

The Most Misunderstood Rules in Basketball (Stop yelling at the officials; you're wrong)

By Bordas & Bordas, PLLC of Bordas and Bordas Attorneys, PLLC posted in John Artimez on Wednesday, February 12, 2014.

Regular readers of our blog will know that community involvement is something that is taken very seriously here at Bordas & Bordas. Our attorneys and staff are heavily involved in area churches, charities, youth organizations and sports. While we all have differing areas of interest, mine happens to be basketball. More specifically, basketball officiating. I have 20+ years of experience in officiating both high school and NCAA Division II basketball games. I also serve as the Rules Interpreter for the Ohio Valley Board of Approved Basketball Officials, and I have taught the training class for new officials for over 10 years. In plain English, I am the "rules guy" for basketball officials in the OVAC.

I often think back to my early training as an official, and how surprised I was to discover how little I actually knew about the rules of the game. Each time I put on the stripes and head onto the floor, the shouts I hear from the stands remind me that I was certainly not alone in my ignorance of the rules. Every official who has ever worked a game has at some point wished he could stop the game, pick up a microphone, and explain why the call he just made, and for which his intellectual capacity and parental lineage are now being loudly called into question, is correct under the rules (I keep promising myself I will do that very thing in the last game I work before hanging it up). This blog is the next best thing. I therefore humbly offer the following primer on some of the most misunderstood rules in basketball.

General Officiating Philosophy

Before getting into the list of misunderstood rules, fans need to understand the philosophy which guides their application. Officials refer to this philosophy as the principle of "advantage/disadvantage." In its simplest terms, the advantage/disadvantage principle recognizes that not all contact between players is a foul, and not all violations will result in a whistle. Contact which does not put a player at a disadvantage is generally ignored, and borderline violations which do not result in an unfair advantage are rarely called. For example, in a rebounding situation where the player with inside position ends up with the basketball, a marginal amount of contact from an opposing player will rarely result in a foul. If officials whistled every bit of physical contact and every borderline travel, the game would be interrupted with a whistle every 30 seconds, making it impossible to watch and enjoy. In order to avoid such a result, all rules are applied with the principle of advantage/disadvantage in mind.

1. Traveling

In my experience, traveling tops the list of the most misunderstood rules of the game. First and foremost, fans need to know this one hard and fast, handed down from the heavens, inalienable and undeniable fundamental rule: Except for one situation that I have never seen happen in my 20+ years of officiating, it is not possible for a player to commit a traveling violation unless he is holding the basketball. Traveling is all about the pivot foot, and a player who is not holding the ball cannot establish

a pivot foot. A player who is fumbling the ball is not traveling, because he has no pivot foot. Theoretically, a player could fumble/juggle the ball from one end of the floor to the other, and no violation would have occurred. I often see plays where one team has a 3-on-1 fast break. The point guard throws a bounce pass to his teammate on the wing, who is breaking for the hoop. The player bobbles the pass and takes several steps before going up to lay it in. The fans go bananas, screaming for what they believe is an obvious travel. Nine times out of ten they are wrong, because the player who bobbed the pass never established a pivot foot. Thus, no travel.

Along those same lines, a player who dives for a loose ball and slides across the sportsJEA.pngfloor after grabbing the ball is not traveling. The rules provide that as long as his momentum is causing the slide, he is legal. Once the slide stops, the player may not roll over to avoid the defense, nor may he attempt to stand up without first beginning a dribble.

Finally, a player who has established a pivot foot is permitted to lift it without violating. The violation occurs if he lifts the pivot foot and then returns it to the floor or attempts to begin a dribble. Fans frequently ask about "how many steps" a player is permitted to take. The number of steps is irrelevant; the question is always what happens with the pivot foot.

2. Block/Charge

The "block/charge" is a close second to traveling on the list of most misunderstood rules. We have Billy Packer, Jay Bilas, Dick Vitale, and any number of other "color analysts" to thank for this one. In order to draw a charge, the rules provide that a defender is simply required to obtain what is referred to as "legal guarding position" on the dribbler. Legal guarding position is obtained by having both feet on the floor, facing the dribbler. That's it. Once legal guarding position is established, the defender is permitted to move in order to maintain his position. Please read that one again: the defender is permitted to move! He can have one foot on the floor, or even be completely airborne and still draw a charge. How many times have you been watching a game on TV and heard an analyst criticize a charging call by saying "the defender was clearly moving", or "the defender was not set"? Such comments have nothing to do with the correct application of the rule, and serve only to further misinform the fans, thus making the officials' job even more difficult. After all, who am I to argue with Dick Vitale?

3. Over the Back

There is no such thing as a foul for "over the back". The words cannot be found anywhere in the rules. It is not illegal to rebound from behind. If a player who is 6'10" is standing behind a player who is 5'7", there is nothing in the rules that says the taller player can't reach over the shorter player and grab the rebound. The question is one of illegal contact. If, in attempting to rebound from behind, the player in the rear pushes and displaces the player with inside position, a foul can be called if, in the judgment of the official, the illegal contact put the inside player at a disadvantage. However, if the contact is minimal and the inside player secures the rebound despite the contact, most officials will hold their whistle. As discussed in the paragraph above dealing with officiating philosophy, physical contact is not always a foul; only physical contact that puts a player at a disadvantage, or contact that may lead to rough play, should be penalized.

4. Three Seconds

People probably scream at us about making this call more than any other. Folks in the stands believe this is an easy rule to apply: if an offensive player is in the lane for more than three seconds, he has violated. Once again, not true. The "three-second rule" is full of exceptions and qualifications. For instance, the rule provides that allowance is to be made for an offensive player who has been in the lane for less than three seconds and then receives the ball and drives to attempt a shot. If the player drives, fakes, fakes again, and fakes a third time, he still is not in violation of the rule, despite the fact that he has been in the lane for 8 seconds. Fans also don't realize that each time the ball is shot or tapped, the three-second count is stopped, and a new one does not begin until a player secures control of the ball. Finally, the concept of advantage/disadvantage is a big consideration in applying this rule. If the ball is out by the mid-court line, a player standing in the middle of the lane is not gaining much of an advantage. Nor is the 5'7" player who is in the lane being guarded by the 6'10" guy from the other team. In such cases, the official is more likely to tell the player "get out of the lane" than he is to blow his whistle.

Keep watching our blog for a future article explaining more of the most misunderstood rules in basketball. Until then, as you are watching a game, please try to keep in mind that basketball officiating is extremely difficult. Officials try their best to get every call right, but there are going to be calls missed in every game. We do our best at a job that is largely thankless. Just remember that without officials, there would be no game at all.

Tags: Basketball, John Artimez, OVAC

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