

WHAT THE RULES SAY:

Playing the ball

The initiative from the PSA on reducing the number of stoppages in the professional game, particularly the number of easy lets, has been an important and controversial development in the sport.

It is a developing situation which has been reported and commented on elsewhere, so it is not our purpose to comment further here. However, what we can look at is what the rules say on the subject.

New rules came into effect on January 1, 2014. They are more concise than those previously issued, with the ever-lengthening 'guidelines' now incorporated in the rules.

The familiar Interference Rule, formerly Rule 12, has now become Rule 8. There are 15 rules in all.

RULE 8

First up in the Interference Rule is Rule 8.1, which reinforces the principle that 'a player must make every effort to clear' and outlines the four types of interference.

Lower down in the general provisions (8.6.5) it explains the implications if a player does not make every effort to clear – a stroke (effectively a point in PAR) is awarded against the outgoing player.

The general provisions in 8.6 should be familiar to most players. If not, they should be read.

IN SUMMARY:

8.6.1 If there was no interference or reasonable fear of injury - **no let**.

8.6.2. If there was interference but the striker would not have been able to make a good return - **no let**.

8.6.3 If the striker continued play beyond the interference - **no let**.

8.6.4 If there was minimal interference - **no let**.

8.6.5 If there was interference and the outgoing player was not making every effort to avoid the interference - **a stroke is awarded to the striker** (assuming a good return could be made).

8.6.6 If there was interference that the opponent (the outgoing player) was making every effort to avoid and the striker would have been able to make a good return - **let allowed**.

8.6.7. If the striker could have made a winning return - **stroke to the striker**.

REQUIREMENTS TO PLAY THE BALL

So what is the requirement on a player to play the ball? Two rules are key here: the Minimal Interference Rule (8.6.4) and the Direct Access Rule (8.8).

MINIMAL INTERFERENCE

Rule 8.6.4 is important. In full it states: 'If there was interference, but it did not prevent the striker from seeing and getting to the ball to make a good return, this is minimal interference and no let is allowed.'

So, fair enough, players cannot get out of difficult situations by claiming a let in minimal interference situations.

Readers may be aware of the situation that arises when minor contact has resulted in appeals for lets. "There was contact, ref. Let please?" Even the referee

then asks the opponent: "Was there contact?" Well, maybe there was, but that is not automatic grounds for a let.

Minimal interference is not defined (we can use common sense here, but it would probably include minor contact and in some way that is the nub of the problem). This concept may have been unintentionally diluted in the notes to rule 8.8.1 'Every effort to get to and play the ball should not include contact with the opponent. If any contact that could have been avoided is made, Rule 15 (Conduct) must be applied.'

The previous rules (2010) covering this area called this 'significant and deliberate contact'.

DIRECT ACCESS

8.8 If the striker requests a let for lack of direct access to the ball, then:

8.8.1 If there was interference but the striker did not make every effort to get to and play the ball, no let is allowed.

8.8.2 If the striker had direct access but instead took an indirect path to the ball and then requested a let for interference, no let is allowed, unless Rule 8.8.3 applies (wrong-footing an opponent).

This (8.8.2) is in effect what some term 'creating your own interference' (or playing the man rather than the ball). Referees should be aware of players avoiding playing difficult balls by creating interference, that is running into an opponent when this could have been avoided.

So really we have one of the underlying principles of the sport clearly reinforced if

not spelt out up front in the rules. A player must make every effort to get to and play the ball. This may seem self-evident, but it was not always spelt out clearly in the rules.

If we go back to the 1985 rules, early on in Rule 12 it states 'the opponent must make every effort to get to, and where possible, play the ball'. In 1989 this became 'adequate effort to get to ...'

In 1997, when we (unfortunately) moved to an emphasis on entitlement to freedom from interference, a player was required to make every effort to get to the ball (playing it was not mentioned). In 2001 'play the ball' was back in.

In various guises the principle of making every effort to play the ball has been a central principle in the sport.

It is useful if referees consider the reasons for a stoppage and be aware if it is to gain a replay on a difficult ball. Perhaps that is where we are at, but we are now on a campaign in the professional game to cut down stoppages and reinforce one of the principles of the game, that is to make every effort to play the ball.

KEY POINTS:

1. Players are required to make every effort to get to and play the ball.
2. Players must accept minimal interference in doing this.
3. Players cannot take an indirect path to the ball and then request a let (except in the wrong-footed situation).