

Kagin believes that the strong support for this failed proposition indicates a desire of the AGM to be permissive of blade materials, and suggests that a less extreme proposition may be needed, for example:

2.4.2 The blade shall be made of one or more layers of natural wood or other solid material. Except for natural wood, each layer shall be without cavities and not compressible.

Action Item: Kagin will send Joseph more examples about how the 2016 Hong Kong proposal would be problematic for table tennis.

Action Item: Joseph will approach the Hong Kong association and inquire as to their future plans regarding their proposal, and see if they are amenable to amending their proposal to something less extreme.

11. Proposal to Remove the Requirement of a Near-Vertical Toss

The rules require a toss to be "near vertical", and the enforcement of this varies quite a bit from one umpire to the next. Kagin suggests that it may no longer be necessary to have this requirement, as long as the toss continues to be tossed 6 inches up, and is (supposedly) visible to the receiver. Removal of this requirement would simplify the rules and their enforcement.

Joseph is of the opinion that the direction of serve does not matter, and agrees that this would make the rules simpler.

Azmy does not agree with the proposal, arguing that it would make the serve faster.

Han had spoken to Kagin in advance, and does not think this should be change.

Action Item: The committee is split and will not pursue this. Kagin will suggest this for consideration by the ITTF Athletes' Commission.

12. Continued Existence of the Rules Committee

This was the first term of the committee, and Kagin asked for opinions regarding the continued role of the committee; whether it should continue to be discrete, or whether it should be recombined with the officials' committee.

Both Joseph and Azmy believe that the committee should continue to exist on its own. The work is completely different from the URC, and it is good to divide to work. Kagin will make note of this to the USATT Board.

13. Adjournment

Kagin thanked the committee for their service, noting that the committee's term ends soon. He suggested that members ask others if they are interested in serving on the committee next year.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:24pm.

Submitted by Kagin Lee, Chair

Appendix A - Email Votes

On February 23, 2016, the committee provided non-binding recommendations to the Secretary General as guidance for voting on ITTF propositions and resolutions as follows:

- Proposition 1: Yes, 3-0-1 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 2: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 3: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 4: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 5: Yes, 3-1 (Kagin opposed)
- Proposition 6: Split, 1-1-2 (Han in favor, Kagin opposed)
- Proposition 7: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 8: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 9: No, 1-3 (Joseph in favor)
- Proposition 10: No, 0-4
- Proposition 11: No, 0-4
- Proposition 12: Yes, 4-0
- Resolution A: No, 0-4
- Resolution B: Yes, 3-1 (Han opposed)
- Proposition 13: No, 0-3-1 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 14: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 15: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 16: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 17: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 18: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 19: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 20: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 21: No, 0-3-1 (Azmy abstaining)
- Proposition 22: Yes, 3-1 (Joseph opposed)
- Proposition 23: No, 0-3 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 24: Yes, 2-0-2 (Kagin and Han in favor)
- Proposition 25: Yes, 3-0-1 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 26: No, 0-3-1 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 27: Yes, 3-0-1 (Joseph abstaining)
- Proposition 28: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 29: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 30: Yes, 4-0
- Proposition 31: Yes, 4-0
- Resolution C: Yes, 4-0
- Resolution D: No, 0-3-1 (Joseph abstaining)

On September 12, 2016, the committee voted to advise the USATT Board regarding the ITTF coaching rule as follows:

Kagin - in support of adoption of the ITTF rule

Azmy - opposed to adoption of the ITTF rule

On September 22, 2016, the committee approved a draft of the USATT Rules with no objections. The draft would delay adoption of the forthcoming change to the coaching rules that allow advice between points. The draft would be sent to USATT as an option for adoption, without recommendation from the committee.

On September 24, 2016, the committee approved the guidance for conduct at tournaments which permit advice between points, with no objections.

On December 3, 2016, the committee approved two draft versions of the USATT Rules with no objections. The first version would remove extraneous language related to the use of unauthorized rubber on a non-striking side of the racket, and was a rules cleanup with no actual change to the game. The second version included all changes in the first version, and also included a change which would apply the ITTF coaching rule to domestic tournaments. The committee would recommend that the USATT Board approve one of the versions, with no preference for one or the other.