

Pickleball Penalty Cheat Sheet: Faults That Cost You Points

Have you ever lost a tight match and realized your opponents did not actually outplay you? Often, players lose not because of a lack of skill, but because of avoidable mistakes that simply hand points to the other side of the net.

Understanding official rules is one of the fastest ways to improve your performance. When you know exactly what is allowed on the court, you stop second-guessing your movements and start playing with confidence. At Voxl Pickleball, we know that refining your mechanics and eliminating unforced errors is the key to consistent growth. If you are struggling with control and want to upgrade your gear, you can browse our collection to find your perfect paddle.

This guide serves as a practical cheat sheet. We will walk through the most common penalties players face, explain why they happen, and show you exactly how to fix them.

What Is a Fault in Pickleball and Why It Matters

In simple terms, a fault is any rule violation that stops play. The moment a fault occurs, the ball becomes dead.

The outcome of a fault depends entirely on who is serving and what scoring format you are using:

- **Loss of rally (point):** If your opponent is serving and you commit a fault, they win the point.
- **Loss of serve:** If your team is serving in traditional side-out scoring and you commit a fault, you lose your turn to serve.
- **Point awarded:** In newer rally scoring formats, a point is awarded to the opposing team regardless of who served.

Minimizing these violations directly translates to faster skill improvement. Every fault you eliminate is another opportunity to keep the rally alive and pressure your opponents.

7 Pickleball Faults That Give Away Free Points

Serving Faults

The serve is the only shot in pickleball that you have complete control over. Yet, it is a massive source of errors, particularly for beginners. According to USA Pickleball rules, a traditional volley serve must meet specific criteria.

Common serving faults include making contact with the ball above your waist or having the highest point of the paddle head above your wrist when you strike the ball. You also cannot use an overhand or sidearm motion. Foot faults are another major issue. At the moment you hit the ball, at least one foot must be on the ground behind the baseline, and neither foot can touch the court inside the lines. Serving to the wrong diagonal service box or failing to call the entire score before serving will also result in a fault.

Most of these serve errors come from form breaking down under pressure. To fix this, build a consistent pre-serve routine. Take a deep breath, verify your foot placement, call the score loudly, and focus on a smooth, upward pendulum motion.

Kitchen (Non-Volley Zone) Violations

The Non-Volley Zone, affectionately known as the kitchen, is a 7-foot area on both sides of the net. You can stand in the kitchen anytime, but you absolutely cannot hit a volley (hitting the ball out of the air before it bounces) while any part of your body is in this zone.

Kitchen faults include volleying while standing inside the zone or letting your foot touch the kitchen line during a volley. The most misunderstood rule involves momentum. If your momentum carries you into the kitchen after hitting a legal volley outside the zone, it is still a fault. This applies even if the ball is already dead or has bounced twice on your opponent's side. Dropping an item like a hat or a pair of sunglasses into the kitchen during a volley is also a violation.

Balance and control are your best defenses here. Practice hitting volleys with a wide, stable stance, and avoid running aggressively forward while swinging.

Double Bounce Rule Mistakes

The double bounce rule is a unique quirk of pickleball that trips up almost every new player. The rule dictates that the ball must bounce once on the receiving side after the serve, and it must bounce once on the serving side after the return.

Beginners often have an instinct to rush the net immediately after serving. When the receiving team returns the ball, the serving team catches it out of the air for a volley. Because the ball did not bounce on their side first, this is an automatic fault. There are no exceptions to this rule. The serving team must stay back near the baseline until the third shot of the rally is played.

Out-of-Bounds and Line Call Errors

Balls landing outside the designated court boundaries are an obvious fault. However, misjudging close line calls causes a lot of unnecessary lost points and court arguments.

In pickleball, any ball that touches any part of the line is considered "in." The only exception is the non-volley zone line on a serve, which is considered out. Players are responsible for calling the lines on their own side of the court. If you cannot clearly see space between the ball and the line, the ball is in. Giving your opponents the benefit of the doubt on close calls fosters good sportsmanship and keeps the game moving smoothly.

Net Faults That Instantly End the Rally

The net is a permanent hazard on the court, and interacting with it illegally will instantly end your rally. A fault occurs if the ball hits the net and fails to cross over to the opponent's side.

More importantly, it is a fault if you, your clothing, or your paddle touch the net system while the ball is live. You are also penalized for reaching over the plane of the net to hit the ball before it has crossed over to your side. You are legally allowed to reach over the net only during your follow-through, provided you do not touch the net itself.

Double Hits and Carrying the Ball

Paddle control can be tricky during fast exchanges at the kitchen line. Catching the ball on your paddle face or carrying it forward in a prolonged sweeping motion is an illegal carry and results in a fault.

Double hits are a point of confusion for many newer players. Hitting the ball twice with your paddle is actually legal, but only if it happens during a continuous, single-direction stroke. If you intentionally swing, hit the ball, stop, and swing again to save it, you have committed a fault. Emphasize clean, single-motion contact to avoid these ambiguous situations.

Positioning and Rotation Faults in Doubles

Keeping track of the score and positioning in doubles play requires constant mental focus. When a rally goes on for a long time, it is easy to forget where you belong.

Serving and Receiving Errors

You will be penalized if you serve out of turn or if you serve from the wrong service box based on your team's score. The correct receiver must also return the serve. If their partner steps in and hits the return, the receiving team commits a fault.

Partner Position Confusion

While the server and receiver have strict starting positions, their partners can technically stand anywhere on their side of the net. However, confusion often strikes when a team wins back the

serve and forgets which side they should be standing on. Getting into the habit of clearly communicating the score and your starting positions before every single point will eliminate these errors entirely.

Quick Pickleball Fault Cheat Sheet

If you need a quick summary to keep in your pickleball bag, remember these immediate fault triggers:

- Illegal serve mechanics or foot placement
- Volleying from the kitchen or falling into it
- Skipping the required double bounce
- Hitting the ball out of bounds
- Touching the net with your body or paddle
- Carrying the ball or making non-continuous double hits
- Serving or receiving from the wrong position

Why Players Keep Making the Same Pickleball Mistakes

If the rules are clearly defined, why do players continue to make these errors? Most unforced errors stem from rushing the point. Players get overly excited at the net and swing wildly, throwing off their balance and causing momentum faults.

Poor communication in doubles is another major culprit. When partners fail to talk to each other, they end up out of position or confused about line calls. Finally, bad habits formed during the early days of playing casually can be hard to break. Increasing your awareness of the official rules is usually enough to fix these issues quickly.

Play Smarter and Reduce Errors with the Right Paddle

Skill and rule knowledge are vital, but equipment quality plays a massive role in your overall consistency. A paddle that lacks a forgiving sweet spot or proper grip stabilization can cause balls to fly out of bounds or pop up too high.

Upgrading to a paddle that prioritizes control and feel allows you to execute precise drop shots and keep your volleys out of the net. Reliable gear gives you the confidence to focus entirely on your mechanics and court positioning, rather than fighting against your equipment.

Stop giving away easy points on the court. Contact us to discuss your equipment needs and let our team help you elevate your game today.

Related Questions

What is considered a fault in pickleball?

A fault is any rule violation that results in a dead ball and the end of the rally. Examples include hitting the ball out of bounds, stepping into the kitchen while volleying, or executing an illegal serve.

Do you lose a point on every fault in pickleball?

Not necessarily. In traditional side-out scoring, a fault by the serving team results in a loss of serve, not a point for the opponent. If the receiving team commits a fault, the serving team gets a point. In rally scoring, a point is awarded on every fault regardless of who served.

What are the most common pickleball mistakes beginners make?

Beginners frequently forget the double bounce rule, step into the non-volley zone while hitting the ball out of the air, and use illegal overhand serving motions.

Can you step into the kitchen after hitting the ball?

You can step into the kitchen after hitting a ball that has bounced. However, if you hit a volley (a ball out of the air), you cannot let your momentum carry you into the kitchen. Doing so is an automatic fault.

What happens if you serve illegally in pickleball?

An illegal serve is immediately called a fault. In standard side-out doubles, this means your team loses that specific serve (either moving to the second server or resulting in a side-out).