

USATT Rule Interpretations and Precedents

1. Authority

- 1.1. This document, the *USATT Rule Interpretations and Precedents*, represents the position of the USATT Rules Committee with regard to the rules of table tennis, applicable to USATT sanctioned competitions.
- 1.2. In all cases, the Tournament Referee at each competition holds complete authority on the interpretation of rules at that competition. The Referee is not required to follow any interpretation or precedent listed here.
- 1.3. In the event of conflict or inconsistency between the USATT Rules of Table Tennis and this document, the USATT Rules of Table Tennis shall be regarded as authoritative.

2. Auxiliary Documents

- 2.1. The USATT rules are derived from the ITTF Handbook, and the ITTF publishes a variety of documents which provide additional regulation and guidance intended to support the ITTF Handbook; for example the Handbook for Match Officials, the Handbook for Tournament Referees, and the Technical Leaflets published by the Equipment Committee. All such documents apply to USATT sanctioned competitions, unless there is direct conflict with USATT rules.
- 2.2. Guidance provided in the USATT Tournament Guide shall apply to USATT sanctioned competitions, unless there is direct conflict with the USATT rules.
- 2.3. In hardbat and sandpaper competition, the rules published on hardbat.com shall apply.
- 2.4. For any particular tournament or event within a tournament, special conditions specified in the tournament prospectus or entry form shall supersede USATT rules, if the tournament and those conditions are sanctioned by USATT.

3. Equipment

3.1. Rackets

- 3.1.1. Inspection – The rules state that a player may examine the opponent's racket before the start of a match. Usually, this may be done at any time if the examination was not done at the beginning of the match, provided it is not used as a delaying tactic or for other gamesmanship. When examining a racket, it is imperative that no damage or modification be done to the opponent's racket. The striking area of the rubber should not be rubbed or touched with fingers.
- 3.1.2. Wood – The blade must be at least 85% natural wood by thickness. Fiberboard, particle board, hardboard, chipboard etc. are not natural wood. Bamboo is considered wood; cork is not.
- 3.1.3. Size of the Racket Covering – The rules require the rubber to cover the entire blade, and not extend beyond the blade. Most referees will permit up to 2mm of tolerance under or over the size of the blade.

- 3.1.4. Treatment of the Racket Covering – Treatment of the rubber is not permitted. This includes any type of speed glue or booster. Surface treatment chemicals also are not permitted. Cleaners are permitted, to remove dirt or oil from the surface, but not to modify the characteristics of the rubber. Each player is responsible for ensuring that his or her racket is legal.
- 3.1.5. Damage – The Referee shall decide whether a racket with minor damage may be used. A referee may permit slight damage around the edge of the rubber; however damage that is not at the periphery, such as a tear or missing pimples where the ball would be struck, normally cannot be used.
- 3.1.6. Other Parts of the Racket – The rules describe the blade and racket coverings, but there are often additional parts to a racket, such as the handle or edge tape. Because these additional parts are not described, they are not regulated; the handle may be made of any material and may be of any size or shape. However, no additional part of the racket may be construed as being a striking surface; for example it is not permitted for the “handle” to have an additional extra-large flat surface, with a third sheet of rubber glued to it, and claim that it is the handle.

3.2. Clothing

- 3.2.1. The rules require the “main colour” of the shirt, skirt or shorts to be different from the color of the ball. If there are multiple colors, the Referee will subjectively decide what the main color is. The main color of a shirt may vary depending on the way it is worn (e.g., tucked in the shorts or not) and on the perception of the Referee. The main color is not necessarily the color which constitutes the majority of the shirt/shorts/skirt.
- 3.2.2. The referee has the authority to permit any additional articles of clothing, such as a track suit or headgear.
- 3.2.3. Wearing a track suit during the two minute practice period is permitted, however the player is responsible for ensuring that he or she is ready to begin play immediately when the practice period is over, with the appropriate attire, player number, etc.

4. Service

- 4.1. Enforcement of the service rule is largely based on fact rather than interpretation. Therefore this section shall attempt to explain some of the intricacies of the service rules as understood by most umpires; however, this section shall not be construed as limiting the responsibility or authority of the match officials at a competition.
- 4.2. Open Palm – The rules require the palm to be open. They do not require the palm to be flat; there is no rule against “cupping” the palm. However the ball must be “resting freely”; it cannot be gripped with the hand. In addition, the ball must be visible to both the receiver and umpires; this limits the degree of curvature of the hand.
- 4.3. Near Vertically Upwards – There is no single, absolute definition of “near vertical” and each umpire may have a different perception and judgment of whether the arc of a ball is near vertical. One umpire may require the toss to be closer to vertical than another umpire. However, it is understood that an arc cannot be simultaneously “near vertical”

and “near horizontal”, and therefore a ball that travels “near horizontal” should not be considered legal.

- 4.4. Rises at Least 16cm – All distances are measured relative to the Earth’s surface. When tossed, the ball must travel to a point at least 16cm above where it started. The relative position of the server’s hand is not relevant.
- 4.5. Ball above the Level of the Playing Surface – To be safe, a player should ensure that the entire ball is above the level of the playing surface at all times during the serve. However, some umpires may permit a serve in which only part of the ball is above the level of the playing surface.
- 4.6. Hidden from the Receiver by the Server – The rules state that the server may not hide the ball, but this does not mean that the receiver must see the ball at all times. The server may not take action which would prevent the receiver from seeing the ball. However if the receiver turns to face away from the ball, he or she cannot see the ball, but the server is not hiding the ball and should not be faulted.

5. Match Conduct

5.1. Suspension of Play

- 5.1.1. After a suspension of play, the match shall resume from where it was prior to suspension, with the same score and the players at the same ends.
- 5.1.2. The Referee should decide whether players may warm up after a suspension based on the duration of the suspension. If play was suspended for 15 minutes or longer, a two minute warm-up period should be authorized; if play was suspended for less than 5 minutes, no warm-up period should be permitted.
- 5.1.3. If a suspension of play is granted for a player to repair equipment or to treat injury, the Referee may grant the player’s opponent permission to practice on another table during the suspension.

5.2. Use of the Racket

- 5.2.1. Each player shall use his or her own racket. In doubles, a player may not strike the ball with the partner’s racket.
- 5.2.2. The rules describe the terms “free hand” and “racket hand”, but this does not mean that a player is required to hold the racket with one hand. If a player holds the racket with two hands, he or she has two racket hands and no free hands.

5.3. Advice

- 5.3.1. Players may receive advice only from designated advisors. However, the rules do not specify whether a designated advisor may receive advice from a third party. In the US, advisors are permitted to receive advice from others, whether in person or by phone. However, note that the interpretation of this rule is different in other countries. Also note that in some competition environments, the designated advisors are situated in an area that cannot be accessed by others.
- 5.3.2. An interpreter cannot be used to translate between a player and their designated advisor. If translation is required, the interpreter should be designated as the advisor; however, only the interpreter may speak with the player.
- 5.3.3. Advice may be given between rallies, but the process of giving or receiving advice may not disrupt continuity of play. Examples of actions that are not allowed:

- A player walking back to the coach between points
 - A player taking a long time to pick up the ball in order to receive advice
 - A player kicking the ball over to the barriers to delay the match
 - A player or coach talking when the players are otherwise ready to begin
 - A coach giving advice during a rally
- 5.3.4. Other matches are likely taking place at the same time on other courts, and the process of giving advice should not disturb play for others.
- 5.3.5. Advice may not be offensive or disruptive to the opponent.
- 5.4. Misbehavior
- 5.4.1. The rules state that players shall not take action that “may unfairly affect an opponent, offend spectators or bring the sport into disrepute.”
- 5.4.2. It is the umpire’s duty to decide if any action is considered misbehavior; and if so, whether that action is minor and should be handled using the point penalty system (yellow card/yellow+red card), or if the misbehavior is serious and the referee should be called.
- 5.4.3. The most common cases of misbehavior are generally understood by both players and match officials. Some less common cases:
- Deliberately breaking the ball, hitting the table or net with the racket, or abusing personal equipment should be treated with the point penalty system. If a player intentionally damages the table or net, the Referee should be called, and the player would normally be disqualified.
 - If illegal advice is given, the advisor should be penalized, not the player. However if the player takes action to seek illegal advice, such as initiating conversation with a person who is not a designated advisor, both the player and the advisor should be penalized.
 - If both players of a doubles pair simultaneously and independently misbehave, two penalties should be assessed to the pair, i.e. both a yellow card and a yellow+red card.
 - Speaking, yelling, or other vocalization is not prohibited in itself; the umpire must consider the total situation and make a subjective judgment. Competitors should not disrupt other matches that are in play. In the championship final with no other matches being played, a show of competitive enthusiasm is often accepted, though not to an extent that would be considered offensive. Yelling in a way that could be considered taunting the opponent, or speech that could be considered “trash talk” should not be permitted.
- 5.5. Disturbances
- 5.5.1. Play may be interrupted if the conditions are disturbed in a way that could affect the rally; for example a loud noise, a stray ball entering the court, or the match ball breaking during the rally.
- 5.5.2. It is important to determine when the disturbance happened. If it occurred after the rally was over, the point stands.
- 5.5.3. If the match ball breaks during the rally, it often affects the outcome and the point should be re-played. However this is not always the case; for example if a player

loses a point, and everything looks normal, but after picking up the ball claims that the ball is broken, the point should stand.

5.6. Deliberate Disruption of Play (Not applicable for ITTF events)

5.6.1. The USATT rules state that a player wins a point “if an opponent deliberately disturbs the conditions of play.” For this to occur, two things must happen:

- The conditions of play are disrupted, to the extent that a let would have been called if the action were not deliberate.
- The disruption is deliberate. The offending player has taken an action with the intent of disturbing play. For example, yelling at the opposing player to interrupt them as they strike the ball would be a deliberate disruption.

5.6.2. An action may be separately both deliberate and disruptive, but not a deliberate disruption. For example if a player smashes a lob and yells “Yes!” before the point is over – The player deliberately yelled, and the action was disruptive, however the player did not yell in an attempt to disrupt play. In this case, a let should be called and the point replayed.

5.7. Good Presentation

5.7.1. The rules require players “to do their utmost to win a match.”

5.7.2. Officials should be cognizant of situations in which a player might not be trying to win. Tournament officials should organize the competition to avoid these situations, such as having proper geographic separation within the draw; or if this cannot be completely done, scheduling potential conflict matches to be played first within the round robin order.

5.7.3. If a player is not trying to win a match, such conduct is considered misbehavior, and an umpire should report to the Referee at the first instance, rather than use the point penalty system.

5.7.4. The Referee may discipline an offending player in a manner suitable for the situation. This may involve default or disqualification, and advising the tournament management committee to withhold prize money. Prize money must be held in escrow pending any appeal.

5.7.5. If disciplinary action is taken for such an offense, the Referee shall submit a report to the USATT Ethics and Grievance Committee.

5.8. Correcting Errors

5.8.1. With respect to out of order play, the rules state that “In any circumstances, all points scored before the discovery of an error shall be reckoned.”

5.8.2. Similarly, points played in error for other reasons, but played in good faith, should stand.

- Example: A pair in doubles begins the second game with their rackets swapped, and the error is only discovered after a few points are played; the players should trade rackets immediately, but points should not be replayed.
- Example: A player suspects the ball is broken but the opponent believes it is okay. After two more points are completed, the players agree that the ball should be replaced; the two points played with the broken ball should not be replayed. However if the players stop play in the middle of a rally because of the broken ball, that point is a let and should be replayed.

5.8.3. If an error is made by the umpire, the umpire should attempt to correct the error immediately. A point should not be awarded to the wrong player due to an error by the umpire. The correction should be made before the next point begins.

- Example: In service, the ball hits the net and the umpire immediately calls “let”, but the ball does not hit the opponent’s side of the table. The umpire should correct his or her call, and award a point to the receiver.

6. Match Results

6.1. Match Completion

6.1.1. Once a match has been completed in good faith, it shall not be replayed or continued.

6.1.2. If a match is scheduled as best of 7 but the players believe it is best of 5 and play the match until one side wins 3 games, the match is complete and the side which won 3 games is the winner of the match.

6.1.3. If a match is scheduled as best of 5 but the players believe it is best of 7 and play the match until one side wins 4 games, the match is complete and the side which won 4 games is the winner of the match.

6.2. Unrated Players

6.2.1. It is common to permit unrated players to compete in rating-restricted events.

Unrated players are normally permitted to play group matches, but not win prizes or advance to the second stage of the event. If an unrated player has good results in a rating-restricted event, it is often an indication that they should not be in that event.

6.2.2. All matches involving the unrated player count for ratings, and are used in determining the order of finish in a round robin group. The rated player who finishes highest in the group will advance, and the unrated player shall not advance.

6.2.3. It is recommended that this limitation be included in the tournament entry blank.

6.3. Unplayed and Unfinished Matches in Group Competition

6.3.1. If a player begins play but does not play all matches in a round robin group, the results of the matches that were played shall stand when determining the final group results. In unplayed and unfinished matches, the winner receives 2 match points and the loser receives 0 match points.

6.3.2. If a match is unplayed or unfinished, for tiebreaking purposes the winning player is awarded enough points and games to decide the match. For example if Player A wins the first point in a best-of-5 match, and then retires; Player B should be regarded as having won the match 11-1, 11-0, 11-0.

6.3.3. If a player does not complete all matches, the tournament management committee may withhold titles or prizes from the player at their discretion. In such cases, the committee should consider whether the player was unable to play due to injury, illness, or schedule conflict.

7. Match Play Without Umpires

7.1. When a match is played without umpires, the competitors are expected and required to follow the rules as if an umpire were present. In such matches, the players are equally responsible for fair play; the match may be seen as a self-umpired match.

- 7.2. Players shall do their utmost to play the match in good faith and accept calls made by their opponents. However, if the players cannot agree on a call, they should ask the Referee to make a ruling. If a player believes that the match is no longer being played in good faith, the players should request an umpire by notifying the Chief Umpire or Referee.
- 7.3. Disruption of Play – If the conditions of play are disturbed, such as if a stray ball enters the court, the players should call a let immediately.
- 7.4. No Second Chances – A player has only one chance to win a point. For example, if play is disrupted by a stray ball, a player cannot attempt to hit a winner and then call a let if he or she misses. It is best if the player makes a clear let call immediately; however if he continues to play he or she must accept loss of the point if the shot misses.
- 7.5. Score Disputes – To prevent scoring issues, each player should call the score aloud before serving. If players cannot agree on the current score, they should attempt to find a previous score which they agree on. If it is discovered that there is only one or two particular points that are in dispute, those points may be replayed.
- 7.6. Illegal Service – If a receiver believes his or her opponent is serving illegally, at the first instance, the receiver should call a let and describe the error to the opponent. If the server fails to remedy the problem, the receiver may decide to permit the opponent additional attempts to serve legally, or request an umpire for the match.
- 7.7. Scorekeepers – If a match has a scorekeeper who is not serving as an umpire, the scorekeeper should only keep score and shall make no judgments. The scorekeeper should accept all instructions from the players, and refer to the Referee if there is a dispute.
- 7.8. Non-Official Witnesses – Any claim from a third party witness such as a spectator or coach should have no bearing on a call. Regardless of what the spectators believe, the players must agree on the events that occurred and the call to be made.