Volleyball is unique when it comes of sports officiating – it is the only sport where every contact of the ball must be judged for legality. In football, the referees don't judge how the quarterback throws the ball, how the receiver catches it, or how the punter kicks it. In baseball, the umpire doesn’t care about the pitcher’s technique for throwing the ball – their primary concern is where the ball crosses the plate – the strike zone.

[CLICK] In volleyball, we have our own “strike zone” – ball handling judgment. Just as batters wait to see how the umpire is going to call balls and strikes, volleyball players and coaches wait to see where the first referee is going to set the line for ball handling. These (ball handling) decisions are often the measuring stick by which referees are judged. During this module, we'll take a look a ball handling philosophies, rules, playing techniques, and we'll help you set some goals.

First, let's talk about some ball handling truths… [CLICK]
“Ugly is not illegal” is probably one of the oldest sayings when it comes to ball handling. Just because something doesn’t look right – or looks ugly – doesn’t mean it’s a fault. Make this your mantra – “Ugly is NOT illegal!”

[CLICK] Body position is a “flag” to encourage us to watch more closely WITHOUT anticipating a whistle. While a player in an awkward position may be more at risk for mishandling the ball, do not assume that the contact will be illegal.

[CLICK] Spin is not a fault BUT spin can be an indication the ball has not been handled cleanly, primarily with two-handed setting actions. Spin from a one-handed contact may be ugly but it’s not illegal, in and of itself. The ball commonly spins (forward or backward) from a forearm pass; this is not illegal either.

[CLICK] Never use the sound of a contact as criteria for judging the contact's legality. Sometimes when a pass goes high toward the ceiling, it’s falling back toward to court at a higher velocity. When a player uses overhand setting action to make the next team contact, it might sound funny but that’s because the ball hit the player’s hands pretty hard! That doesn’t make it illegal.

[CLICK] As spectators, we watch the teams rally the ball back and forth across the net, and we tend to follow the ball as it flies through the air. But as referees, we must learn to NOT follow the ball but instead, we must look ahead of the ball to it’s next point of contact. This will help us make better judgments.

Now let’s talk about some Ball Handling Philosophies & Concepts [CLICK]
Throughout your volleyball officiating career, you will likely come across as many ball handling philosophies as the number of partners you have in your matches. Some of the most common philosophies, in no particular order:

[CLICK] Tight vs Loose – this is the most basic philosophy. “Tight” means “you call everything” and “Loose” means “you call nothing/very little.” There’s a happy medium that we all need to find!

[CLICK] Conceptually, an over-controlled ball often results in a catch/throw or prolonged contact, while lack of control or under-control may result in a multiple or double contact.

[CLICK] Start where you want to finish – It has been a long, exciting match and you don’t want to be a factor in the outcome. [CLICK] As a result, some referees tend to “back off” late in a match, even if they were making ball handling calls on similar plays earlier in the match. If you don’t want to end a set or match on a marginal call, then DON’T make that call early in the match either. [CLICK] This will help you establish consistency as you gain experience.

[CLICK] Volleyball is a spectator sport! The fans come to see exciting rallies, big blocks, powerful attacks and great digs – they did NOT come to the match to watch the referees blow the whistle. To encourage longer rallies, only call a ball handling fault when you are 100% sure it is illegal. [CLICK] Consequently, start establishing your ball handling skills by calling only the most egregious contacts. There is a finesse to calling the game, and until you gain more experience, it may be best to not get overly involved.

[CLICK] When you don’t get overly involved, and you call only the most egregious contacts, this ultimately let’s the teams decide the outcome. That’s what we want!

[CLICK] Another concept comes from the coaching ranks – they want to game called in favor of the more skilled team. In other words, if one team has a very strong setter but the opponent’s setter is less experienced and doesn’t handle the ball as cleanly, the coaches expect that the lesser skilled setter will be called for more ball handling faults. Be careful with this philosophy! A stronger, more skilled team is statistically likely to win the match regardless of the calls you do or don’t make. We can “take a team out of the game” if our calls are too strict on a lesser skilled player.

Now let’s discuss the rules related to ball handling decisions… [CLICK]
When it comes to calling the game, the rules are your best friend!

[CLICK] Most of the ball handling rules are located in NFHS Rule 9-4.

Legal contact is a touch of the ball by any part of a player's body which:
[CLICK] does not allow the ball to visibly come to rest.
[CLICK] does not involve prolonged contact with a player's body.
[CLICK] In essence, this requires a noticeable “stop” of the ball while in contact with the player. Other terms are sometimes used to describe this include: caught and/or thrown. Make them part of your volleyball lingo!

[CLICK] A first team hit can legally be a multiple or double contact, hitting various parts of the body during one attempt the play the ball. But, a double contact on a team’s second or third team hit is illegal. A caught/thrown is always illegal, regardless of which contact it is.

[CLICK] Successive contacts occur when a player makes two (or more) separate attempts to play the ball without an intervening contact by a teammate or opponent.

Let’s look at a few key points to help you prepare to implement the philosophies, concepts and rules we’ve just discussed… [CLICK]
Preparing for those ball handling decisions you'll have to make during a match starts with knowing the RULES, which we've just highlighted. You can never study too much.

Once you're courtside, observe warm-ups. Identify setters and watch their techniques/styles. Watch the players as they do ball handling drills so that you become familiar with their skills levels. This gets you mentally ready for the match.

Make time to watch other referees. Watch what they call/don't call. Observe the reactions of the players and coaches. Keep in mind that coaches will always question ball handling decisions, so you must discern whether or not their concern is valid. And remember, spectators are biased! Their “job” is to react to plays or referees’ calls/no-calls and to support their team, so be careful about allowing these outside influences to impact your decisions.

Most importantly, get some time on the court. Practice! The more times you’re on the stand, the better you will become. It may not be a bad idea to work as the second referee on your first few matches so that you get a feel for things. And plan to attend scrimmages where you can get some real-life experience without the added pressure of conference play, cross-town rivalries, or season-ending consequences on your shoulders.

The next part of preparation is breaking down the basic playing actions and knowing what to look for when it comes to ball handling.
As coaches say, “it starts with a pass.”

[CLICK] A forearm pass is often used on a team’s first hit. During the forearm pass, sometimes called a “bump,” players hold their arms together, forearms facing upward, to form a platform to pass the ball. Ideally they want the ball to contact their “platform” between the elbow and wrist, but that doesn’t always happen…

[CLICK] Sometimes a player may run too far under the ball and the ball will contact them high on the arm in the bicep area. It may rebound slowly or may even make a “thud,” but that doesn’t make it illegal.

[CLICK] During a forearm pass, the ball may spin forward or backward. This is fairly common, so don’t’ be concerned with the spin.

[CLICK] When the player isn’t able to control the ball with a forearm pass, the ball may contact the player multiple times (i.e., rebounding from forearms then to the shoulder), or may roll up the player’s arms. In most situations, that play should not be considered a fault if it occurs on the first contact where multiple contacts are permitted. However, it is a fault on a second or third contact where multiple contacts are illegal. A ball that quickly rolls up the arms and doesn’t visibly come to rest is generally not considered prolonged contact or caught/thrown.

Let’s move on to the team’s second hit – usually a “set”… [CLICK]
Ball handling rules are a little tighter on a team’s second contact than they are on a first team contact.

[CLICK] The second hit is usually a “setting action” (an overhand finger pass) and cannot be caught/thrown, carried or lifted. As an example, when the setter’s intended hitter is late getting into position for the attack, the setter may be slow in releasing the ball, and a catch/throw or held ball may result. [CLICK] During a team’s second (or third) team hit multiple or double contacts are illegal.

[CLICK] One-handed sets are fairly common, especially at higher levels of play. The setter is often attempting to save a pass tight to the net, or it may be a "broken" play that catches the setter slightly out of position. The ball may spin after the contact, but don’t be concerned with this; however, a catch/throw may result, especially if the player is trying to prevent the ball from crossing the net.

[CLICK] Overhand “setting” action is a controlled technique often resulting in a more accurate pass. In today’s sport, coaches teach their players to “use their hands” during the team’s first contact since it can result in a better pass to the setter. [CLICK] As with any team hit, the ball cannot be caught/thrown during this action. [CLICK] However, a multiple or double contact using an overhand pass during the team’s first hit is LEGAL. [CLICK] Spin is not an issue, and the ball may quickly roll off the finger tips.

Now we'll look at attack hits… [CLICK]
A team ideally wants their third contact to be an attack, or “spike.” While many attacks involve a strong arm swing – hitting the ball hard toward the opponent’s court – sometimes a feint attack or “tip” is also used. It is legal for a player to use the fingertips to attack the ball, but the ball must be played without being caught or thrown.

[CLICK] Most importantly, you cannot assume that a player is going to make a hard swing at the ball. This often results in a referee leaving the contact before it actually occurs in anticipation of needing to look for a touch by the blocker(s). As a result, if the player changes her mind and decides to tip the ball across the net, you need to be prepared to judge that contact. So, SEE each and every team contact! If you miss a contact, you can’t judge its legality!

[CLICK] When a tight pass or set leaves a hitter with few options for getting the ball across the net, she may decide to forcefully “tip” the ball – a “power tip.” Be careful that the ball isn’t thrown during this action. Front-row setters often use the “power tip” to surprise the opponent.

[CLICK] To judge a tip or attack, it is common to use “the width of the ball” as a guideline for determining the duration of contact. When the player has contact with the ball for a distance greater than the ball’s width, prolonged contact may occur.

[CLICK] Also watch for the player to change the direction or path of the ball, especially during a tip. For example, a player starts to tip the ball and realizes the opposing blocker is in position to block that tip. So, the player tries to tip around the blocker by change the direction she had originally intended to use.

[CLICK] Timing their jump is a skill players practice to ensure they are contacting the ball at the highest point for the attack. Sometimes they mistime their jump, resulting in the attacker jumping too soon. The ball will be a little too high for the player to reach fully, so the resulting contact will be an “ugly” hit. Apply the same standards for a caught/thrown ball – and “ugly is not illegal,” so don’t penalize a player for poor technique.

We’ve covered first, second and third team contacts. So now let’s look at blocking [CLICK]
Blocking is an action by a player(s) close to the net who is attempting to deflect a ball coming from the opponent. We emphasize that the ball must be coming from the opponent because we sometimes see a player use a “blocking action” to play a ball that has been passed by her teammate. Since a player can’t block a ball coming from her teammate, you must be careful that you don’t allow a double hit during this action, which would be LEGAL during an actual block but is illegal during a team's second or third contact.

In addition, it is the PLAYER who must be reaching higher than the top of the net to be considered a blocker, regardless of the height of the ball in relation to the top of the net. Careful attention must be paid to the “reach” of the player. If she is not reaching higher than the top of the net but is still attempting to deflect the ball coming from the opponent (sometimes called a “soft block”), it will be her team’s FIRST hit, not a block, when she touches the ball.

During blocking action, a multiple or double contact is permitted. In addition, when a player blocks the ball but the ball remains on her side of the net, she may also make the next contact – her team’s first hit. This is why it is important to ensure the player is reaching higher than the top of the net during blocking action – because she can make her team’s first hit after a block. If she’s not reaching higher than the net but touches the ball – i.e., the team’s first hit – she CANNOT make the next contact. If she does, this would result in successive contacts – a fault (“two hits”).

As with any contact, the ball cannot be caught/thrown and there can be no prolonged contact.

Be alert to a “directional block,” during which the blocker often uses both hands to swipe or “push” the ball to the floor. It may look awkward, but this is a technique taught by coaches, so make sure you actually see the ball “stop” in the blocker’s hands before you judge this as a fault.

There are a few other plays we should address too…. [CLICK]
It’s natural for referees to want more structure from the rules to make these decisions. Certain plays or situations might create a higher likelihood of illegal contact. However, referees must be careful to not make assumptions about plays based on factors that are not part of the rules.

[CLICK] When a player has to react quickly to a ball coming toward her, we often see some interesting and unusual things! We shouldn’t assume they’re going to be illegal, but we need to be ready and focused to judge these contacts with the same standards we’ve established for the more common plays.

[CLICK] Pancake – A player lays her hand on the floor beneath the ball to try to prevent it from hitting the court. This seldom results in an illegal hit.

[CLICK] Dump – A setter may try to deceive the opponent by setting – or dumping – the ball across the net. You may be focused ahead of the ball anticipating one of her hitters is going to swing, and then – Bang! She sends the ball across the net instead. A double hit may result.

[CLICK] Joust – When the ball becomes trapped between opponents, usually a setter or hitter and the opposing blocker(s), the ball may momentarily come to rest as they “joust.” This is LEGAL.

[CLICK] Underhand hit – A held ball could result when a player is trying to play a ball that is very close to the floor by getting underneath the ball to prevent it from hitting the playing surface. A player may use a single, open hand in an attempt to keep the ball in play, which may result in a “catch.” It is generally LEGAL for a contact under the ball with an open hand provided the ball rebounds off the open hand.

[CLICK] Plays out of the net – This play often results in referees automatically making a call when the ball was actually played legally. As long as the ball rebounds off the player, the referee should allow play to continue and not make a call based on the player's body position or technique. A ball falling down the front of the net often rebounds slowly from a player’s arm(s) or hand(s) because it isn’t carrying much momentum. A slow rebound shouldn’t be confused with a catch/throw.

[CLICK] Simultaneous contact by teammates may look “ugly,” but especially with a forearm pass, it can often be LEGAL. And remember, when simultaneous contact occurs between teammates, it is counted as ONE team hit and either player may make the next contact.

Let’s shift gears to the referees now… [CLICK]
Making ball handling calls is a first referee’s responsibility, but what about the second referee?

[CLICK] The second referee can provide assistance to the first referee by discreetly signaling when the R2 feels the R1 may not have been able to see the contact.

[CLICK] It’s important that the R2 NOT give an opinion on calls – i.e., “I would have called that” – especially when the R1 could clearly see the play. Limit assistance to contacts that you are CERTAIN the R1 couldn’t see. For example, the player’s back was turned toward the R1, or there were numerous players who may have blocked the R1’s view.

[CLICK] Remember, the second referee can NEVER whistle a ball handling fault. This can result in confusion for the teams and for the officiating crew itself. Instead, have a post-match discussion to talk about calls/no-calls.

[CLICK] During play when the R2 needs to give assistance because the R1 was screened from seeing a play, simply hold two fingers or the “illegal hit” signal in your chest area.

[CLICK] Make sure you are visible (not behind the net post), and hold the signal long enough for it to be seen. If the R1 doesn’t look for the help or doesn’t see you, drop the signal and refocus on the rally.

[CLICK] The most important thing a second referee can do is BE SUPPORTIVE of the first referee! You don’t have to agree with every call, but you are on the same team and once the whistle blows, you BOTH own the call. Save any critique for feedback for post-match. During the match, give a discreet thumbs-up after a good call/no-call, or a quick wink or head-nod as positive acknowledgement.

Now that you have a general ball handling foundation, let’s set some GOALS… [CLICK]
The biggest goal for any referee needs to be ball handling CONSISTENCY! And it’s a multi-faceted goal since it covers a wide spectrum:

- It starts with being consistent from match to match. That’s a “big picture” goal and requires experience. You want your strike zone to be predictable. When you officiate a team the first week of September, they will expect the same kind of officiating when they see you again later in the season.

- We can break it down even further – consistency from set to set within a match. Nothing will frustrate a team more than not being consistent with your calls from one set to the next in the same match. They will adjust to your strike zone as long as you don’t throw them curveballs!

- And within a match, it is important to be consistent from team to team. In other words, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. As coaches often say, “call it both ways.” Set your standard and apply it to both teams.

- Within each team, be consistent from player to player. Recognize skill levels – blockers may not be as good as setting but don’t hold them to a tighter standard than the setters are held to.

- Perhaps the most detailed goal in this list is being consistent from skill to skill. For example, if you are really tight calling a catch/throw, you can’t be really loose when calling double hits. Or if you call double hits really tight – not missing any! – don’t allow the players to throw the ball during a tip. You ultimately want a consistent, predictable strike zone.

- Automatic calls are those calls that we are “expected” to make because the play was awkward or ugly. We need to hold our whistle and only call a fault when we are 100% certain one has occurred.

- Outside factors – aside from spin, awkward techniques or body positions, sound, or a slow rebound, there are other factors that may try to influence your decisions: spectator/coach/player reactions! Remember, THEY are biased – you are NOT! Try to minimize these influences by blocking them out.

- Lastly, make it a goal to NOT surprise the teams with a random or ill-timed call. If you’ve managed to “stay out of the way” for most of the match, don’t become a bigger part of the match late in the deciding set!

So in summary…
Determining ballhandling legality is a skill all referees must learn. Regardless of a referee’s experience, it is an area that everyone can improve upon with practice.

[CLICK] Strive for consistency.

[CLICK] Stay current with playing trends and techniques.

[CLICK] Anticipate unusual plays and give the benefit of the doubt unless you are 100% certain a fault has occurred.

[CLICK] Observe other referees and discuss their calls/no-calls.

[CLICK] And seek feedback from partners and fellow referees to help identify areas you can improve.

Good luck!