

BASKETBALL RULES MYTHS

By Steve Gompertz, January 10, 2009

Even people that watch, play, coach, or even referee a lot of basketball hold to some long-standing misconceptions about the rules. The following are some of the more commonly misunderstood rules.

Over the Back

Although commonly heard at basketball games, there is no such phrase in any official basketball rule book. Players are entitled to a spot on the floor and the ball. If they can do both without displacing or impeding an opponent, no foul has occurred. A taller player who is able to reach over an opponent from behind to secure the ball without making illegal contact, should not be penalized. Keep reading for more on legal vs. illegal contact.

Moving Pick or Screen

This is another very common phrase, which again doesn't exist in the rules. Again, players are all entitled to a spot on the floor, as long as it isn't already occupied. That means they're allowed to move anywhere on the floor, as long as no illegal contact occurs. If a player can establish a screening position that prevents an opponent from moving directly towards a ball-handler, there is nothing illegal about continuing to move so as to keep the opponent from moving where they want. An Illegal Screen would be called if the Screener's motion or actions cause illegal contact, such as extending a leg into the opponent's path or bumping the opponent.

All Contact is a Foul

Despite common preconceptions, basketball is a contact sport. Put ten players in a confined area focused on securing one ball, and there will be contact. Fouls only occur when contact is combined with gaining unfair advantage; usually defined as meaning displacing or impeding an opponent. Opponents standing against each other have equal advantage and therefore are not committing a foul. If one pushes, bumps, grabs, or restrains the other, then a foul has occurred. Players are also entitled to the vertical space above them. However, an opponent's incursion into that space doesn't become a foul unless contact occurs; hence the mythical "over the back." A player extending their arms over the head of an opponent is clearly in the opponent's vertical space, but if no contact occurs, there is no foul. If the opponent suddenly jumped up and made contact with the other player's extended arms, then it would be a blocking foul. In the case of a screen, the player setting the screen may continue to move to maintain the screen so long as they don't initiate contact with their opponent. If they move into the opponent, or extend an arm or knee to impede the opponent, then a foul has occurred. However, if the opponent tries to move through the screening player, then the opponent has committed a foul. If both move together following the same path and make contact without either impeding or displacing the other, then neither is committing a foul. Remember, it's always about contact plus advantage for a foul to have occurred.

Sliding = Traveling

It's common to see a player dive after a loose ball and then slide along the floor on their stomach, side, or back after securing the ball. It's also common for shouts to follow for a traveling call since distance was covered without dribbling. However, the rules specifically allow for this type of movement, regardless of how much distance is covered. It would be traveling if the player slides while still standing, or rolls over on the floor.

Two Steps Before Shooting

This has become a common way for people to try to explain the traveling rules. However, there is no specific number of steps allowed in the rules. At the end of a dribble, traveling occurs if the pivot foot is lifted and returned to the floor. Once the ball-handler stops dribbling, the next foot to touch the floor becomes the pivot foot. So on a basic right-side lay-up attempt, the ball-handler stops dribbling by either grabbing the ball in both hands or allowing the ball to come to rest in their right hand, steps forward with their right foot (which now becomes their pivot foot), steps forward with their left foot, lifts their right foot, and shoots the ball. Since the right foot never returned to the floor, no traveling occurred. This situation resulted in two steps being taken legally. However, if the ball-handler had come to a stop after dribbling, turned on their left foot, then took a step with their right foot, they would need to shoot before taking another step with the left; essentially limiting them to a single step before the shot. By the way, since we're on the subject, the rules for traveling are different at the start of a dribble, when the pivot foot can't be lifted before starting to dribble.

Three Seconds in the Lane, Period

Most spectators seem to think that once an offensive player enters the lane, they have to get out within three seconds regardless of what occurs. Actually, a violation only occurs if an offensive player stays in the lane for three seconds without a shot attempt occurring. If a shot is attempted, the 3-second count stops until the offense re-establishes possession, and then a new 3-second count begins. Therefore, if the offense keeps rebounding and shooting within 3 seconds, they can stay in the lane for a long time. By the way, the officials get to decide what constitutes a shot attempt. An air-ball, blocked shot, over-shot, or under-shot would all qualify to stop the 3-second count. It doesn't have to be a good shot attempt, just a shot attempt.