

Sometimes Being Right Means “Be Right for the Game”



By Barbara Wyatt

As I sit at my local coffee hang-out minding my own business, invariably I hear someone say “Ask Barbara, she wrote the tennis rules app.”

Three players then walk over to my table and tell me horror stories about a tennis rule violation. “This happened to me at Sectionals ...”

“You won’t believe what my opponent did at a USTA match!”

The stories usually include one player’s misunderstanding of a tennis rule. That player uses a raised voice to demand the game be conducted under their interpretation of the rule.

You and I know those players miss the meaning of a competitive tennis match. How can we help all players understand that tennis matches, either social or competitive, are healthy, delightful hours of play? The purpose is to enjoy the game and its competitive moments.

Jake told me a story about obtaining a third ball. When serving, he asked his opponents to pick up the third ball located between their baseline and the fence. The opponents refused. Jake asked again. The opponents refused and taunted Jake and his partner with name calling.

Jake walked over to the third ball and picked it up. Yes, he left his serving position, walked to the opposite side of the net, picked up the ball and returned to his side of the net to commence serving.

Question: Was Jake at fault for asking for the third ball?

Answer: No!

Code 22 of The Code: *The Players’ Guide to Fair Play and the Unwritten Rules of Tennis*, states: “When a server requests three balls, the receiver shall comply when the third ball is readily available.” The ball was behind the opponents. If it had been on an adjacent court, that could be considered

“distant.” The opponents should have given Jake the third ball.

Question: What about Jake’s decision to leave his side of the court?

Answer: According to USTA Regulations IV.C.5: “A player may leave the court to retrieve a ball.” His action to pick up the third ball could be perceived as acceptable. But was that the right decision to make?

Jake had options. Perhaps Jake prefers to begin serving with all three balls. He understood Code 22. He made his request, but the opponents refused. He had the opportunity to be the ingenuous player and start his serve with two balls in hand. On changeover, he could ask the tournament desk for an official ruling on third ball requests from a server. By leaving his side of the court and picking up that third ball, he was contributing to the tension on the court.

Perhaps he was right as server. But was the action right?

If Jake believed the ball was a hazard, but the opponents said it wasn’t hindering them. He should serve. However, if the third ball was a distraction to him and the opponents refused to pick it up, call for an

official and explain his opponents are hindering him by not complying with a reasonable request. Officials are trained to help ensure the game continues under the fairest possible conditions. Was the ball reasonably close? Were the opponents playing a gamesmanship maneuver by refusing Jake the third ball?

My advice to Jake? Be the highly principled player. Perhaps your opponents were engaged in a bit of gamesmanship. Big deal ... their loss. You, Jake, are better than that. If it wasn’t a hindrance to you and you simply wanted the third ball as the server, serve on, my friend. You have a killer serve. At changeover, let the tournament desk and official handle the opponents’ education.

Sometimes being right means “Be right for the game.”

Barbara Wyatt is a Writer, Photographer, USTA Official, and Mobile App Developer of iKnowTennis!, the tennis rules app. Her poem, Ode to Tennis, an amusing poem on the joys and frustrations when learning tennis, is available at Amazon. She can be reached by e-mail at BarbaraW@iKnowTennis.com.

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