

What you absolutely need to know about Referees, Umpires, Officials

(adapted from an article written by Robert Sasseville of USTA/Southern Section)

As a tournament player, you need to know what these terms mean. The terms “referee,” “umpire,” “official” and even “tournament director” are used by many players interchangeably. They don’t mean the same thing, and if you don’t know the difference, you may lose points, games, or even a match because of it.

“**Official**” is a general term which includes anyone who exercises some degree of control over the conduct of tournament play. Typically, this term applies to the “referee,” “deputy referees,” “site referees,” “roving umpires,” “chair umpires,” and “line umpires.” [The “tournament director” is not really an official, but sometimes the duties of this position and those of the “referee” are confused.]

“**Umpires**” (roving or chair) typically wear the USTA “officials shirt” and/or other distinguishing apparel. Chair umpires are the officials you see sitting in an elevated chair and are responsible for one court only. They assign line umpires if available; call the score of the match; and overrule clear mistakes made by the players. Roving umpires are responsible to monitor play on two or more courts and become involved in matches only when invited. (This invitation may come from a player request or as a result of on-court misbehavior (audible profanity, racquet abuse, etc.) Roving Umpires may come to the court to address a certain issue and leave, or stay for a few games, or stay for the duration of the match, depending on the situation. Additionally, Umpires typically:

- Conduct pre-match meetings with players, perform the coin toss, and time the warm-up
- Oversee play and issue code and time violations, when warranted
- Resolve disputes regarding tennis law (rules)
- Resolve scoring disputes
- Make decisions of fact (correcting erroneous “out” calls, net touches, incorrect score calling, etc.) when on court or in direct observation thereof.
- Summon the referee to the court at the players’ request for a decision on a point of law.

The **referee** (or site referee) typically wears USTA “officials apparel.” The referee may be at the tournament desk or anywhere on the premises, but must always be somewhere on site when matches are in progress. If only one official is assigned to a tournament, that official is the referee. The **referee**:

- Oversees all tournament play and has the final responsibility for assuring fairness, enforcement of the rules, “calling” matches and assigning them to specific courts, and scheduling match times.
- Suspends play and postpones or cancels matches when circumstances warrant
- Makes final decisions regarding tennis law. The decision on a point of law of an **umpire** may be appealed to the **referee**.

What happens when there is a dispute?

If something occurs on the court that you feel is contrary to the rules, your first line of appeal is to the **umpire**. If the **umpire** must be summoned, and the question involves the score, stop playing until he arrives. When the **umpire** arrives, you and your opponent should explain the situation. The **umpire** will apply the rules to the current situation and give instructions as to how to proceed.

What happens if the dispute is over line calls or an issue of fact?

First, the **umpire** cannot overturn any call that he didn’t see directly. No matter how adamantly a player protests his opponent’s call, the **umpire cannot overturn the call or order the point replayed**. If the **umpire** is already on court, or is in direct observation of the incident, he may “correct” a clearly erroneous call. **Umpires are trained not to overrule a first serve called good by the receiver unless persuaded it is an intentionally bad call**. If the umpire issues a correction (called an “overrule”), the player making the erroneous call loses the point. [The exception to this rule is when an umpire can read a ball mark on a clay court that both players agree is the mark.]

What happens if you don’t agree with the umpire’s interpretation of the rules?

Any decision made by the **umpire** regarding the rules (not fact, like a ball being in or out, or a ball touching a player) may be appealed to the **referee**. Players should use words similar to these: “I am not sure that I agree with that decision. Please summon the referee.” The **umpire** is obligated to call the **referee**. If the ruling doesn’t affect the score, play may resume while awaiting the referee’s arrival.

What happens if the umpire’s decision affects the score?

Do not resume play until the **referee** has come to the court and rendered his decision. Once the **referee** has issued his opinion, you must resume play immediately.

What happens if you resume play and then decide to appeal to the referee at a later time?

When any dispute occurs that affects the score and it is resolved by an **umpire** and play is resumed, the score **IS** whatever was decided upon when play resumed. If you don’t agree with the score, **do not resume play, or shake your opponent’s hand if at the end of the match**, until you appeal to the **referee**.

What if I don’t agree with the referee either?

Sorry, you are out of options; the referee has the final say. You have 20 seconds to resume play.

**If you get in a situation that you don’t believe is fair or follows the rules, remember these words:
“Please summon the referee.”**