

Hockey Umpiring Top Tips and Guidance 2

by

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THE BALL IN THE AIR (01-09-2010)

This is probably the worst umpired rule in hockey and the most inconsistently applied. The interpretation is as follows:

Most importantly THINK DANGER and NOT lifted.

There are three areas to consider.

01. The take of zone, when the ball is lifted into the air: The player putting the ball in the air has a responsibility to make sure that it goes up in a safe manner and clear of any opponents. If it does not, then the umpire should blow the whistle and award a free hit against the player raising the ball and that free hit is taken from the spot where the ball left the ground. On *most* occasions nowadays the ball is likely to be safe when it goes up.
02. While the ball is in the air - Players are not allowed to play the ball with their stick above the shoulder, i.e. "tennis smash type" shots are not permitted and, depending on the circumstances, such action *may* warrant a yellow card and inside the defending twenty three metre area a penalty corner would then be the appropriate decision.
03. The landing zone - This is the area which is frequently the most contentious and controversial and where even good umpires sometimes have difficulties! The team that puts the ball into the air has the prime responsibility for ensuring that it is safe and that no danger arises when the ball is landing on the ground. Firstly, to this end, the player arriving *first* in the landing zone to try to receive the ball sensibly and within the rules should *normally* be given priority. At this point all opposing team players must remain five metres (which is almost six yards!!) away from the player receiving the ball until that particular player "has received the ball, has it under control and it is on the ground" (to quote from the current rule book as of 01-01-2011). Secondly, if the ball is landing between two or more players of opposing teams, then the umpire has to decide and judge which player was there first and penalise his opponent as may be necessary. Thirdly, if the ball is landing between two (or more) players of different teams who were both in the landing zone at the same time, then the umpire blows in favour of the team that is the opposite one to the team who put the ball in the air. Frequently, but not *now* exclusively, the decision will go in favour of the defender. In all cases the good umpire will need to be positioned well scanning to see the disposition of the players in the landing zone and also those moving into the landing zone and will blow early to prevent any danger or accidents preferably when the aerial ball is its highest point during its trajectory so that all players have full confidence in the umpire's ability to reach the correct decision and prevent (serious) injury. The alertness of the umpire to the various possible scenarios and the timing of the whistle are critical together with a astute

reading of the game. Sometimes with good coaching an aerial pass may go to a “forward” who is in space but a “defender” opponent moves towards the landing ball in order to try to “persuade” the umpire to give him the free hit. In these circumstances the decision should go to the attacking team and it may also be appropriate to warn the defender about his future conduct. The use of the voice and / or coloured cards may be necessary.

04. It is pertinent to remember that perceived DANGER from an aerial ball is affected and influenced by three factors, namely (a) the proximity of the opposing player, (b) the height of the ball off the ground (Please do remember that this is NOT indoor hockey!) and (c) the speed or velocity of the ball. If the ball is hit or propelled at high speed and the opponent raises his stick in “self defence”, then the player propelling the ball into the air is the one who should be penalised.
05. When considering what penalty to impose against and just how strict to be with any player who plays the ball above the level of his own shoulder, it is essential that the umpire considers the **intent** of that player together with the state of the match and the disposition of the players. Above all use **common sense** and be **consistent**. If the player receiving the ball is trying to do something legitimately within the rules and but inadvertently breaches them by a few inches, then he should be treated with more sympathy than the player who behaves either in a reckless manner or one designed to stop the opposition gaining a clear advantage and / or preventing a goal-scoring opportunity. In the latter instances the award of a yellow card is a distinct possibility. Whenever possible, the umpire should use his voice to explain his decision and interpretation of a particular instance or circumstance.