



To: National Referees  
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State Directors of Assessment  
State Directors of Instruction

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Subject: Handling Offenses

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Recent incidents in the professional leagues involving possible handling offenses have caused considerable comment and debate. For those not officiating the match, multiple camera angles, instant replay, and slow-motion viewing make the debate easier because they allow a leisurely analysis of the facts well after the relevant decision has to be made.

The Laws of the Game declare that a direct free kick is given to the opposing team if a player “handles the ball deliberately (except for the goalkeeper within his own penalty area).” This simple statement defines one of the ten listed offenses in the first part of Law 12 (Fouls and Misconduct) and lies at the historical and traditional heart of soccer, a game played with all parts of the body other than the hands. Only the goalkeeper is exempt from this restriction and only while within his own penalty area.

What are the characteristics of a clear handling offense?

- A player deliberately carries, strikes, or propels the ball with the hand or arm
- It is the player’s action that initiates the contact with the ball

What characteristics of ball contact are clearly not handling offenses?

- The ball strikes the hand or arm (i.e., the ball initiates the contact)
- The contact is accidental (not the result of action by the player)
- The contact is the result of a purely reflexive effort at self-protection

What are the standards of judgment which the referee will apply when the handling offense is not immediately clear?

- The distance or time within which the player had to react to avoid contact – if there was time to avoid the contact, the likelihood of an offense is greater
- The position of the player's hand or arm at the time of the contact – if the hand or arm is carried in an unnatural or unusual position (e.g., high up in the air or, while defending against a free kick, far away from the body), the likelihood of an offense is greater
- Directing the ball after initial accidental or reflexive contact – if the player takes advantage to control or push the ball away, a handling offense has occurred

The referee, with input from the assistant referees, must make the immediate decision based on the best available evidence in an increasingly fast-paced game. This difficult decision must be **respected and final**.