

Serving Rule Proposal: "Net Visibility Rule"

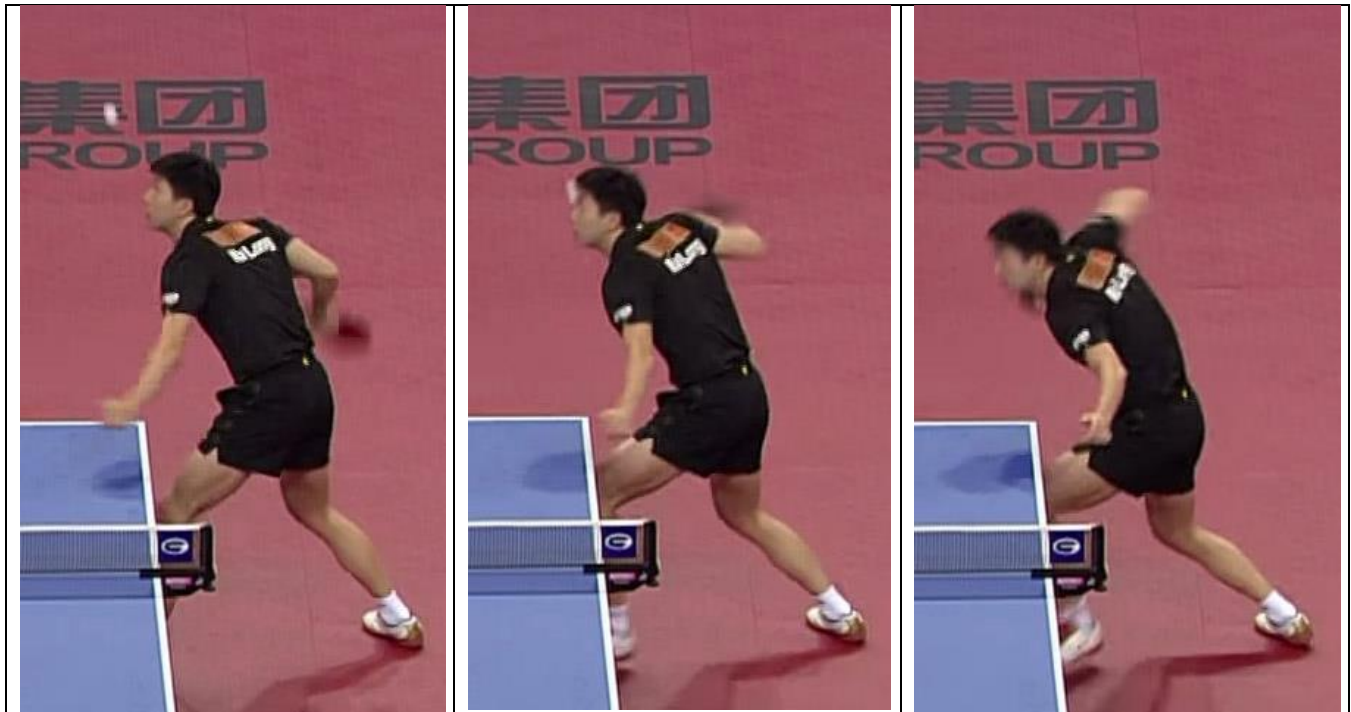
September 23, 2015

Dear USATT Rules Committee,

Cheating is rampant at the higher levels in our sport. By the time you reach the final rounds at any major tournament, few matches are played where players aren't illegally hiding their serves. The ones who do not hide their serves are at a major disadvantage.

As a professional coach I regularly coach players who are cheated out of matches by opponents with illegal hidden serves. Many of these players are juniors who are training nearly full-time, and are absolutely astonished when all their hard work is wasted because opponents regularly cheat them out of matches. Do we tell juniors they have to cheat if they want to compete on an equal basis, as many coaches do, or do we teach them to play fair and accept that our sport favors cheaters? How do we explain to parents that their children cannot compete on an equal basis unless they cheat? There is no good answer - except to change the rules to stop the rampant cheating.

Players around the world have perfected a serving technique where the ball is thrown behind the head, hiding contact. Below is an example of World Men's Singles Champion Ma Long doing this serve. He is serving to Zhang Jike in the Men's Singles Final at the 2015 German Open. It's his first serve of the third game – most of his serves are like this, as are Zhang Jike's. Note the head thrust – head starts under the "U" in picture 1, is midway under the "O" and "U" in picture 2, and ends up under the "O" in picture 3 - and the ball is now completely hidden by the head from the opponent. Here are larger versions: [photo1](#), [photo2](#), [photo3](#), and the [video](#). The picture at the top of the page shows what this looks like from behind (Pierre-Luc Theriault of Canada serving to USA's Timothy Wang.)



What follows is a proposal for a simple rule change we can make to the ITTF that would make it far more difficult for players to get away with hiding their serves.

There is precedent for the U.S. taking a leadership role in changing rules. For example, in the early 1990s I wrote the proposal to get rid of the paddle point rule. It went to the USATT Officials and Rules Committee, and they made the proposal to the ITTF. It passed. I'd like to see us once again become a world leader in solving the major problems in our sport.

There are few perfect solutions to these problems. The key is to find a way to resolve the problem as best we can. The current status quo, where cheaters dominate tournaments and we look the other way, cannot last. We cannot continue to honor the cheaters while cheating the honorable ones.

How Bad is the Problem of Illegal Hidden Serves?

At the 2014 U.S. Open, there was only one top cadet who was regularly hiding his serve illegally. Since that time, despite regular complaints from opponents, few umpires have enforced the rule, and the cadet has regularly won matches that he might not have won without the illegal serves. At the same time the top players in the U.S. and the rest of the world also regularly hide their serves, and our cadets see that. The result? Essentially all of the top USA cadet boys now regularly hide their serves. In a little over a year, we've gone from one cadet cheating to teaching an entire generation that if they want to compete, they have to cheat. If sports is about sportsmanship, then table tennis is no longer a sport.

On the following page is a gallery of serves from top cadets and players at the 2015 North American Championships, held in Westchester, NY, Sept. 5-7. Video was available for all eight Men's Singles Quarterfinalists and seven of the eight Cadet Boys Singles Quarterfinalists. EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM REGULARLY HID THEIR SERVES. As an addendum at the end you'll see all of these pictures.

These were not occasional serves; these are their regular serves, used over and over, without a single fault for hidden serves that I saw in the live-streamed videos. In most cases, the serve shown is the very first serve the player used on the far side of the table, as noted. You can see live video of these at the [North American Video Page](#).

After the gallery is a proposal for a rule change that USATT can propose to the ITTF that would solve the problem.

Hidden Serve Gallery from 2015 North American Championships

- The screen shots linked below are all shown in the addendum (pages 5-12).
- When it says "first serve," that means the first serve on the far side of the table that's viewable by the camera angle.
- In each case the ball is hidden behind the head – see the video. (Timothy Wang also used his free arm to hide the ball.) Here's an example of [hiding the ball with the head](#) from behind the server. If needed, one could create sequences of each of them similar to the one of Ma Long above.
- Here are the [North American Video Links](#). A short viewing of these players will quickly show that hiding the serve with the head is not the exception; it is now the norm among top players.
- I didn't see a single player faulted for hiding their serve.
- In Cadet Boys the only player not livestreamed, and so no video available, was Derek Nie. He is from my club, but that's just coincidental as I wasn't involved in who was videoed.
- Most of the women and cadet girls did not hide their serves.

CADET BOYS	Player (Click to see picture)	Link	Notes
1st	Jack Wang	Video	Second serve. First serve was borderline visible.
2nd	Victor Liu	Video	First serve.
3rd	Gal Alguetti	Video	Second Serve.
4th	Kanak Jha	Video	First serve.
5th	Jeremy Hazin	Video	First serve.
6th	Sharon Alguetti	Video	First serve.
7th	Derek Nie	--	No video available from tournament.
8th	Nikhil Kumar	Video	First serve.
Other Top USA Cadets	Krish Avvari	Video	First serve.
	Jonathan Li	Video	Second serve. First one was borderline.
MEN'S SINGLES			
1 st	Timothy Wang	Video	First serve. Here the free arm was also used to hide the serve. His second serve shows him pulling the arm away but thrusting his head forward to hide the ball.
2 nd	Pierre-Luc Theriault	Video	First serve. Here's the reverse side where you can see the ball behind the head.
3-4	Kanak Jha		See cadets above.
3-4	Jack Wang		See cadets above.
5-8	Jimmy Butler	Video	First serve. The serve was faulted for hand being over table. Second serve was also hidden.
5-8	Jeremy Hazin		See cadets above.
5-8	Sharon Alguetti		See cadets above.
5-8	Filip Ilijevski	Video	First serve.
WOMEN'S SINGLES			
1 st	Lily Zhang	Video	First serve.

Proposal to Stop Hidden Serves - "Net Visibility Rule"

The current rule is that the ball cannot be hidden from the receiver throughout the serve. The problem is that umpires often cannot tell if the serve is hidden or not – as noted above, the difference between hidden and just visible is about 0.7 degrees. The rules state that it is the responsibility of the player to serve so that the umpire is satisfied that he is serving legally. Logically, if an umpire can't tell if the serve is visible or not, then he cannot be satisfied that the serve is legal, and should warn or fault. In reality, few umpires do so, and so many or most major titles go to players who abuse this rule and hide their serve. And so we honor the cheaters and cheat the honorable ones.

There was previous consideration for a rule where the ball be visible to both umpires, or where the umpires would sit, but that the rule was apparently considered too extreme, and so was rejected.

Here is a less extreme proposal, which I call the **Net Visibility Rule**. For this, we require that throughout the serve the ball cannot be hidden from the receiver *or the net assembly and its upward extension*.

Current Rule:

02.06.04: From the start of service until it is struck, the ball shall be above the level of the playing surface and behind the server's end line, and it shall not be hidden from the receiver by the server or his or her doubles partner or by anything they wear or carry.

Proposed Rule:

02.06.04: From the start of service until it is struck, the ball shall be above the level of the playing surface and behind the server's end line, and it shall not be hidden from the receiver[, **or the net assembly and its upward extension,**] by the server or his or her doubles partner or by anything they wear or carry.



Here's an illustration of the rule:

The angle from the ball to the opponent (the current rule) and the ball to the right-hand net post (proposed rule) is about 90 degrees. What might be a borderline hidden serve under the current rule becomes an obviously illegal serve under the proposed rule – the ball is obviously hidden from the net post on the right.

What about lefties? Here's another illustration – and the angle now is about 60 degrees. (Yes, Timothy Wang really thrusts his head out that much to hide his serve – here's the [video of this serve](#). He's serving to lefty Jeremy Hazin of Canada.) Even if a lefty took a more extreme ready position the angle would likely be over 45 degrees.



For perspective, the difference between a barely visible serve and a barely hidden serve is roughly the width of a 1.6" ball. Assuming the players are 11 feet apart, that's about 0.7 degrees. Trying to judge 0.7 degrees is impossible; trying to judge 60-90 degrees is not.

I've tested this out at my club along with many others, and it solves the problem. If you try to hide the ball from an opponent in a normal ready position, it's obvious you are hiding the ball from at least one of the net posts.

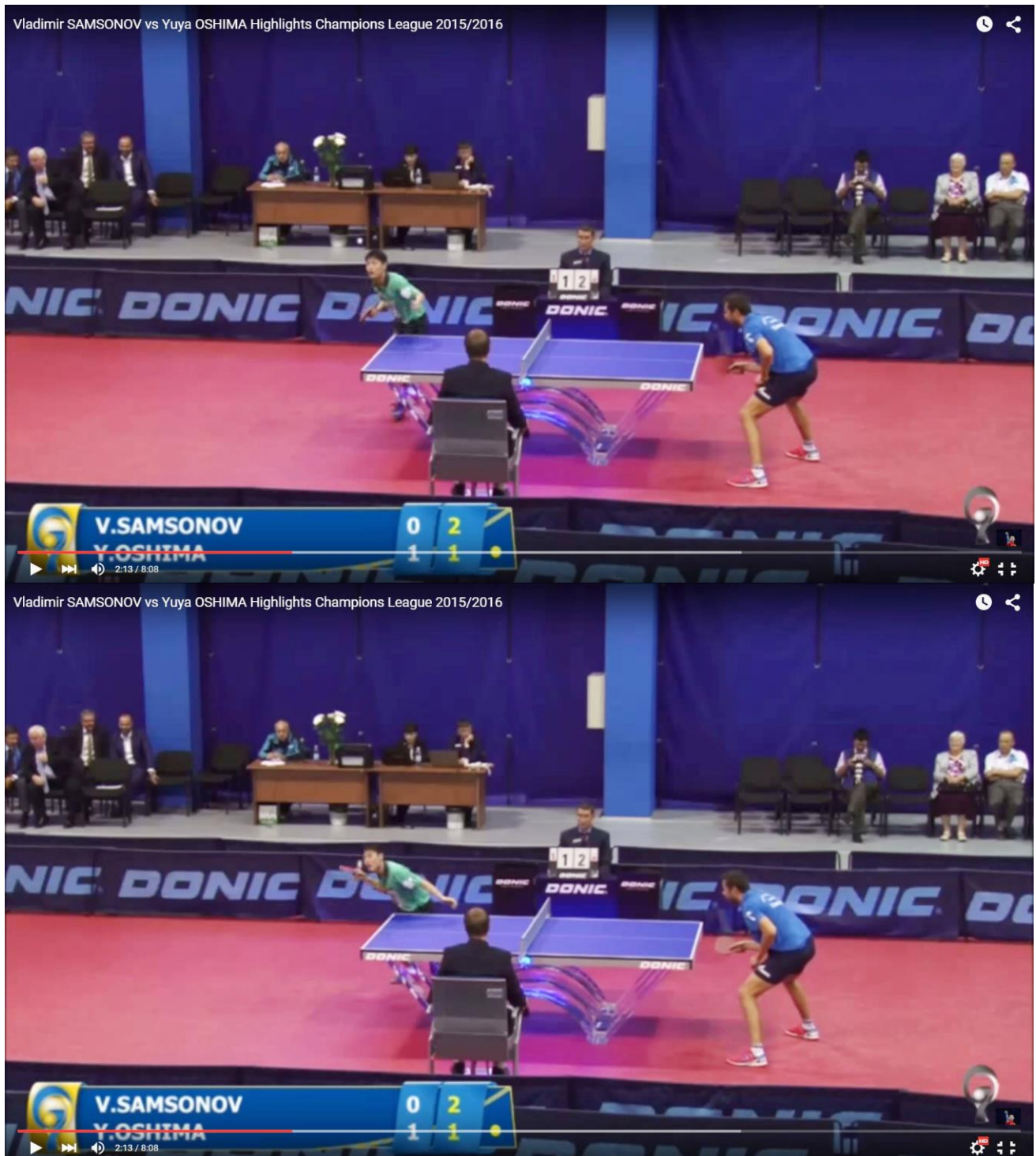
This proposal parallels the six-inch serving rule. The purpose of that rule was not to make players toss the ball up six inches; it was to stop the

rampant problem at the time, which was that players were serving out of their hand. By requiring a six-inch toss, even if a player abuses the rule and gets away with a five-inch toss, he won't be serving out of his hand; if he does, it would be obvious to the umpire (and opponent) that the ball wasn't tossed up six inches. Similarly, if a player abuses the proposed rule and gets away with hiding the ball from one net post, he won't be hiding the ball from the receiver; if he does, it would be obvious to the umpire (and receiver) that the ball was hidden from at least one net post.

So far we've looked at the serves from behind the receiver. What about from the umpire's perspective? The following two pages illustrate that view.

Umpire's Perspective

Let's start with the front view. Here is Yuya Oshima serving to Vladimir Samsonov in the Champions League. (Here's the [video](#).) In the first picture the ball is about to fall behind his head. In the second, it's difficult to tell from the umpire's perspective whether the serve is visible to Samsonov. However, it's quite obvious to the umpire on the near side that the ball is hidden from the net post on the far side. (Remember that these are 2-D pictures; in real 3-D action, umpires would be able to judge the location of the ball relative to the head and body.) Under the proposed rule, this serve would obviously be illegal. To adjust, the server would have to make the ball at last borderline visible to the net posts – and in so doing, the ball would obviously be visible to the receiver.



Now let's look at the back view of the same player in the same match, at [2:07](#). In the first picture the ball is again about to fall behind his head. In the second, it's again difficult to tell from the umpire's perspective whether the serve is visible to Samsonov. However, it's quite obvious to the umpire on the near side (and, as shown on previous page, the umpire on the far side) that the ball is hidden from the net post on the near side. (Remember again that these are 2-D pictures; in real 3-D action, umpires would be able to judge the location of the ball relative to the head and body.)



There is often no perfect rule, and it's quite possible that in some cases, umpires would fail to call a hidden serve under the proposal. But that's also true of other rules, such as the six-inch toss rule, as mentioned earlier. But let's emphasize this: while an umpire might not always call a five-inch toss serve, he would almost always call a serve where the ball is thrown out of the hand, as that would obviously not be a six-inch toss. Similarly, under this proposal, while an umpire might not always call a serve that's hidden from part of the net or net posts, he would almost always call ones that are hidden from the receiver, as they would obviously be hidden from the net posts. And even if umpires don't call all of them, servers aren't going to hide their serve if they are frequently getting faulted.

There's nothing you can do about an umpire who simply won't call illegal serves other than to find better umpires. But with this proposal, a serve hidden from an opponent would clearly be illegal (i.e. hidden from at least one net post), and so unlike the current rule where umpires aren't sure and so don't call it, now they would be *sure*, and so would be far more likely to do so.

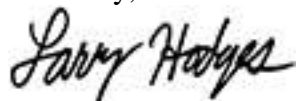
Rather than judge the proposal while at a computer or looking at a printout, test it at the table yourself with two volunteers. Have one prepare to serve to the other. Have the server hold the ball behind his head, as shown in the pictures, so it's barely hidden from the receiver. Then observe from both sides where the umpire would sit. From there it should be obvious that the head is blocking the ball from at least one of the net posts. Keep in mind that the umpire would normally be able to see the ball as it disappears behind the head or shoulder. (If a player so hides the ball that the umpire cannot see the ball at any time during the serve, then the umpire clearly would not be sure about the legality of the serve and so would fault it. But most servers do not hide the ball throughout the serve; they do so as it approaches contact as hiding it throughout the entire serve would lead to umpires faulting the serve.)

Hopefully the text and pictures shown illustrate both the problem and the solution. The proposal itself is not meant to be just a proposal from the author; it should come from USA Table Tennis, and can be edited in any way necessary. I'm told that November 1 is the deadline for making rules proposals to the ITTF for the next meeting at the Worlds in May of next year.

The proposal has been endorsed by Sean O'Neill, Dan Seemiller, Han Xiao, and Richard McAfee, among others.

As an addendum, the following pages include the pictures linked to in the "Hidden Serves" gallery given above. You can see larger versions with the online links. From the videos you can verify that in every case, the ball is hidden behind the head, with the head thrusting forward at the last second as the ball moves toward it. In none of the pictures will you see the ball; neither does the receiver.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Hodges". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Larry Hodges













