



San Diego County Tennis Umpires Association

USTA Chair Umpire Handbook

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The United States Tennis Association's Chair Umpire Handbook is intended for officials who chair matches at all levels of events where the chair umpire is making the calls on court.

The procedures, techniques and tips in the Chair Umpire Handbook are based on the experiences of chair umpires who officiate these events. Accordingly, this handbook is meant to serve as a general guide. There is no cookie-cutter approach to officiating. The best officials have their own mannerisms and styles. One of the best ways to develop your own style is to sit near a court where a top-level umpire is working and pay close attention to the umpire, not the match. (The world's top chair umpires work full time for the ITF, the WTA, and the ATP. Being a chair umpire is a constant challenge, and these experienced officials continue to learn from every match they officiate.)

When observing experienced chair umpires, notice where the umpire looks, observe his or her technique, and listen to the pacing of the score. Note the procedures that are automatic. From these observations, develop your own style and pace.

Nothing you do in the chair should focus attention on you. The best umpires control a match quietly and unobtrusively by their "presence."

Never be afraid to make a mistake. When you know you have made an error, forget about it and move on. Pondering mistakes during a match is distracting and may lead to further mistakes. After a match, review your procedures and learn from your errors.

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Before the Tournament

Review the Rules of Tennis, The Code and any special regulations that might apply to the (ATP, ITF, USTA, WTA, etc.) event you will be working. Discuss unusual situations and rules interpretations with other umpires. These discussions will help get you into an officiating frame of mind.

You must know the rules, on-court procedures and techniques thoroughly. If you do not, you are putting yourself at great risk of making a major on-court mistake that could damage the match and cause you to lose confidence in yourself. When you doubt yourself, you take longer to make decisions and appear tentative.

BEFORE THE MATCH

Mental Preparation

Players prepare mentally for each match, and so should chair umpires. Approximately 30 minutes before a match, you should stop thinking about everything except what is about to happen. Thinking ahead about the match and court conditions will help you make the right decisions promptly and prevent problems.

To help get away from others and focus on the players and tennis, prepare your scorecard or prepare your computer (note ball changes, number of balls, etc.), and mentally run through possible problems. Consider the weather and court conditions. Will the crowd be a factor?

Mental Preparation *(cont.)*

It may be helpful to think about the players in your match. Are they serve-and-volley players, or do they play from the back of the court? Do not try to anticipate who should win the match. This can lead to many distractions and might influence your decisions on court.

Physical Preparation

A match can take a very long time. Go to the bathroom before going on court. Make sure you have your supplies (pencils, hand-held stopwatch, coin) and other items to handle minor problems. It is recommended that you assemble an officials "kit bag" of certain standard items (see following list). Include any other items you have learned through experience that might be helpful to have on hand.

The following is a representative list of items to take on court:

- Pencils (3)
- Pens (2)
- Stopwatches (2)
- Tape measure
- Safety pins
- Plastic cord (to repair nets)
- Sunblock
- Sunglasses
- Band-Aids
- Spare scorecards
- Aspirin
- Eye drops
- Erasers
- Chapstick
- Clear template for measuring logos
- Silver dollar/half-dollar for the coin toss
- Badges (ITF/ATP)
- Net measuring device (Net Set)
- Swiss Army knife (the big one with scissors, a saw, tweezers, screwdrivers, etc.)

An official not only needs to be physically fit to be a good umpire but also needs to stay fit. Do not stop working out during a tournament. Before or after each day's assignment, schedule a workout. This will help clear your mind and keep your metabolism up.

Court Preparation

- Always arrive at the court before the players. Conduct your pre-match checks.
- Make sure the singles sticks are properly placed. (Do not rely on pre-painted marks on the court for the placement of the single sticks. They are frequently incorrect.)
- Measure the net.
- Move the umpire's chair as close to the court as possible. Allow enough room for players and ball persons to pass in front.
- Place the line umpire chairs in a position so that the sun is not in the eyes of the officials.
- Open the balls for the warm-up and for the first change. (Make sure there are enough balls for the entire match.) Have some used balls available for replacement.
- Check your court supplies (i.e., towels, sawdust, cold drinks, plenty of water).
- Be certain that the sound system is working and be aware of the placement of all microphones on the court (and, if it is a night match, that the lights are operable).

Court Preparation *(cont.)*

All these pre-match checks may not be your responsibility. But if there is a problem, the players will hold you responsible. Take a quick walk around to check the court and its surroundings. Is the court in good shape, or does it need to be swept or further prepared? Are there any loose practice balls, used towels, leaves, trash, or cups around the court? If so, get rid of them. Check the general condition of the court, especially a clay court. Make sure there is nothing hanging on the net or net posts. If your match is on clay, be certain that there are no wet spots. If the players discover them during the warm-up and play is delayed, you lose credibility and control.

When the players arrive at the court, conduct your brief pre-match meeting at the net. Make sure both players (or at least one from each doubles team) are there for the meeting and the coin toss. Choose the player who will call the toss. Never ask who would like to call the toss!

Each decision you make—each question you anticipate and answer—helps you, however subtly, to establish control. Each time you let the players dictate action before a match, you surrender some control. On the other hand, do not be a dictator or overtly assert authority. Such behavior could hurt you even more than being uncertain during the pre-match meeting.

If there are any special conditions (i.e., extra warm-up time, clay court procedures, a camera in an unusual place authorized by the referee, etc.), tell the players and then ask, “Any questions?” If there are questions, answer them confidently.

When you are confident and well prepared without being cocky, arrogant or overbearing, you have set the right tone for the start of a match.

Warm-up

Either give the match balls to the ball persons before you talk to the players, or give the balls directly to the players after the pre-match meeting and coin toss.

Start your stopwatch as soon as both players have actually begun the warm-up. (Because the first ball is sometimes unplayable or ignored by the receiving player, do not start timing the warm-up until both players have struck their first warm-up shot.)

While the warm-up goes on, complete the necessary portions of your scorecard: winner of the toss, time the warm-up began, who will serve, etc. (to be fully explained in the scorecard marking section). You may do this either sitting in the umpire’s chair or standing.

Once you are in the chair and your card is prepared, begin warming up like the players. Loosen up your eyes and sharpen your concentration. Follow the ball and mentally make a few calls. Make eye contact with your line umpires and give them a nod. (You are subtly establishing a team feeling.) Stay relaxed and mentally rehearse what you’re going to say.

When three minutes have elapsed, announce, “Two minutes.” You may introduce the match and the players anytime during the last two minutes. Experienced chair umpires try to time their announcements to finish just before they say, “Time,” when the warm-up is complete. Usually, beginning the introduction after you announce, “One minute,” is sufficient time.

Keep the announcement simple and brief. The less you say, the better—for example: “Ladies and gentlemen, this third-round match is the best-of-three tie-break sets. To the right of the chair, from San Jose, California, Karl Michaels. [If there are spectators, allow time for them to applaud for each player.] To the left of the chair, from Rome, Georgia, Terry McDaniel. [Applause.] McDaniel won the toss and chose to serve. Time.”

Unless otherwise instructed, do not announce what tournament it is or the type of match it is (e.g., a men’s singles match). Everyone in attendance should already know that information. (Note: In some countries, a much fuller, traditional pre-match announcement is preferred.)

Warm-up (*cont.*)

Most players will continue hitting a few serves after you have said, "Time." Both players are a little nervous (as they should be) and are getting rid of those last butterflies. If the time drags on a bit too much, you might say, "Balls to the right [or left] of the chair." If the time continues to drag on, say as a last resort, "Let's play." This is a gentle but firm reminder that it is time to begin play without being confrontational. Now is not the time to insist on the letter of the law by giving time violations.

Once it is time to begin, announce (for example), "Terry McDaniel to serve. [Pause.] Play."

DURING THE MATCH

There is no one thing on which you must concentrate during a match. Rather, there are several things. Most important of all, you must concentrate. You cannot let your attention wander. When a player's concentration lapses, he or she loses a point. Similarly, when your concentration lapses, you begin to lose control of the match.

Always appear confident. If you look nervous or puzzled, you lose control, even if you are doing everything else correctly. Always think before you say anything. Know what you will be saying before you say it. You should have practiced or rehearsed your lines, just like an actor, before you ever stepped on the court. That way, your words come out automatically while you concentrate on the whole match.

It is particularly valuable for you to practice giving code violations, so that when the occasion arises, you can administer the code calmly and uniformly. For example: "Code violation. Ball abuse. Warning, Mr. McDaniel." Do not pause. A pause makes it sound as though you are changing your mind or you are unsure of yourself.

Match Specifics

Play has begun. What are your responsibilities? Everything! If the lights go out, it's your fault. If it starts to rain, the players will be annoyed with you: Either you stopped play too quickly, or you let it go on too long (or both). The list is endless.

You are now completely responsible for the conduct of the match, and no two matches are the same. To help guide you on how to conduct a match, let's trace a typical match from the first point to the last.

Court Awareness

As the player prepares to serve, glance at his opponent to make sure he is ready to receive. Keep your field of vision open, but concentrate more on the server as he tosses the ball. You are watching to make sure he does not foot fault. You are aware of the entire court, but as the toss begins, you focus on the ball. From now until the end of the point (if the serve is good), you will concentrate on the ball, tracking it as it goes back and forth over the net. At the same time, you are aware of the entire court and surrounding area, but your concentration is on the ball.

(If you are indoors—or outside on a very sunny day—be careful not to follow the ball up too far on a lob so that you avoid losing it in the glare of a light or the sun. You should rely on your peripheral vision to track the ball, pick it up on its way down and again focus on the ball.)

As the ball approaches a line, your vision focuses on the line and the ball so that both are equally sharp in your mind. You are prepared mentally to call the ball in or out—and, if necessary, to overrule a line umpire's call.

Always be aware of what is happening on and around the court. If a ball rolls in from another court or a piece of paper blows onto the court during a point, call a let immediately. Do not wait and hope the object is not bothering the players, and do not hope the point is over before anyone sees it. Nine times out of 10, you will cause more problems by hesitating.

If a player has not seen the problem, point it out. Communication always helps to establish control of the match.

Overruling

Unless you are 100 percent sure that the call is wrong, do not overrule. There is nothing worse than a bad overrule. If you do overrule, it must be immediate. If you have to think about the call, it is too late. To have credibility, the overrule must be instantaneous. You should understand that if you hesitate, you have essentially given up the overrule option. When you overrule late, you are guaranteed to have a problem. The best chair umpires rarely overrule, but when they do, it is an instantaneous, confident decision. The proper verbiage: "Out" (when you change a good call to out), or "Correction. The ball was good" (when you change an out call to good).

In the latter instance, you have a decision to make: Did the verbal "Out" call from the line umpire interfere with the player's opportunity to return the ball, or was it a clear winner or ace? If it was a clear winner, the point goes to the player who hit the winner. If you have any doubt that the player returning the ball was hindered by the call, then the point must be replayed.

Announcing the Score

At the conclusion of every point, be aware of the loser. Do not stare at him, but look toward him and keep him in your peripheral vision as you announce the score. In most instances, a complaint or a code violation will come from the loser of the point.

You should be keeping the score in your head. So during a particularly long point, you might mentally rehearse (love-15, 15-love, etc.) so that you know what you will say when the point ends.

Announce the score in a conversational tone. Do so promptly because your pace in giving the score will subtly affect the pace of play. If you take a long time after points, the players will subconsciously slow down.

Communicating with the Players

Communicate with the players, but do not get chatty. Just as in your pre-match, keep it simple and to the point, but keep both players informed. If one player asks for a bathroom break, tell the other. When a player asks you a question, by all means answer it. But be careful and respond to the question, not to the emotion behind it.

Allow the player to ask the complete question and be a good listener. You may know the question before it is presented, but permit the player to make his case. This will give you time to think about your response. When you do respond, be calm and non-emotional. This may help to calm the emotions of the player. Nothing makes a player angrier than a chair umpire who will not respond to a question. If a player asks, "Did you see that ball?", do not respond by announcing the score. Say, "Yes, I did. I agree with the call," or some similar response. Do not try to use humor or sarcasm; it will backfire on you.

Keep your response conversational—off the microphone, if possible. The conversation is between you and the player only.

Be prepared to use non-verbal communication. For example, after a close line call, confirm the call as the player who lost the point looks to you. This can be done with a nod or a hand signal. Do not look at your scorecard. This is one time to be looking directly at the point-losing player, in anticipation of a question. After a ball change that comes on a changeover, many players will glance at you inquiringly as they accept the new balls for service to confirm that the balls indeed are new and that it was time for a change. Some just might be checking to see if you are paying attention. A nod with eye contact will answer the unasked question. If the player fails to notify his opponent of new balls, make a soft announcement, "New balls."

There is no need to announce new balls if the player has shown the new balls to his opponent.

Cautioning the Players

Players hate surprises, and they like to know what is going on. If a player is taking a bit more than the allowed time between points, do not call a time violation right away. If possible, wait until the next changeover and quietly tell him, "Watch the time; you're pushing the clock." That way, he should not be surprised later when he gets a time penalty.

The same reasoning applies to code violations. Preventive communication, or "90-second diplomacy" (as it is sometimes known), goes a long way toward avoiding problems. A calm "Please, keep your racquet in your hand, Mr. McDaniel," or similar precaution delivered during a changeover lets a player know that the next time he throws his racquet he is risking a penalty.

However, obvious code and time violations should be given immediately, without preventive communication. As such, "90-second diplomacy" should not be a substitute for an obvious violation.

Calling Code Violations

The code of conduct is a tool to control a match. When a player becomes abusive or exhibits serious unsportsmanlike conduct, he has earned a penalty; so do not hesitate to administer it. But do not appear too eager or too happy to give a penalty. Allow a few seconds to go by before announcing the penalty. For example, if a player hits the ball over the fence or into the crowd, wait for the ball to bounce. This brief wait allows for the player's anger to diffuse and may help to relieve a bit of pressure. It also allows you to rehearse mentally what you are about to say. Then, calmly and in a conversational tone, say (for example), "Code violation. Ball abuse. Warning, Mr. McDaniel." In all cases, announce the penalty, what the violation was, the punishment and the offending player.

Remember to think about exactly what you are going to say before you announce the penalty. If you say, "Code violation," and suddenly forget the category of violation, you can always say, "Unsportsmanlike conduct." Most penalties are in some way a form of unsportsmanlike conduct. So, in effect, "unsportsmanlike conduct" is an all-purpose category. Make a mark on your scorecard once the situation has been handled.

A "C" or a "©" for the first violation will help you remember when the violation occurred, and a word or two in the margin will help you to complete the PPS card after the match. If the violation is for an obscenity, write in the word. (You can always erase it later.) If a penalty has been particularly serious, you may want to get a statement from one or two umpires who witnessed the incident. Remember, you are part of a team out there.

Clay Court Procedures

Working on clay slows down your score announcing. On close shots, hesitate before giving the score, in case a player requests a ball mark inspection.

If this happens, you should personally handle the inspection. Get down from the chair, read the mark, make your decision and get back in the chair. If you are not sure of the mark location, ask for the line umpire to point to the mark, but stay away from a "committee" approach. In most cases, you will read the mark and make the decision.

This does not mean you cannot overrule from the chair on clay. However, it is not advisable to overrule on close balls unless you can see the mark clearly from the chair. From the chair's vantage point, a ball may appear out on a clay court but, upon closer inspection of the mark, the ball may have been good. On very close balls about which the chair umpire is not 100 percent sure, the player should make the appeal for a ball mark inspection. If the chair makes an overrule and then has some doubt, the chair umpire, not the line umpire, should make the ball mark inspection.

The following provide a complete explanation of clay court procedures.

1. A ball mark inspection requested by a player (team) shall be allowed only if the Chair Umpire cannot determine the call with surety on either a point-ending shot or when a player (team) stops playing the point during the rally. (Reflex returns are permitted but then play must stop immediately.) Chair Umpires shall check ball marks if the Line Umpire or the Chair Umpire has some doubt about the accuracy of the call.

The following provide a complete explanation of clay court procedures (*cont.*)

2. If the Chair Umpire sees a clear mistake, he may stop play with an overrule.
3. The original call shall always stand if the Line Umpire and/or Chair Umpire cannot determine the location of the mark or if the mark is unreadable.
4. In clay or composition court tennis, the Chair Umpire should not be too quick to announce the score unless absolutely certain of the call. If in doubt, the Chair Umpire should wait before calling the score to determine whether a ball mark inspection is necessary. Ball mark inspections made after the score has been announced or after first serves shall be done as quickly as possible so the Server is not unreasonably delayed.
5. In doubles, the appealing player must make his appeal in such a way that either both players stop playing the point or the Chair Umpire stops play. If an appeal is made to the Chair Umpire, the Chair Umpire must first determine that the correct procedure was followed. If not proper or if it is late, then the Chair Umpire may determine that the opposing team was deliberately hindered.
6. Players may not cross the net to check a ball mark except after a changeover without being subject to the Code. A player may not erase marks unless he is conceding the point or after a ball mark inspection occurs and the Chair Umpire has made a final decision.

Scorecard Marking

Scorecards have become increasingly user-friendly over the years. Most scorecards now include spaces for extra-long games, extended tiebreaks, match interruptions and code violations. They have special provisions to help track the ball changes and service breaks. All these modifications are designed to help you keep your nose out of the scorecard. The less time you spend looking at a card or marking it, the more time you have to pay attention to your court, the players and the match.

The following symbols are standard scorecard markings:

- / — Point won
- — First-serve fault
- A — Ace
- D — Double fault
- C — Code violation
- T — Time violation

(Note: Some umpires circle the "C" or "T" to indicate a warning.)

The server's initials are entered in the boxes on the left of the card to denote the server's position in relation to the umpire's chair.

The margins of the card are available for you to make any notes you deem helpful. This might include the phonetic pronunciation of a player's name, visual character traits for a player with whom you are not familiar (e.g., tall, blond—Schmidt), a code violation, when a possible injury occurred, etc. It is your tool to run a match. Use it to help; do not let it interfere.

On some circuits, a hand-held or palm-top computer is used to replace a scorecard. If you are using a computer, it is always helpful to keep a blank scorecard and one or two note cards with you. The scorecard is to use if technology fails, and the note cards are to make those helpful notes, since it is considered bad form to write on a computer screen.

General Advice

Eye contact with a line umpire who has made a particularly close call is good to reinforce the team feeling. It is also helpful to glance around occasionally at your team during each changeover. But do not become like the little dog in the back window of a car. Eye contact is one thing; constant head bobbing is quite another, and it looks silly.

If there has been a discussion on a close call, wait until the point-losing player is not watching before making eye contact.

General Advice (*cont.*)

If a player is running toward the net to retrieve a short ball, focus your attention on him while opening up your vision of the court to be aware of where the ball is going. Remember, although you should be tracking the ball, you have line umpires to call the ball in or out. But only you can make the call if the player touches the net or invades his opponent's court.

At the conclusion of a match, get out of the chair and get off the court. Never wait to talk to a player about a decision or call. Announce the score (for example), "Game, set and match, McDaniel, 6-4, 2-6, 7-6, 6-0." Shake the players' hands only if they offer (or nod your head if they make eye contact), give a quick thumbs-up to your line crew (if appropriate) and then leave the court. Complete your scorecard (and penalty card) off court, not in the chair. If you remain in the chair at the conclusion of a match, you become almost a lightning rod—and a very convenient target.

Remember the following:

- Keep your head up as much as possible. You do not need to sit perfectly erect. Just leaning in to the court a bit will help your concentration.
- Do not cross your legs. It looks very unprofessional.
- Stay relaxed but confident.
- Keep your voice clear (and loud, if you don't have a mike), using a conversational tone and pace.
- Check the receiver.
- Track the ball during play, and watch the point-loser (but do not stare at him).
- Control the crowd politely.
- Be aware of everything on and around the court. Practice this "court awareness." It is the hallmark of an experienced official.

What to Do at the End of the Match

1. Announce the end of the match (e.g., "Game, set, match, name of player(s), 6-3, 2-6, 7-6.").
2. Record the ending time.
3. Shake hands with the player(s) if the player(s) extends their hand.
4. Get out of the chair promptly.
5. Collect the balls.
6. Leave the court. Do not discuss the match with the players or the media.
7. Find a quiet place to check your card. Make sure you have filled in all the points and score.
8. Fill out the bottom portion of the scorecard front. Make sure you have recorded the correct winner, score, and duration of the match in hours and minutes. Indicate if you have given any code or time violations. Sign your name.
9. Turn in the scorecard and used balls to the referee.
10. Fill out a Point Penalty Card, if necessary. If a Point Penalty Card is not available, write a brief, factual description of what happened and give it to the referee.

Additional Helpful Information

1. Remember to appear confident and in control of the match.
2. To be as accurate as possible on the serve, watch the server strike the ball and follow the ball until it lands. Always check the receiver just before the server hits the ball to make sure he or she is ready.
3. Try to be aware of all that is happening on and around the court.

Additional Helpful Information (cont.)

4. Watch the loser of the point. Problems and misconduct usually arise with the loser of the point.
5. Train yourself to look at the scorecard as little as possible. Keep your eyes and attention on the court and the players at the end of each point. If all is well, then quickly mark your scorecard.
6. Always look up from the scorecard when announcing the score. Do not mark your scorecard before you announce the score. If there is no microphone, your voice needs to be loud and clear without yelling.
7. If you give a penalty for a code violation, the player may ask for and must be given a short explanation.
8. When a player asks you a question, listen to him or her; do not interrupt. The player may not even want an answer. He or she may make a statement and then turn and walk away.
9. If a player asks to see the referee, tell the player you will call for the referee. However, unless it is a question of law (rules of tennis), he will have to continue to play and will be able to speak to the referee only at the next changeover. A referee should never be called on a question of fact (e.g., shots called in or out, service lets, etc.).
10. If a ball is lost or becomes unplayable during the warm-up or before the 3rd game begins after a ball change, you may replace it with a new ball. If a ball is lost or becomes unplayable at any other time, you may replace it with a ball of like wear. You may continue to play with less than the required number of balls, but this will almost certainly delay the progress of the match.
11. Study and practice your umpire skills. You can never stop learning. Work on court awareness. You are responsible for everything on court, so be aware of all your surroundings.
12. Accept the fact that you will make mistakes and you are not perfect. Learning from your errors will help to minimize any future mistakes.

Preferred USTA Verbiage for ScoreAnnouncements

1. "Game, Jones, 1st game."
2. "Game, Smith. One all."
3. "Game, Jones. He leads 2-1" (or, "Jones leads 2-1").
4. "Game and first set, Smith, 6-2."
5. "Game, Smith, 1st game, 2nd set, 1st set Smith" (or, "He leads one set to love"). Never announce the actual score of the 1st set. Reference to the previous set winner is done only on the odd-game changeovers.
6. "Game, Jones, 1st game, final set."
7. "Wait, please," when the ball is not in play and you need to delay the start of a point. "Let" when you need to stop play in progress. Do not say, "Play a let."
8. "Let, 1st/2nd serve" when the ball hits the net and lands in the proper service court. Do not say, "Net."

Officials must constantly study the tasks and responsibilities of the chair umpire. Practice and experience will help you learn and stay sharp. Court awareness is an important element of officiating, and through experience you will improve this skill.

All officials make mistakes. No official in any sport is perfect. The key is to learn from your errors in judgment and procedure and minimize future mistakes. Officiating is a humbling experience, so maintain a respect for the responsibility of being a chair umpire.