



## Memorandum

To: State Referee Administrators  
State Directors of Referee Instruction  
State Directors of Referee Assessment  
Chair, State Referee Committee  
National Referees  
National Instructors and Assessors

From: Alfred Kleinaitis  
Manager of Referee Development and Education

**Re: Use of the Elbow**

Date: August 31, 2005

The International Football Association Board (IFAB) has urged referees to be more aware of and to deal properly with the use of the elbow during challenges. Increasingly, the Board has noted, elbows are being used to gain an unfair advantage and, often, to injure opponents.

USSF shares this concern and notes a growing number of such incidents in professional matches:

- [Clip 1](#) (KC Wizards - Columbus Crew, 7/23/2005), #3 Garcia cynically and with excessive force targets #29 Cameron's head. A red card was clearly warranted.
- [Clip 2](#) (NY MetroStars - Columbus Crew, 5/31/2003), Wolyniec retaliates against #5 McCarty for an earlier foul and uses excessive force to the opponent's head. Another definite red card.
- [Clip 3](#) (FC Dallas - NE Revolution, 7/16/2005), #22 Leonard is closely behind #9 Mina and Mina uses his elbow or upper arm to strike backwards. The action was reckless but not performed with excessive force (the arm was moving naturally as both players were at a full run). A caution was warranted.
- [Clip 4](#) (Chicago Fire - LA Galaxy, 8/13/2005), #29 Thiago is closely marked (considerable contact and some holding) by #8 Vagenas and Thiago, in recklessly swinging his arm backward to ward off further contact, strikes Vagenas in the face. A caution was appropriate.
- [Clip 5](#) (NY Metrostars - CD Chivas USA, 8/20/2005), #11 Ibrahim jumps up to challenge and, while doing so, rakes a straight arm along the face of #7 Ramirez. While arguably a foul, it does not appear to have involved misconduct (contact with the elbow was incidental to contact with the entire arm).

- [Clip 6](#) (NE Revolution – Colorado Rapids, 8/17/2005), #2 Dempsey is jumping up to challenge, leads with an arm extended and bent, and connects with #3 Kotschau. The decision as to whether such foul is seen as reckless or committed with excessive force depends, of course, on the referee's angle and information he may receive from his assistants and fourth official. In all cases the safety of players must be a primary concern and the inherent danger of blows to the head recognized.

Taking these and other clips together, certain generalizations are possible regarding criteria on which officials should focus when evaluating situations involving the use of an elbow (the guidelines below assume that the action occurs during play, on the field, and against an opponent):

- When an elbow is used, the potential offense is **striking** and therefore the action must be assessed in the context of Law 12 (careless, reckless, or excessive force).
- Any form of striking, including the use of an elbow, also carries the high likelihood of being misconduct – if the action is reckless, the player must be cautioned for unsporting behavior but, if excessive force is used, the player must be sent off and shown a red card for violent conduct or, if competing for the ball, serious foul play.
- Given the impact and likelihood of injury, a player who appears to be targeting the head (based, for example, on the direction of the player's view) must be dealt with firmly and promptly.
- Jumping toward an opponent with the arm bent and held above shoulder level must be considered particularly serious since the force is increased by the weight and momentum of the body. If contact is made with the elbow or forearm, the foul must be called and the offending player's misconduct dealt with accordingly. In such cases, the referee should **not** consider applying advantage except under the most unusual circumstances.
- Although it is possible for a player to contact an opponent with an elbow or forearm entirely accidentally, this is rare and referees must be prepared to suspect that a foul has occurred unless concretely convinced otherwise. Instances where the offending player is looking at the opponent or where the opportunity to avoid contact was ignored should draw the referee's attention and concern. The natural movement and placement of an arm while running should be taken into account in deciding if contact is reckless or merely careless.
- The angle of view is critical and referees must expend an extra effort to achieve a position to see the event clearly when their reading of the play and the players suggests that elbow or forearm contact is possible. Where a poor angle is suspected, the referee must quickly determine if an assistant referee can provide relevant information before making the decision.