

A Coach's Three Wishes

by Steve Bender

As a coach, if I were ever given three wishes, I know what I would wish for. I don't need another Mia Hamm on my team, though it would be nice. I don't need a newer, flatter, better-groomed field; my kids have learned to play the bad hops. No, my three wishes would be used to give every spectator, parent and coach on the field a clear understanding of three problem areas involving the Laws of Soccer. No matter how many times explanations are given, there are three issues that still seem to generate more problems than all the others.

I wish I had a penny for every time a player or parent who shouted "hand ball!" when they thought the referee "missed" a call. If I could get a nickel for every time a coach screamed for an offside call, I could probably retire. And, if I could get a dollar for anyone on the side who really understood the advantage clause, I could buy a cup of coffee.

I wrote this article for our club to distribute to our coaches, players and parents. If we can educate parents on just these three rules, we will eliminate 90 percent of disputed calls and I will be a happier coach.

HANDBALL First, let's clarify this issue: There is no such thing as "handball" in soccer. The Laws of Soccer never mention "handball" and it is not against the Laws of Soccer for the ball and the hand to make contact.

Law XII governs Fouls and Misconduct and lists offenses which are punished by awarding a direct free kick to the opposing team. Among them is intentionally handles the ball, i.e., carries, strikes or propels the ball with his hand or arm; (this does not apply to the goalkeeper within his own penalty-area). Note the verbs used: "carries," "strikes," and "propels." The player must take deliberate action to hit the ball with their hand. There are several instances where the ball and hand make contact and no foul is or should be called.

Many young players are taught that it is okay for a boy to cross his hands in front of his groin and for a girl to protect her chest with her forearms. This rule frequently is extended to pre-adolescent players protecting their face with a reflexive response to a hard, close kick. As long as they do not move their hands or arms toward the ball, a foul generally isn't called. However, I have seen girls start with their hands pulled to their chest, and as a high ball gets closer their arms raise up to meet it. That should be called and the referee should, in most cases (see the advantage clause below), award a direct free kick for handling the ball deliberately.

Have you ever watched an MLS or World Cup game? Even professional players will protect parts of their bodies with the hand and arm. If a ball were to strike a defender's hands while in front of the groin, no referee would ever call a foul. And many youth leagues (all should) extend that principle to protecting the face. Most players under the age of 10-12 should not even be learning to head a ball because of the risk of injury to the

neck. A young player's Involuntary reaction to protect the face should never be penalized.

The more common scenarios are the bad hop and the player who is struck on the hand or arm by a ball coming in from behind. Invariably, one sideline starts yelling at the referee, demanding a handball be called. But the ball struck the player. There was never a deliberate attempt to play the ball with the hand.

The rule of thumb is "Was the ball moving to hand, or hand moving to ball?" If the ball moved to the hand (or arm) then it was not deliberate and should not be called. If the hand or arm moved to meet and play the ball, then it probably was deliberate and should in most cases be called.

In some cases, particularly with younger players, deliberate intent truly is a judgement call on the part of the official. Did the player intentionally move and use a hand or arm to control the ball, or just protecting himself or herself?

Parents must learn to trust the referee's judgement in these cases, and recognize that the whistle should not be blown every time hand and ball make contact.

OFFSIDE So many have had so much trouble understanding this rule that FIFA has rewritten it to clarify the point. The first sentence now reads: It is not an offence in itself to be in an offside position. There are several conditions that must be met before offside is called:

- The player must be in an offside position: he or she is 1) in the attacking half of the field and 2) closer to the goal than the ball and 3) closer to the goal than at least two defenders (including the keeper)
- The player must be in an offside position when the ball is last touched by a teammate.
- He or she must be, in the opinion of the referee, actively involved in the play by 1) interfering with play, 2) interfering with an opponent, or 3) gaining an advantage by being in that position.

Many situations frequently result in a chorus of "Offside" calls from spectators. A ball may be received directly from a goal kick, a corner kick, or a throw-in even if the receiver is in an offside position. However, if an intervening player touches it, offside may be called. Sometimes the defense pulls up toward the centerline. A fast breakaway by more than one attacker will always result in screaming parents as soon as they pass the last defender. But remember-one of the rules is to be ahead of the ball. As long as neither attacker moves ahead of the ball, they are not in an offside position, and it should not be called. Another common error is not marking the position of a receiving player when the ball is last played by one of his own team. As long as an attacker is just behind or even with the next to last defender when the ball is passed by a teammate, there should be no call. In fact, a well-timed departure-just after the pass-can quickly produce a scoring opportunity. Finally, remember that it is possible to be penalized for offside in the case of direct and indirect free kicks.

The Assistant Referee helps the Referee by moving up and down the touchline to stay even with the next to last defender. When an attacker passes that point into an offside

position, he raises his flag to inform the referee that a player is in the offside position. The referee can then determine whether an offense has actually occurred and, if so, award an indirect free kick to the defending team.

THE ADVANTAGE RULE The advantage clause has to be the least understood rule in soccer. Law V, the Referee Law, contains the following clause: "[The Referee] allows play to continue when the team against which an offence has been committed will benefit from such an advantage and penalises the original offence if the anticipated advantage does not ensue at that time "

The purpose of the rule is to keep a player and his or her team from gaining an advantage by committing a foul. A perfect example of the application of the advantage clause occurred in one of my All-Star games at the end of the Spring 2000 season. An attacking player used her forearm to tomahawk chop a goal kick and caused the ball to land at her feet, where she shot on goal. The goalkeeper stopped the first shot but did not control the ball. The attacker then kicked the rebound into the net.

The referee saw the original handball, but did not immediately call the foul. Had the keeper controlled the first-or even second-shot, she would have been able to punt the ball much farther than a free kick would have carried. Calling the foul before the keeper had an opportunity to play the ball would have given an advantage to the player who committed the foul and to her team. However, when the ball instead entered the goal, the Referee called the foul, awarded the free kick and disallowed the goal. At that point, the free kick was an obvious advantage over a goal against.

By applying the advantage clause first to allow play to continue, and then to stop play and disallow the goal, the Referee has ensured that the offending team in no way benefited from the foul.

Recognizing that spectators may see the foul but not understand the reason for its not being called, the Referee is supposed to indicate when he applies advantage. The accepted hand motion is to push the palms away from the body and down toward the ground. He should also say "advantage" or "play on" to indicate that he has seen the offense and is applying the advantage clause.

A FINAL THOUGHT In most youth games, the Referees are themselves children. As such, they are still learning the game, and they will make errors in judgement and errors in application of the Laws. We, the adult coaches and parents, must recognize going in to a match that mistakes will be made. We should take those mistakes in stride during the match. Parents, leave it to the coaches to handle the matter. Coaches, leave it to the league officials to approach the referees--especially the youth referees, and address poor performance. Finally, to the youth referees, remember that to earn the patch you wear, you had to study the rules and pass a test. You have already studied the rules longer than most of the players and coaches in the games you work. So, go out and make your calls with confidence and authority--and you will help make my wishes come true.