

The Code: The Players' Guide for Un-officiated Matches

PREFACE

When your serve hits your partner stationed at the net, is it a let, fault, or loss of point? Likewise, what is the ruling when your serve, before touching the ground, hits an opponent who is standing back of the baseline. The answers to these questions are obvious to anyone who knows the fundamentals of tennis, but it is surprising the number of players who don't know these fundamentals. All players have a responsibility to be familiar with the basic rules and customs of tennis. Further, it can be distressing when a player makes a decision in accordance with a rule and the opponent protests with the remark: "Well, I never heard of that rule before!" Ignorance of the rules constitutes a delinquency on the part of a player and often spoils an otherwise good match.

What is written here constitutes the essentials of The Code, a summary of procedures and unwritten rules that custom and tradition dictate all players should follow. No system of rules will cover every specific problem or situation that may arise. If players of good will follow the principles of The Code, they should always be able to reach an agreement, while at the same time making tennis more fun and a better game for all. The principles set forth in The Code shall apply in cases not specifically covered by the ITF Rules of Tennis and USTA Regulations.

Before reading this you might well ask yourself: Since we have a book that contains all the rules of tennis, why do we need a code? Isn't it sufficient to know and understand all the rules? There are a number of things not specifically set forth in the rules that are covered by custom and tradition only. For example, if you have a doubt on a line call, your opponent gets the benefit of the doubt. Can you find that in the rules? Further, custom dictates the standard procedures that players will use in reaching decisions. These are the reasons we need a code.

– Col. Nicolas E. Powel

Note: The Code is not part of the official ITF Rules of Tennis. It is meant to be used as a guide for unofficiated matches. This edition of The Code is an adaptation of the original, which was written by Colonel Nicolas E. Powel.

PRINCIPLES

1. **Courtesy.** Tennis is a game that requires cooperation and courtesy from all participants. Make tennis a fun game by praising your opponents' good shots and by not:

- conducting loud postmortems after points;
- complaining about shots like lobs and drop shots;
- embarrassing a weak opponent by being overly gracious or condescending;
- losing your temper, using vile language, throwing your racket, or slamming a ball in anger; or
- sulking when you are losing.

2. **Counting points played in good faith. All points played in good faith stand.** For example, if after losing a point, a player discovers that the net was four inches too high, the point stands. If a point is played from the wrong court, there is no replay. If during a point, a player realizes that a mistake was made at the beginning (for example, service from the wrong court), the player shall continue playing the point. Corrective action may be taken only after a point has been completed.

THE WARM-UP

3. **Warm-up is not practice.** A player should provide the opponent a 5-minute warm-up (ten minutes if there are no ball persons). If a player refuses to warm-up the opponent, the player forfeits the right to a warm-up. Some players confuse warm-up and practice. A player should make a special effort to hit shots directly to the opponent. (If partners want to warm each other up while their opponents are warming up, they may do so.)

4. **Warm-up serves.** Take all your warm-up serves before the first serve of the match. Courtesy dictates that you not practice your service return when your opponent practices serving. If a player has completed the player's warm-up serves, the player shall return warm-up serves directly to the opponent.

MAKING CALLS

5. **Player makes calls on own side of the net.** A player calls all shots landing on, or aimed at, the player's side of the net.

6. **Opponent gets benefit of doubt.** When a match is played without officials, the players are responsible for making decisions, particularly for line calls. There is a subtle difference between player decisions and those of an

on-court official. An official impartially resolves a problem involving a call, whereas a player is guided by the unwritten law that any doubt must be resolved in favor of the opponent. A player in attempting to be scrupulously honest on line calls frequently will find himself keeping a ball in play that might have been out or that the player discovers too late was out. Even so, the game is much better played this way.

7. Ball touching any part of line is good. If any part of the ball touches the line, the ball is good. A ball 99% out is still 100% good.

8. Ball that cannot be called out is good. Any ball that cannot be called out is considered to have been good. A player may not claim a let on the basis of not seeing a ball. One of tennis' most infuriating moments occurs after a long hard rally when a player makes a clean placement and the opponent says: "I'm not sure if it was good or out. Let's play a let." Remember, it is each player's responsibility to call all balls landing on, or aimed at, the player's side of the net. If a ball can't be called out with certainty, it is good. When you say your opponent's shot was really out but you offer to replay the point to give your opponent a break, you are deluding yourself because you must have had some doubt.

9. Calls when looking across a line or when far away. The call of a player looking down a line is much more likely to be accurate than that of a player looking across a line. When you are looking across a line, don't call a ball out unless you can clearly see part of the court between where the ball hit and the line. It is difficult for a player who stands on one baseline to question a call on a ball that landed near the other baseline.

10. Treat all points the same regardless of their importance. All points in a match should be treated the same. There is no justification for considering a match point differently than the first point.

11. Requesting opponent's help. When an opponent's opinion is requested and the opponent gives a positive opinion, it must be accepted. If neither player has an opinion, the ball is considered good. Aid from an opponent is available only on a call that ends a point.

12. Out calls corrected. If a player mistakenly calls a ball "out" and then realizes it was good, the point shall be replayed if the player returned the ball within the proper court. Nonetheless, if the player's return of the ball results in a "weak sitter," the player should give the opponent the point. If the player failed to make the return, the opponent wins the point. If the mistake was made on the second serve, the server is entitled to two serves.

13. Player calls own shots out. With the exception of the first serve, a player should call against himself or herself any ball the player clearly sees out regardless of whether requested to do so by the opponent. The prime objective in making calls is accuracy. All players should cooperate to attain this objective.

14. Partners' disagreement on calls. If doubles partners disagree about whether their opponents' ball was out, they shall call it good. It is more important to give your opponents the benefit of the doubt than to avoid possibly hurting your partner's feelings by not overruling. The tactful way to achieve the desired result is to tell your partner quietly of the mistake and then let your partner concede the point. If a call is changed from out to good, the point is replayed only if the out ball was put back in play.

15. Audible or visible calls. No matter how obvious it is to a player that the opponent's ball is out, the opponent is entitled to a prompt audible or visible out call.

16. Opponent's calls questioned. When a player genuinely doubts an opponent's call, the player may ask: "Are you sure of your call?" If the opponent reaffirms that the ball was out, the call shall be accepted. If the opponent acknowledges uncertainty, the opponent loses the point. There shall be no further delay or discussion.

17. Spectators never to make calls. A player shall not enlist the aid of a spectator in making a call. No spectator has a part in the match.

18. Prompt calls eliminate two chance option. A player shall make all calls promptly after the ball has hit the court. A call shall be made either before the player's return shot has gone out of play or before the opponent has had the opportunity to play the return shot. Prompt calls will quickly eliminate the "two chances to win the point" option that some players practice. To illustrate, a player is advancing to the net for an easy put away and sees a ball from an adjoining court rolling toward the court. The player continues to advance and hits the shot, only to have the supposed easy put away fly over the baseline. The player then claims a let. The claim is not valid because the player forfeited the right to call a let by choosing instead to play the ball. The player took a chance to win or lose and is not entitled to a second chance.

19. Lets called when balls roll on the court. When a ball from an adjacent court enters the playing area, any player shall call a let as soon as the player becomes aware of the ball. The player loses the right to call a let if the player unreasonably delays in making the call.

20. Touches, hitting ball before it crosses net, invasion of opponent's court, double hits, and double bounces. A player shall promptly acknowledge if:

- a ball touches the player;
- the player touches the net;
- the player touches the player's opponent's court;
- the player hits a ball before it crosses the net;
- the player deliberately carries or double hits the ball; or
- the ball bounces more than once in the player's court.

21. Balls hit through the net or into the ground. A player shall make the ruling on a ball that the player's opponent hits:

- through the net; or
- into the ground before it goes over the net.

22. Calling balls on clay courts. If any part of the ball mark touches the line on a clay court, the ball shall be called good. If you can see only part of the mark on the court, this means that the missing part is on the line or tape. A player should take a careful second look at any point-ending placement that is close to a line on a clay court. Occasionally a ball will strike the tape, jump, and then leave a full mark behind the line. The player should listen for the sound of the ball striking the tape and look for a clean spot on the tape near the mark. If these conditions exist, the player should give the point to the opponent.

SERVING

23. Server's request for third ball. When a server requests three balls, the receiver shall comply when the third ball is readily available. Distant balls shall be retrieved at the end of a game.

24. Foot Faults. A player may warn an opponent that the opponent has committed a flagrant foot fault. If the foot faulting continues, the player may attempt to locate an official. If no official is available, the player may call flagrant foot faults. Compliance with the foot fault rule is very much a function of a player's personal honor system. The plea that a Server should not be penalized because the server only just touched the line and did not rush the net is not acceptable. Habitual foot faulting, whether intentional or careless, is just as surely cheating as is making a deliberate bad line call.

25. Service calls in doubles. In doubles the receiver's partner should call the service line, and the receiver should call the sideline and the center service line. Nonetheless, either partner may call a ball that either clearly sees.

26. Service calls by serving team. Neither the server nor server's partner shall make a fault call on the first service even if they think it is out because the receiver may be giving the server the benefit of the doubt. There is one exception. If the receiver plays a first service that is a fault and does not put the return in play, the server or server's partner may make the fault call. The server and the server's partner shall call out any second serve that either clearly sees out.

27. Service let calls. Any player may call a service let. The call shall be made before the return of serve goes out of play or is hit by the server or the server's partner. If the serve is an apparent or near ace, any let shall be called promptly.

28. Obvious faults. A player shall not put into play or hit over the net an obvious fault. To do so constitutes rudeness and may even be a form of gamesmanship. On the other hand, if a player does not call a serve a fault and gives the opponent the benefit of a close call, the server is not entitled to replay the point.

29. Receiver readiness. The receiver shall play to the reasonable pace of the server. The receiver should make no effort to return a serve when the receiver is not ready. If a player attempts to return a serve (even if it is a "quick" serve), then the receiver (or Receiving team) is presumed to be ready.

30. Delays during service. When the server's second service motion is interrupted by a ball coming onto the court, the server is entitled to two serves. When there is a delay between the first and second serves:

- the server gets one serve if the server was the cause of the delay;
- the server gets two serves if the delay was caused by the Receiver or if there was outside interference.

The time it takes to clear a ball that comes onto the court between the first and second serves is not considered sufficient time to warrant the server receiving two serves unless this time is so prolonged as to constitute an interruption. The receiver is the judge of whether the delay is sufficiently prolonged to justify giving the server two serves.

SCORING

31. **Server announces score.** The server shall announce the game score before the first point of the game and the point score before each subsequent point of the game.

32. **Disputes.** Disputes over the score shall be resolved by using one of the following methods, which are listed in the order of preference:

- count all points and games agreed upon by the players and replay only the disputed points or games;
- play from a score mutually agreeable to all players;
- spin a racket or toss a coin.

HINDRANCE ISSUES

33. **Talking during a point.** A player shall not talk while the ball is moving toward the opponent's side of the court. If the player's talking interferes with an opponent's ability to play the ball, the player loses the point. Consider the situation where a player hits a weak lob and loudly yells at his or her partner to get back. If the shout is loud enough to distract an opponent, then the opponent may claim the point based on a deliberate hindrance. If the opponent chooses to hit the lob and misses it, the opponent loses the point because the opponent did not make a timely claim of hindrance.

34. **Feinting with the body.** A player may feint with the body while the ball is in play. A player may change position at any time, including while the server is tossing the ball. Any movement or sound that is made solely to distract an opponent, including, but not limited to, waving the arms or racket or stamping the feet, is not allowed.

35. **Lets due to hindrance.** A let is not automatically granted because of hindrance. A let is authorized only if the player could have made the shot had the player not been hindered. A let is also not authorized for a hindrance caused by something within a player's control. For example, a request for a let because the player tripped over the player's own hat should be denied.

36. **Grunting.** A player should avoid grunting and making other loud noises. Grunting and other loud noises may bother not only opponents but also players on adjacent courts. In an extreme case, an opponent or a player on an adjacent court may seek the assistance of the Referee or a Roving Umpire. The Referee or official may treat grunting and the making of loud noises as a hindrance. Depending upon the circumstance, this could result in a let or loss of point.

37. **Injury caused by a player.** When a player accidentally injures an opponent, the opponent suffers the consequences. Consider the situation where the server's racket accidentally strikes the receiver and incapacitates the receiver. The receiver is unable to resume play within the time limit. Even though the server caused the injury, the server wins the match by retirement. On the other hand, when a player deliberately injures an opponent and affects the opponent's ability to play, then the opponent wins the match by default. Hitting a ball or throwing a racket in anger is considered a deliberate act.

WHEN TO CONTACT AN OFFICIAL

38. **Withdrawing from a match or tournament.** A player shall not enter a tournament and then withdraw when the player discovers that tough opponents have also entered. A player may withdraw from a match or tournament only because of injury, illness, or personal emergency. A player who cannot play a match shall notify the Referee at once so that the opponent may be saved a trip. A player who withdraws from a tournament is not entitled to the return of the entry fee unless the player withdrew more than six days before the start of the tournament.

39. **Stalling.** The following actions constitute stalling:

- warming up longer than the allotted time;
- playing at about one-third a player's normal pace;
- taking more than 90 seconds on the odd-game changeover; or more than 120 seconds on the Set Break.
- taking longer than the authorized 10 minutes during a rest period;
- starting a discussion or argument in order for a player to catch his or her breath;
- clearing a missed first service that doesn't need to be cleared; and
- excessive bouncing of the ball before any serve.

A player who encounters a problem with stalling should contact an official. Stalling is subject to penalty under the

Point Penalty System.

40. **Requesting an official.** While normally a player may not leave the playing area, the player may contact the Referee or a Roving Umpire to request assistance. Some reasons for visiting the Referee include:

- stalling;
- chronic flagrant foot faults;
- a Medical Time-Out;
- a scoring dispute; and
- a pattern of bad calls.

A player may refuse to play until an official responds.

BALL ISSUES

41. **Retrieving stray balls.** Each player is responsible for removing stray balls and other objects from the player's end of the court. A player's request to remove a ball from the opponent's court must be honored. A player shall not go behind an adjacent court to retrieve a ball, nor ask a player for return of a ball from players on an adjacent court until their point is over. When a player returns a ball that comes from an adjacent court, the player shall wait until their point is over and then return it directly to one of the players, preferably the server.

42. **Catching a ball.** If a player catches a ball before it bounces, the player loses the point regardless of where the player is standing.

43. **New balls for a third set.** When a tournament specifies new balls for a third set, new balls shall be used unless all players agree otherwise.

MISCELLANEOUS

44. **Clothing and equipment malfunction.** If clothing or equipment, other than a racket, becomes unusable through circumstances outside the control of the player, play may be suspended for a reasonable period. The player may leave the court after the point is over to correct the problem. If a racket or string is broken, the player may leave the court to get a replacement, but the player is subject to code violations under the Point Penalty System.

45. **Placement of towels.** Place towels on the ground outside the net post or at the back fence. Clothing and towels should never be placed on the net.

