

DISPELLING THE MYTH: Three Seconds!

By Tony Haire

When James Naismith invented the game of basketball in 1893, he gave us his original 13 rules.

Conspicuously absent was one of today's basic principles, the three-second violation. The need for a three-second rule didn't arise until 1936, when roughness among post players first found its way into the game. But even now, more than 70 years later, myth and fact remain far apart for many fans.

The three-second rule was written to reduce roughness under the basket among the game's big men. But just a few years later, it became apparent that it also prevented an offensive player from gaining a large competitive advantage.

The rule states that an offensive player shall not remain in the free-throw lane for three consecutive seconds while his team has control of the ball in their frontcourt.

What many fans don't realize is there is no three-second count during a throw-in, there's no count when the ball is in the back court and the count ends once the ball has been shot.

A new three-second count would not begin unless the offensive team rebounded the ball and there was an offensive player in the paint. This is where many officials often hear the screams of "3 seconds!" from the fans. The ball is shot and the offensive team repeatedly rebounds the ball and shoots the ball, all the while with several offensive players in the lane. Each time the ball is shot, the count ends.

Another aspect of the rule is that a player who has been in the lane for fewer than three seconds is allowed to receive the ball and move in an attempt to score. During this allowance, the count is suspended. The rule is somewhat ambiguous with regard to what "moving to try for a score" entails.

It leaves the play open to the judgment of the official. But the rule is clear that the player must attempt to score. For example, a player in the lane under the allowance who has been in the lane in excess of 3 seconds should be immediately called for a violation if he were to pass the ball to a teammate, because he did not attempt a shot.

When is a player in the lane? If any part of either foot is in the lane or on lane lines, the player is in the paint. Most officials are not going to call a violation if a player has a toe on the line. But by rule, the player is in the lane.

The most common thing a player will do is have one foot in the lane and one foot out. The player will lift the foot in the lane so that neither foot is touching the paint. Unfortunately for the player, the rules address this - and it's still a violation.

Although I haven't seen it in years, at one time it was not uncommon for a player to step out of bounds in an attempt to avoid a violation. But the rules were also changed to address this tactic as well.

Finally, the most recent change to the rule addressed the three-second violation while there was no player control. Prior to the 2003-2004 season, there was no count when an offensive player had fumbled or lost the ball. For example, player A is dribbling the ball in his frontcourt when it's knocked away by a defender. In this situation, if there was a 3 second count, the count terminated immediately. If a Team A player regained possession of the ball, a new count would begin on any player in the lane. But in 2003, this exception was eliminated. The count now continues in such a loose ball situation.

The game of basketball grows and changes every year. We will continue to see rules changes, but hopefully this helps clarify the three-second rule.