

TOUCH SITUATIONS

A document for advanced referees, coaches and players on how referees apply the rules of Touch to specific match situations, what these rulings are, how and why they are made and what coaches and players should consider as a result

*ADVANCED GUIDE
FOR REFEREES,
COACHES AND
PLAYERS*

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ADVANCED GUIDANCE FOR REFEREES, COACHES AND PLAYERS

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INTRODUCTION

As the sport of Touch evolves, coaches and players find new ways to exploit situations to their advantage. Referees also must adapt to ensure that their rulings complement the game, facilitate good play and lead to better outcomes for all participants. This is a healthy process for any sport but it does lead to grey areas that a rulebook cannot cover.

This guide is designed as a living document, to be added to and amended as the game evolves. Elite players, coaches and referees should use it to better understand specific situations in the game, leading to greater consistency of understanding and approach. Ultimately, the guide looks to provide harmony to the sport across Europe and possibly beyond.

The guide will be published in an open forum. For further ideas for this guide contact peter.faassendeheer@gmail.com.

Process and Contributions

A subsection of Europe's leading Touch coaches have contributed situations to this guide. These have then been analysed from a refereeing standpoint, providing a rationale for typical rulings from referees and what players are seeking to achieve, technical issues with making these rulings and options for players and coaches to work with referees to get the best outcomes for their team.

The European Referee Commission has looked over the paper to ensure it fits with current referee approaches.

A Word About Materiality

Materiality is whether the breaking of a rule has an impact on the outcome of the play. This is set against the nature of and extent of the rule violation. A good referee noting a rule breach will consider whether it has had a material impact first. If not, then referees will look to play on with perhaps a warning to the player to prevent a later similar violation.

There are limits however. Significant violations would always be penalised, whether it is gross misconduct such as swearing at another player or a major technical breach – for example, rolling the ball when facing full square-on to the side-line. 'Significant' cannot be legislated and has to remain a subjective call made by the referee.

A good referee should carefully consider materiality so that the game is not punctuated by unnecessary and pedantic penalties, stoppages and changeovers leading to an unenjoyable experience for all. The game should flow as much as possible.

This Is Not About Blame

This guide tries to avoid blaming players, referees and coaches for what happens on the pitch. In an ideal world, players would not throw forward passes and referees would always be in a perfect position to call any that were made. These statements are obvious but not helpful or realistic. We are all human and mistakes are made – this guide seeks to answer the more interesting question of **why** so that all participants can analyse these situations from the same basis and come to better understand one another.

Ability and Experience

This guide is aimed at advanced players and referees with the aim to create a level of consistency at the top end of the sport. However, we must be mindful that ability and experience will have a bearing on interpretation and rulings by all parties and that this will vary considerably from country to country.

This expectation works both ways – an experienced player may need to make allowances for a level 2 referee that he/she may not make for a level 5. Similarly, a level 5 referee will need to adapt his/her refereeing style if officiating two lower-end teams.

Peter Faassen de Heer

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1. SHORT FORWARD PASSES FROM THE ROLLBALL

Rule 8.2

Situation

The Half throws a short Forward Pass after a Rollball has occurred. This usually occurs in a drive where the receiver mistimes their run; or from a quickie line attack move when the Half hasn't advanced enough with the ball (usually a step suffices) or when the receiver has not sufficiently realigned for the pass to not be forward. Either way, if the ball leaves the passer's hands in a forward direction then it is a Forward Pass.

Ideal Ruling

Any Forward Pass is a Penalty. There has been an assertion from some that certain minimal forward passes are 'let go'. This is not correct as any Forward Pass spotted by the referee will always be penalised (after the potential for Advantage to the non-offending team has been allowed, e.g. intercept and run-on). The perception that such infringements are ignored come from difficulties for referees to spot the infringement because other areas of the game are given greater priority (see below). The priority is more on 5m control as this has a greater bearing on creating an open game of Touch.

Referee Concerns

Forward Passes from the Rollball are often very quick and short, allowing minimal time for the on-field referee to spot the forward trajectory. Furthermore, the referee's focus will tend to be more on managing defenders onside rather than on the pass. This is because any Advantage gained by an offside defender is usually significantly greater than that of a pass only minimally Forward. A referee will need to use peripheral vision to control defensive players on both sides, potentially including shooters, while also keeping an eye on the rollball/ ruck area. This can be very challenging.

Critically, defenders moving up and the Half playing the ball happen at the same time which when combined with a physically challenged/ less experienced referee, this can be missed.

Referee Solutions

Referees who are too square on will not have the correct viewing angle to see such passes so it is better to keep 1-2 players' width. They should keep an eye on the motion of the hands as the pass is made – this is the best indication of a Forward Pass. In the case of a short pass of the kind described here, it may be the only indication they get.

The sideline may have an easier time seeing a forward pass but only if the pass is made in their direction – in order to adjudicate a pass as Forward, the referee(s) must have seen the ball leave the hands in a Forward direction. Even so, it is challenging for the on-field to look across for that signal. Losing an instant doing so can leave the referee out of position at the next touch, especially when controlling a fast drive. So for short passes like this, it's unlikely referees will make a joint decision. Instead, unless the pass is blatantly Forward, they will play on.

Coach and Player Considerations

It may seem as if this means that players could get away with a Forward Pass in this instance. That might be true but there are risks attached as referees will still penalise if they see a Forward Pass. The risk to reward ratio is relatively poor since a flat pass will not particularly disadvantage a drive or scoring move. Furthermore, if a team repeats the offence, referees will catch on and shift their focus from controlling the 5m to looking for forward passes. This is not in the attacking team's interests.

2. RATE OF ADVANCING WHEN THE 'MOVING UP WITHIN THE 5M RULE' IS IN EFFECT

Rules 11.5 / 11.6 / 11.7

Situation

The Rollball is just outside the 5m line which means the defending team must advance until a Touch is imminent (see box). Typically, defences will send up one or two 'brave' players to make the Touch and hold back others. Usually a Link and opposite Middle will be the holding players. These players will seek to advance as slowly as possible so that they need to retreat the minimum distance to return onside at the next Touch and can kill the next attacking move.

Ideal Ruling

The point of this rule is that players should not be allowed to freeze or all but freeze on their line to then kill the ensuing attacking play after the next Touch. If they materially affect play, either by making the Touch or forcing the play in a different direction then the referee should penalise after allowing for Advantage.

Referee Concerns

Advantage is really important here, even if it goes into a second phase as this keeps play flowing and could result in a Touchdown – an ideal outcome in an Advantage situation.

Materiality is also key. A player may be dawdling and technically in breach but if it didn't affect play then a warning is all that should be applied.

For the on-field referee to control all 6 players in moving Forward is very challenging. This referee's focus is likely to be on the two defensive Middles. As the attacking side steps back, the referee needs to also step Forward to set the 5m so that the defence knows where the offside line. If the defence is forced back, then so the referee needs to step back. In both cases the referee is multi-tasking.

While the rules do not excuse players who have already gone past the line of the ball from continuing to move Forward, in reality such players are not going to affect play in relation to this rule. The purpose of the rule has always been to prevent the unfair killing of the next attack following the Touch, usually by a pocket Middle or Link. It was not designed to have defenders march all the way up the field.

What is Imminent?

This means that the Touch is about to be made. It is a factor of time as well as the relative position and speed of ball carrier and defender(s) - each of which can influence the perception of "imminent" depending on what is actually happening.

Examples:

(1) There might be 2 metres between the ball carrier and defender, but the distance between them is closing quickly then the Touch could be determined to be imminent.

(2) There might be 1 metre (or perhaps even less) between the ball carrier and defender but both are fairly static - this would not be imminent.

Referee Solutions

This is all about pre-emptive communication. If the holding player is not moving Forward quickly enough then the player needs to be advised as soon as possible. Once the player responds, it is useful for the referee to confirm they are content – for example, “happy with that” or if not then “quicker”. Doing this prevents unnecessary penalties. If there is no time to warn on the run then warn after the play is over and play is slow or dead (assuming there has not already been a Penalty).

Sideline referees with the holding link player need to work hard on their communication in a similar vein. If the player is not responding then either use their wing to get the message across or call the referee by name when the ball is dead or play is slow, e.g. “Peter, the link’s not moving up”.

Referees should ignore players who have gone past the line of the ball until they return to a deeper position as they are not likely to materially affect play.

Coach and Player Considerations

The holding players should make visible progress in a forward direction. Marching on the spot might be visible but it’s not progress. Inching forward might be progress but it’s not visible. There is no defined rule for what constitutes a good rate of advance but a good rule of thumb is to move one whole foot in front of the other per second.

For the holding player to respond positively to ref instruction to move forward – “moving up, sir” is helpful as it shows the player is trying to avoid that Penalty. It demonstrates co-operation.

The holding player can choose to advance at an angle – flat/lateral movement is however non-compliant with the rule. In addition, there is no rule preventing the holding player from initially retreating behind the scoreline and to start advancing from there. This can, however, give the referee an issue in marking the next 5m for the defence as he/she will need to stay out of that player’s way.

‘Swing & Miss’

The defender who is up to make the Touch must make a genuine attempt to do so. However, it is recognised that defenders may wish to make that Touch at maximum reach so they have less distance to retreat to get onside.

This often results in a ‘swing and miss’. Provided the defender’s attempt was genuine and not one to induce a Voluntary Rollball penalty, referees should call ‘play on’ even if the potential toucher and remaining defenders start to retreat. Often the defender will repeat the attempt a moment later in any case. This avoids unnecessary stoppages.

Players should take care when opting for this tactic. The referee has to make a subjective decision to determine whether the attempt to Touch was genuine. If the referee feels it was not genuine then the player is liable to be penalised.

3. LATE PASS CALLS

Rule 10.8

Situation and Ideal Rulings

This is the standard Late Pass (formerly called Touch and Pass) situation. Rulings for this situation are not as consistent as they could be and are often misunderstood by players.

There are four potential situations and corresponding rulings:

	Situation	Ruling
A	The player is touched after the ball has been released in the pass	Play On
B	The player is touched before the ball has been released but there is no way the passer could refrain from releasing the ball	Play On
C	The player is touched before the ball has been released but there is no way the referee can tell whether the passer could refrain from releasing the ball	Simultaneous Touch
D	The player is touched before the ball has been released but the passer could refrain from releasing the ball	Late Pass Penalty

Referee Concerns

The key difficulty here is that this situation requires an instant decision from the referee and a judgement about the (in)ability of the passer to retain the ball. This may be subjective but it needs to be consistent across the referee team.

Less experienced referees will more likely call situation B a Late Pass Penalty because they merely look at the timing of the Touch vs the release of the pass. This leads to unnecessary penalties.

Situation C provides the referee with a fair option where they are unsighted but it is not ideal. It should be a last resort.

Referee Solutions

The decision must be quick and in the case of situations A & B communicated immediately so that game flow is not impeded.

A good referee will take the (in)ability of the passer to retain the ball and the timing of the Touch into account and make a quick call. Spotting the difference between situations B and D will reduce the Penalty count in the game.

Coach and Player Considerations

Listen for the referee call. An immediate call will be for play to continue. Aside from the very rare Simultaneous Touch call, the alternative will be a delay followed by the referee moving to where the player was touched to blow a Late Pass Penalty. Being alert to this may allow the non-offending team to get a quick tap and/or for the offending team to get its players back 10m early.

4. ROLLBALL OVER THE MARK (INCL. 'KICKING' OR 'KICKING OUT')

Rule 9.2

Situation

Simply this is where the ball is placed beyond where the Mark for the Touch should be. The Mark is where the Attacking Player is where he/she was at the time of the Touch – so as long as he/she releases the ball where he/she is when the Touch happens, it's a normal Rollball situation.

Ideal Rulings

Placing the ball over the Mark is a Penalty – no advantage can be played from this.

How close (to the mark) is close enough? If the ball is a quarter of a metre or less beyond the Mark, then any advantage to the attacker is negligible and the referee should play on.

Referee Concerns

The ruling here should be 'play on' unless some distinct territorial advantage has been gained. It is not a matter of steps, rather it is about distance. There is no rule saying that you can or cannot complete your step, it's about the geographical position of the Mark. So someone could take two steps and gain 30 cm while someone completes their step and gains 150 cm. The latter is more likely to (and should) carry a Penalty, while the former should not.

Referee Solutions

Referees should always focus on the Attacking Player's position when adjudicating an 'over The Mark' Penalty. The Defending Player's position is completely irrelevant. This is especially important when defenders allow attackers to pass by them in order to Touch them from behind.

Referees should not be pedantic with these situations and if time allows call 'back to the Mark' to help a potentially infringing player to avoid the Penalty. Player momentum may carry them over the Mark in this way, however, the Touch should be anticipated by the Attacker so the ground gained should still be too minimal for a Penalty.

Coach and Player Considerations

Defenders who allow an attacker to pass them before making the Touch must understand that the Mark is not where they are or where the Touch is – it's where the attacker is. This may mean that the Mark is a metre or so behind where the defender is positioned.

Attackers may seek to 'win the ruck' by 'kicking out' to the side of the defender, initiating the Touch and performing the rollball next to the Defender. This is a perfectly legitimate tactic. The same rules apply as with any other rollball performed over the Mark.

Some attackers 'push through' a defender. This is where contact is initially made by the attacker and he/she then continues that contact as they drive through the defender. As well as running the risk of being penalised for an over-physical Touch, there is also the risk of going over the mark. This is because the ball is not placed immediately on the ground at the Touch when it should be.