

Hand Ball!!!! Stop Saying That! - Victor Matheson

Referee Discretion required to correctly call hand ball.

November, 2005

OK, I simply cannot stand it anymore. One cannot go to a game anywhere in the US without someone yelling for a "hand ball" every five minutes. Listen up folks, players, coaches, referees and fans have gotten this rule wrong all of these years, and it's got to stop. Furthermore, it's not just beginning players who get the call wrong. Even top-level professional players want referees to call a foul every time a ball hits a player's hand. In this week's article we all need to have a little talk about the "hand ball" and what this rule really entails.

To learn more about the "hand ball," we need to begin by looking inside our FIFA Laws of the Game to see what the rules really are. First of all, unbeknownst to many, there is no such rule as "hand ball." In reality, Law XII states that is illegal if a player "handles the ball deliberately (except for the goalkeeper within his own penalty area)" This means that is not, I repeat not, a foul if the ball touches a player's hand. It is only a foul if the player intentionally handles the ball. Therefore, all of those times that a defender kicks the ball right into a player's hand or the ball bounces up and hits an arm, these are not fouls and should not be called.

Let me also emphasize that nowhere does the rule book say anything about whether or not the player gains an advantage by the ball hitting his or her hand. In other words, even if the ball were to hit a player's arm and drop right at his feet or even were to go directly into his opponents' goal, these are not fouls if they were unintentional acts. Apparently, I am not the only one whose feathers have been ruffled by years of bad calls by referees and undeserved abuse from fans. As recently as 1996 FIFA specifically changed the laws to make it very clear that it is only a foul if the player handles the ball deliberately.

So how can one tell if a hand ball is intentional or not? First, if a ball, such as a clearance out of the defense, hits a player so fast that they have no time to react then this cannot be a hand ball. Likewise, bouncing balls that come up and hit a player's arm or balls that hit a player's arm when his or her back is turned are generally not fouls. On the other hand, when a player uses her hand at her side to control a ball that comes in at waist level or has time to reach out and touch a ball, then these clearly should be called. A good rule-of-thumb to use is if the player's hand comes to the ball, it is a foul. If the ball comes to the hand, it is not a foul.

Now to all of you parents, coaches, players, and fans who incessantly yell for the referee to call these infractions: you need to sit down and be quiet. There is nothing that makes you look more ignorant of the game than crying for a foul every time the ball touches an arm.

Unintentional hand balls are not fouls. Period.

Finally, to all you referees out there, I know that it is easier to simply call every ball that hits a player's hand a foul rather than having to make a difficult decision regarding a player's intent and having to face the wrath of angry (although incorrect) fans. However, you must resist the temptation of making the easy call and have the courage to make the correct call. Calling unintentional hand balls will only make it more difficult in the future for the minority of referees who choose to call the fouls correctly. Remember, no intent, no foul! Let's start playing and calling the game the way it is meant to be played.

Victor Matheson is a USSF National Referee as well as a certified assessor and instructor. In his 15 years as a referee he has officiated over 1,600 games including A-League matches as referee and MLS matches as a 4th official and assistant referee. He has refereed in USSF amateur or youth regional competitions thirteen times and in national competitions five times. He currently serves as the State Director of Instruction for Illinois.