

Most Misunderstood Basketball Rules

This is a list of basketball rules that are often misunderstood by coaches, players, and parents. This list is not meant to train officials, but rather, it is meant to educate players, coaches, and fans.

It is important to know the intent and purpose of a rule so that it may be intelligently applied in each play situation. A player of a team should not be permitted an advantage which is not intended by a rule. Neither should play be permitted to develop which may lead to placing a player at a disadvantage not intended by a rule.

1. A player cannot touch the ball, ring, or net while the ball is on the ring or within the basket. A player cannot touch the ball if it is in the imaginary cylinder above the ring. These are examples of basket interference. It is legal to touch the ring or the net if the ball is above the ring and not touching the ring, even if the ball is in the imaginary cylinder above the ring. It is legal to hang on the ring if a player is avoiding an injury to himself or herself or another player.
2. The backboard has nothing to do with goaltending. Goaltending is contacting the ball on its downward flight, above the level of the rim, with a chance to go in. On most layups, the ball is going up after it contacts the backboard. It is legal to pin the ball against the backboard if it is still on the way up and not in the imaginary cylinder above the basket. Slapping the backboard is neither basket interference nor is it goaltending and points cannot be awarded. A player who strikes a backboard so forcefully that it cannot be ignored because it is an attempt to draw attention to the player, or a means of venting frustration, may be assessed a technical foul. When a player simply attempts to block a shot and accidentally slaps the backboard it is neither a violation nor is it a technical foul.
3. The front, top, sides, and bottom of the backboard are all in play. The ball cannot pass over a rectangular backboard from either direction. The back of a backboard is out of bounds as well as the supporting structures.
4. The traveling rule is one of the most misunderstood rules in basketball. To start a dribble, the ball must be released before the pivot foot is lifted. On a pass or a shot, the pivot foot may be lifted, but may not return to the floor before the ball is released. A player may slide on the floor while trying to secure a loose ball until that player's momentum stops. At that point that player cannot attempt to get up or rollover. A player securing a ball while on the floor cannot attempt to stand up unless that player starts a dribble. A player in this situation may also pass, shoot, or call a timeout. If the player is flat on his or her back, that player may sit up without violating.

5. During a fumble the player is not in control of the ball, and therefore, cannot be called for a traveling violation. A fumble is the accidental loss of player control when the ball is unintentionally dropped or slips from a player's grasp. After a player has ended a dribble and fumbled the ball, that player may recover the ball without violating. Any steps taken during the recovery of a fumble are not traveling, regardless of how far the ball goes and the amount of advantage that is gained. It is always legal to recover a fumble, even at the end of a dribble, however that player cannot begin a new dribble, which would be a double dribble violation. A player who fumbles the ball when receiving a pass may legally start a dribble.
6. The shooter can retrieve his or her own airball, if the referee considers it to be a shot attempt. The release ends team control. It is not a violation for that player to start another dribble at that point. When an airborne player keeps control of an attempted shot that is blocked and is unable to release the ball and returns to the floor with it, that player has not traveled; it is a jump ball. If, in this situation, the shooter releases the ball, then this is simply a blocked shot and play continues.
7. Palming or carrying is when a player gains an advantage when the ball comes to rest in the player's hand, and the player either travels with the ball, or dribbles a second time. There is no restriction as to how high a player may bounce the ball, provided the ball does not come to rest in a player's hand. Steps taken during a dribble are not traveling, including several that are sometimes taken when a high dribble takes place. It is not possible for a player to travel during a dribble.
8. A player inbound the ball may step on, but not over the line. During a designated spot throwin, the player inbound the ball must keep one foot on or over the three-foot wide designated spot. An inbound player is allowed to jump or move one or both feet. A player inbound the ball may move backward as far as the five-second time limit or space allows. If player moves outside the three-foot wide designated spot it is a violation, not travelling. In gymnasiums with limited space outside the sidelines and endlines, a defensive player may be asked to step back no more than three feet.
9. The defender may not break the imaginary plane during a throwin. If the defender breaks the imaginary plane during a throwin, the defender's team will receive a warning. Any subsequent violations will result in a team technical foul. If the defender contacts the ball after breaking the imaginary plane, it is a player technical foul and a team warning will be recorded. If the defender fouls the inbound player after breaking the imaginary plane, it is an intentional personal foul, and a team warning will be recorded.

10. The inbound player does not have a plane restriction, but has five seconds to release the ball and it must come directly onto the court. The ball can always be passed into the backcourt during a throwin. This situation is not a backcourt violation.
11. If a player's momentum carries him or her off the court, he or she can be the first player to touch the ball after returning inbounds. That player must not have left the court voluntarily and must immediately return inbounds. That player must have something in and nothing out. It is not necessary to have both feet back inbounds.
12. If a blind screen is set on a stationary defender, the defender must be given one normal step to change direction and attempt to avoid contact. If a screen is set on a moving defender, the defender gets a minimum of one step and a maximum of two steps, depending on the speed and distance of the defender.
13. The hand is considered part of the ball when the hand is in contact with the ball. This includes holding, dribbling, passing, or even during a shot attempt. Striking a ball handler or a shooter on that player's hand that is incidental to an attempt to play the ball is not a foul, no matter how loud it sounds or how much it hurts.
14. Reaching in is not a foul. The term is nowhere to be found in any rulebook. There must be contact to have a foul. The mere act of reaching in, by itself, is nothing. If contact does occur, it's either a holding foul or an illegal use of hands foul. When a player, in order to stop the clock, does not make a legitimate play for the ball, holds, pushes or grabs away from the ball, or uses undue roughness, the foul is an intentional foul.
15. Over the back is not a foul. The term is nowhere to be found in any rulebook. There must be contact to have a foul. A taller player may often be able to get a rebound over a shorter player, even if the shorter player has good rebounding position. If the shorter player is displaced, then a pushing foul must be called. A rebounding player, with an inside position, while boxing out, is not allowed to push back or displace an opponent, which is a pushing foul.
16. A defensive player does not have to remain stationary to take a charge. A defender may turn away or duck to absorb contact, provided he or she has already established legal guarding position, which is both feet on the playing court and facing the opponent. The defender can always move backwards or sideways to maintain a legal guarding position and may even have one or both feet off the playing court when contact occurs. That player may legally rise vertically. If the defender is moving forward, then the contact is caused by the defender, which is a blocking foul.

17. The mere fact that contact occurs does not constitute a foul. Incidental contact is contact with an opponent which is permitted and does not constitute a foul. Contact, which occurs unintentionally in an effort by an opponent to reach a loose ball, or contact which may result when opponents are in equally favorable positions to perform normal defensive or offensive moves, should not be considered illegal, even though the contact may be severe. Contact which does not hinder an opponent from participating in normal defensive or offensive movements should be considered incidental.
18. A ten-second count continues when the defense deflects or bats the ball in the backcourt. When a dribbler is advancing the ball into the frontcourt, the ball maintains backcourt status until both feet and the ball touch entirely in the frontcourt.
19. During a throwin, even under a team's own basket, if the throwin is deflected, tipped, or batted by an offensive player in the frontcourt to an offensive player in the backcourt; or after a missed field goal attempt or a missed foul shot attempt, if the ball is deflected, tipped, or batted by an offensive player in the frontcourt to an offensive player in the backcourt; these are not a backcourt violations. In both cases team control, a player holding or dribbling the ball, has not yet been established.
20. During a throw in or jump ball, any player; or a defensive player, in making a steal; may legally jump from his or her frontcourt, secure control of the ball with both feet off the floor, and return to the floor with one or both feet in the backcourt. The player may make a normal landing and it makes no difference whether the first foot down is in the frontcourt or the backcourt. These three situations are not backcourt violations.
21. The closely guarded rule is in effect in frontcourt only, when a defender is within six feet of the ball handler. Up to three separate five-second counts may occur on the same ball handler, holding, dribbling, and holding. The count continues even if defenders switch. The five-second count ends when a dribbler gets his or her head and shoulders ahead of the defender.
22. The intent of the three-second rule is to not allow an offensive player to gain an advantage. Referees will not call this violation if the player is not gaining an advantage. There is no three-second count between the release of a shot and the control of a rebound, at which time a new count starts. There is no three-second count during a throwin. There is no three-second count while the ball is in the backcourt. Allowance shall be made for a player who, having been in the restricted area for less than three seconds, dribbles in or moves immediately to try for goal.

23. The head coach may request and be granted a timeout if his or her player is holding or dribbling the ball, or during a dead ball period. A player saving the ball in the air can ask for and be granted a timeout even if that player is going out of bounds. The key is whether or not the player has control of the ball.
24. On free throws, there is a maximum of two offensive players and four defensive players in the six marked lane spaces. The defense must be in both bottom spaces on all free throws. A player, other than the free thrower, who does NOT occupy a marked lane space, may not have either foot beyond the vertical plane of the free-throw line extended and the three-point line which is farther from the basket until the ball touches the ring or backboard or until the free throw ends. The free throw rule allows players in marked lane spaces to enter the lane when the ball is released by the free thrower.
25. A player occupying a marked lane space may not enter the free throw semicircle until the ball touches the ring or until the free throw ends. During a free throw, no opponent, including bench personnel, may disconcert the free thrower.
26. Kicking the ball is intentionally striking it with any part of the leg or foot. An unintentionally kicked ball is never illegal, regardless of how far the ball goes and who recovers it. It is also illegal to hit the ball with a fist.
27. Players may not participate while wearing jewelry. Religious medals or medical alert medals are not considered jewelry. A religious medal must be taped and worn under the uniform. A medical alert medal must be taped and may be visible. Headbands must be made of a single colored cloth. Rubber or cloth elastic bands may be used to control hair. Undershirts must be similar in color to the jersey and shall not have frayed or ragged edges. State associations may on an individual basis, allow a player to participate while wearing a head covering, if it is worn for medical or religious reasons, provided that the covering is not abrasive, hard, or dangerous, and is attached in such a way that it is highly unlikely to come off during play. Written documentation should be available.
28. Officials are not required to explain judgment calls, but they may explain some calls if approached by the head coach in a respectful manner. Officials have been instructed to call technical fouls for profanity, unsporting acts and excessive complaints or verbal abuse.
29. Officials do not make calls that decide the outcome of a game. Players commit fouls and violations; officials view those infractions, judge the action, and then apply the rules of the game to what they had viewed. The rules then determine the penalty. Officials are on the court to be the only unbiased arbiters of the game. Officials are not concerned with who wins or loses, but only fairness and safety. Everyone else in that gym cares about winning, and therefore cannot look at the game objectively.