

The Definitive Guide to the

2023 Pickleball Rule Updates

The Rules of Pickleball Change?!

Every year, the [USA Pickleball](#) rules committee reviews and revises the rules of pickleball. Usually the changes are minor, but over the last few years, we've had some changes that rocked the sport (I'm looking at you, spin-serve and drop-serve)

The Must-know Pickleball Rule Updates for 2023

Here's the short list of the main rule changes you need to know for 2023. More detail below, plus notes on some of the less impactful changes.

- **NO MORE SPIN SERVE!**

This is the big one! **As of 2023, the "spin serve" will no longer be legal!**

The quick recap of the change is, if you spin the ball as you release it from your hand, it's a replay / re-serve. You can still hit the ball with topspin, slice...etc, as long as you follow the other serve rules. The only new restriction is spinning it upon release. Here's the [video from Zane Navratil explaining what a "spin serve" is](#). See below for more info, reasoning, explanation...etc.

- **Avoid Wearing Clothing...**

...that closely matches the ball color. (Keep your mind out of the gutter!) There are actually two parts to this change. The most impactful change is to rule 2.G.1. which adds the mention of clothing that "approximates the color of the ball" as something that could be a "Safety" or "Distraction" issue, and may require the player to change apparel. More details below.

- **Equipment Time-Outs**

Equipment time-outs no longer require the use of your team's time-outs and the limitation of "up to 2 minutes" has been replaced with "of reasonable duration". So if you break your paddle, or the sole of your shoe falls off, not only will you not need to use up one of your time-outs, but it may also be reasonable to take more than 2 minutes to find a replacement paddle, or switch into a new pair of shoes...etc.

- **Illegal Service Motion MAY be a Replay (if called by a referee)**

In 2023, if a referee sees what they think MIGHT be an illegal service motion, they MAY call for a replay. Serves that are clearly illegal will still be called as a fault. This call must be made by a referee, not a player. The receiver may call for a replay if they cannot see the release of the ball or see the server spin the ball, but may not call an illegal service motion.

Note: This is not clear in the USA Pickleball "Passed" rule wording, but has been clarified by [Mark Peifer](#), Managing Director of Officiating at USA Pickleball. I expect the wording will be clarified before it's published.

More Details & Explanation

Spin Serve Rule Changes for 2023

It was fun while it lasted.

The new rule 4.A.5. (see below) now specifies that although some rotation may naturally occur, if the server intentionally creates spin, it will be a reserve / replay:

4.A.5. The Volley Serve.

The server shall use only one hand to release the ball to perform the serve. While some natural rotation of the ball is expected during any release of the ball from the hand, the server shall not impart manipulation or spin on the release of the ball immediately prior to the serve. The server's release of the ball must be visible to the referee and the receiver. If the referee determines that manipulation or spin has been imparted, or the release of the ball is not visible, the referee shall call for a reserve.

In matches without a referee, the server's release of the ball must be visible to the receiver. The server shall not impart manipulation or spin on the release of the ball immediately prior to the serve. If the receiver determines that manipulation or spin has been imparted, or the release of the ball is not visible, the receiver shall call for a reserve immediately after the serve occurs. Exception: A player who has the use of only one hand may use their hand or paddle to release the ball to perform the serve.

To provide additional insight, there is a section for "USAP Rules Committee Voting Status", which says the following:

"Passed. 1) Original purpose was to just use the serve to get a begin play 2) Most players cannot master a truly effective spin serve, or return a good spin serve 3) Effective spin serves require more court space to allow a receiver to react. 4) Only a limited number of players have mastered this, giving them an unfair advantage 5) It is particularly devastating for amateur players Edit: replace 'reserve' with 'replay'"

While I'm not necessarily a proponent of the spin serve, I do find it interesting that much of the explanation or reasoning for eliminating the spin serve deals with the

inability for many players to do it. While that has been an argument by many, it's commonly rebutted by saying "too bad".

The mention of required court space is an interesting one and isn't an argument I've heard before. That does seem to have some merit, as an effective spin serve can often kick sideways enough to cause a player to run into fencing/walls...etc.

Did you like the spin serve, or are you happy it's gone? Join the discussion on the [Pickleball Rules Facebook Group!](#)

Let's all take a moment to look back and admire the OG Spin-Serve Master, [Morgan Evans as he demolishes his opponents with the soon-to-be-illegal spin serve.](#)

Don't Wear Clothes that Match the Color of the Ball

The first change isn't exactly a "rules" change, but it is in the rulebook. In the first section of the rulebook, there's an area called "The Players", which provides general guidelines and etiquette for players. For 2023, they've added a note that players should avoid wearing clothes that match the color of the ball.

It now specifies that:

"Pickleball is a game that requires cooperation and courtesy. A sense of fair play from giving the opponent the benefit of any doubt is essential in maintaining the game's underlying principles of fun and competition. To that end:"

...

"Players avoid wearing clothing that closely matches the ball color."

The second change actually does update a rule (2.G.1.) from:

2.G.1. Safety and Distraction. A player may be required to change garments that are inappropriate.

to

2.G.1. Safety and Distraction. A player may be required to change apparel that are inappropriate, including that which approximates the color of the ball.

This really doesn't affect much. TDs have always known they have the ability to request an apparel change for this reason. And now it's still up to the tournament director to request an apparel change. Overall, this just makes it clear by officially listing it as something you should avoid doing, and is written more clearly than previously just being called a potential "safety" issue.

USAP Rules Committee Voting Status

Passed. This doesn't add any additional punitive result. This just clarifies that the Tournament Director can choose to request apparel changes due to the clothing matching the ball color. It also suggests to players that they should not intentionally choose clothing that is the same color as the tournament ball.

Equipment Time-Outs

Two major changes. First, if you have an equipment issue, you're no longer required to use a standard time-out. Previously, the rule said that if an equipment issue occurs, players:

"...are expected to use regular time-outs and time between games for adjustments and replacement..."

And while it did allow for a referee to award an equipment time-out if the team was out of time-outs, it now simply puts equipment time-outs in their own category. Overall, this just makes sense.

Reasoning Behind Suggested Change

This proposal eliminates the inconsistency of how equipment time-outs are handled at tournaments between matches with and without referees. For the same equipment malfunction, players in non-officiated tournament matches will work out a reasonable accommodation for a player who has for example, a broken paddle. The opponents won't typically 'charge' the other a time-out either. That, however, has never been part of the rules. This proposal codifies what is happening naturally in matches without a referee. Contrast that to the prescriptiveness in the rule for a match with a referee. This proposal removes that inconsistency. Furthermore, requiring players to use their regular time-outs for

circumstances beyond their reasonable control, for example, a broken paddle, sunglasses, hat, etc., is inconsistent with other situations where we expect referees to use their best judgment.

Wrong Score Called

In 2022, if the wrong score was called, you must wait until the end of the rally to draw attention to it. Stopping play because of a wrong score called would have resulted in a fault.

In 2023, you may now stop play until the return of serve to correct the score.

Note: it's still risky to stop play when you think the score was called incorrectly. If you stop play, and it turns out it was the correct score, it's a fault on you and your opponents will win the rally (and therefore the point).

Other Rule Updates

Here are some of the other rule updates that most people (other than refs and rule-nerds like myself) won't really care about.

- **Who's Fault when player hit by ball?**

Some wording got clarified on rules 7.H. and 7.I. that clarify that when a player is hit by a ball, it's a fault on that player. We already knew this, but it's nice that they cleaned up the wording so there's no doubt.

- **You can now ask "Am I good?"**

Rule 4.B.8. has been expanded to allow for a player to ask a generic question like "Am I good?". The ref (or opponent) may then answer both whether or not they're in the correct position AND the correct server/receiver.

- **Ambiguous wording: Hitting a ball that "first lands out of bounds"**

Rule 7.D. was listed as a fault if "A player hitting a ball that first lands out of bounds or onto their own side of the court." I agree, that's not clear. They've updated the wording to: "A player hitting a ball that subsequently lands out of bounds or onto their own side of the court." The reasoning behind the suggestion was:

"Is it a fault if you hit a ball after it has first landed out of bounds? Or is it a fault if you hit a ball that then lands out of bound first? It's confusing to know

the intent because the wording leaves room for one's own interpretation. Replacing "first" with "subsequently" puts the actions in the proper chronological order without ambiguity."

- **"Promptly" removed from wording on the line-call requirement**

Rule 6.D.8. used to specify that all out calls must be made "promptly", then went on to actually define "Promptly". The requirement to make a prompt line call still exists, it just removes the additional phrasing that was at very least redundant. Previously it was:

6.D.8. All "out" calls must be made "promptly"; otherwise, the ball is presumed to still be in play. "Promptly" is defined as calling "out" prior to the ball being hit by the opponent or before the ball becomes dead.

and now it's changed to:

6.D.8. All "out" calls must be made prior to the ball being hit by the opponent or before the ball becomes dead. Otherwise, the ball is presumed to still be in play.

Some additional clarification on the reasoning:

"players often remember the term 'promptly', but insert their own definition of the word instead of the definition specified in the rules"

- **Other**

- "side" changed to "end" for consistency.
- Adds 3 out of 5 format clarification for withdrawals.
- 13.D.1.a. related to calling faults on yourself was clarified - no major change - you should still always call a fault on yourself as soon as you see it.
- Clarification that if you're forced to make an apparel change, it won't cost you a time-out. (2.G.4.) (no actual change)
- Rule clarification on round-robin tie breaks. (no actual change)
- Clarification that you cannot spin the ball during release on a drop serve. (no actual change)
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- Additional language to rule 11.E. allowing for a ball change when it's squishy, and not just "broken or cracked"
- Other editorial changes that would bore you.
- I'm proud of you for reading this far! You must be a rules nerd like me!

What do YOU think?

Join us to talk about the new rules on the [Pickleball Rules Facebook Group](#)!

Which changes do you like? Which do you dislike, and why? Do you think they'll all pass the USA Pickleball Board vote? **Did I miss anything? It's late. I'm tired - it's quite possible I skipped something. Let me know!**