

Ball Runner Information Sheet – All you ever needed to know!

A lot of runners in the past said that they really used the “cheat sheet” we put together prior to the last FineMark event with runners, so here we have it again, updated. Use it if it helps you!

What do I do on the day of my shift?

Show up 30 minutes before your scheduled time and check in at the ball runner desk (we will let you know where that will be at the training sessions). There will be always at least one of five coordinators at the desk—Adam Lane, Joe Hahn, Juliana Hahn, Lee O’Daniel, or Denise Spears. Let us know you are present, and then please stay in the ball runner area. The daily schedule will be taped to the desk, as well, but remember, the final assignments (your court, and your position) will be given out by Mr. Lane 15 minutes before your shift. A “shift captain” will be assigned to your team, who will lead your team from the ball runner area to the court.

When and how do we enter the court?

The new ball runner team will enter at the first changeover after the top of the hour. Note that the change of ends after the first game of the set is not a changeover. At a true changeover, when the players sit down, the shift captain will notify the chair umpire that the new runner shift is starting, the umpire will acknowledge, and then the new runner team will take their positions by circling the court in a clockwise fashion. The exiting runner team will leave the court ahead of them in a clockwise fashion as well. Remember to run AROUND the court...don’t cross the court.

Where will the balls be when we enter the court?

The balls will already be on the correct end of the court...the exiting ball runner team will ensure that all four balls are there. The exiting corner runners will leave the balls at their post for the new corner runners to pick up.

What are the three ball runner positions?

There are net runners (2), near corner runners (those closest to the chair umpire) (2), and far corner runners (2). Each role has a few distinct responsibilities. Overall, though, all 6 runners operate as a team to accomplish several common goals: to have balls available for the pros when they are ready to serve, to clear the court of stray balls as quickly as possible, to shield the players from the sun using umbrellas during the changeovers, to do any task as requested by the chair umpire, and, finally, to do all of this without interfering with play or even with the flow of play. The highest compliment is to do the job and not be noticed!

Who clears a missed first serve?

The nearest runner. Time is most critical, by the way, between the first and second serve, because the pros have a routine here that is very important. We want to be swift at all times—but especially between the first and second serve.

If the first serve is into the net, then the net runner working that side of the net runs out to get the ball and holds onto it. **Important: there is NO ball movement between the first and second serve. Whoever picks up the missed first serve holds the ball until the point that begins with the second serve is over.** In this case, once the net runner picks up the ball, they will run to the nearest ball runner post. That could be back to where they were, at the net. That could be at the net on the other side of the court. That could be the near or far corner if the ball rolls in that direction. Use your judgment.

A missed serve “long” or “wide” will usually be the responsibility of the corner runners. The nearest corner runner picks it up, and again, moves swiftly to the nearest ball runner post. Usually, this will be their corner. However, balls take funny bounces, and if the ball begins to roll away from you to the net, don’t stop and wait for the net runner to pick it up. Stay with it, and then continue to the net position, side by side with the net runner. At the same time, if the ball rebounds towards the net and after you begin to run to it, it’s clear the net person is going to beat you to it, it’s ok, just turn and run back to your corner position.

If the missed serve “long” goes between the corner runners, you should both move to the ball, and the first one to get it does so. Again, once you pick it up, move to the nearest position. It’s possible two runners will temporarily be in the same location.

What if the ball leaves the court?

If a missed serve leaves the court entirely—if ANY ball leaves the court entirely, at any time—don’t leave the court to retrieve it. Hopefully, a spectator will retrieve it and get it back to the nearest runner at the end of a point or game. If not, retrieve it at the changeover or if the umpire instructs you to do so. One exception here is that there are pros who, when serving, will specifically request a certain ball. If they do, the umpire will instruct the ball runners to retrieve the ball, if possible. Follow the umpire’s direction. **Remember: the pros usually won’t talk to the ball runners, and the ball runners must never initiate conversation with the pros.** If a pro speaks to you, or asks you a question, or makes a request, you may respond. But when they’re done, you’re done—and in my experience, it has never happened on court to me.

The point is over...now what?

At the end of the point, the runner team must get all four balls back to the corner runners at the server’s end rapidly. That could mean zero balls have to move...we started with four balls on the server’s end, the point was a first serve in followed by a return long, so all four balls are on the right end of the court. But it could be one ball (point ended with a winner on the other end, e.g.), two balls (first serve long, second serve ended with a winner on the other end), THREE balls (previous scenario with a let serve as well), or all four (multiple lets). Key here is that when the point ends, all the balls on the returner’s side must get moved to the server’s end—quickly.

Why quickly?

The time limit between points is twenty seconds, and the pros have a routine based on an internal clock. After the point ends, they’ll gather themselves for a few seconds, maybe towel off, and then begin looking to the corner runners for the balls. Figure, then, that we’ll need all four balls in place within 5 seconds.

But we already have two balls down the already...isn't that enough?

With some pros, it might be. With most pros, no. The pros will usually want to inspect multiple balls before they choose the ones they want for their first and second serve. They won't like it if they only have two to choose from.

What's the procedure for getting the balls from one end of the court to the other?

Let's start with the corner runners who need the balls (those on the server's end). If a corner runner sees that the far corner runner or net runner on their side of the court has a ball, they should prepare to make eye contact with the net runner as soon as the point ends. If they already have two balls, job one is to roll a ball to their corner teammate—try to have two balls at all times, not less and not more. Then, now that you're down to the one ball, let the net runner know by your attentive posture that you're ready for the ball currently on its way.

The net runner is the relay station. She/he sees that the corner runner on their side of the court, on the returner's end, has a ball. So, when the point ends, they immediately make eye contact with the corner runner to let that person know they are ready. Now, the corner runner rolls the ball to the net person, who immediately turns, and relay rolls it to the server's corner runner. If the net runner has the ball at point's end, it's the same process, just without the far corner runner's participation.

Let's say a far corner runner has two balls to move. The process is this: the corner runner rolls ball one to the net runner, and when the ball is halfway to the net runner, rolls ball two. The net runner collects ball one, turns and rolls it to the server's end, and then immediately turns to collect ball two, after which it too is rolled to the server's end. Do not wait for the first ball to get to its destination before rolling the second. Again, speed counts.

What if there is no net runner on my side of the court?

There will be. Net runners must not be on the same side of the court when the point ends. Even if there is no ball movement necessary, a net runner must cross to the other side of the court at the end of the point to ensure that we have the relay person in place. As you see already, net players do a lot!

What do I do if I can't get my ball runner teammate's attention?

This will happen occasionally. As much as we all try to pay attention to what we're doing, minds wander once in a while. When this happens, don't yell the person's name...it's distracting to the pro. Better: physically move toward your teammate, give them a short series of hand claps (with a smile!) and that should do the trick.

What if the ball is rolled poorly?

This will happen too. Last time, we had balls rolled into the linesperson's boxes, out of the court, into the net, you name it. If it happens, don't freeze. Treat it as a stray ball,

nearest runner grabs it, continue. That said, practice this, please. Accuracy counts as much as speed because accuracy equals speed. Practice rolling the ball in the alley from baseline to net, without it bouncing or veering off course. This is a key skill for this job.

The game is over...now what?

It depends. If the game is over, and the players don't change ends, then the balls must be rolled to the opposite corner runners. It is helpful to remember: if the players don't move, the balls do. If the players move, the balls stay. Players will move after odd numbered games (1, 3, 5, 7 etc). Players will stay after even numbered games.

The set is over...now what?

The players will sit down for up to two minutes. If the set ended on an even game, the balls will move. If the set ended on an odd game, the balls will stay.

What if there is a set tie-break?

Nothing challenges the runner team quite like the set tie-break, the sprint to 7 points, win by two. It begins with one player serving one point. After this one point, the balls move, and the opponent serves two points, after which the balls move again. After six points, the players will switch ends, and the balls will move. After seven points, the balls move again! I know it sounds complicated, but fear not. There is usually at least one runner who will know exactly where the balls need to be, and the umpire will help as well.

The umpire called for a ball change...what does that mean?

The four balls given to the players for warm up are new balls. During warm up, runners help retrieve balls for the players. Those same balls are used for the first 7 games of the match. After those 7 games, the umpire will call for a ball change. At that point, balls will be rolled to the net runners, who will take the old balls to the umpire, who will exchange them for new balls. The net runners will then run the balls to the corner runners for the start of the next game.

After the ball change after 7 games, the balls will change every 9 games.

The match is over...now what?

Stay in position until the players leave the court. Then exit in the clockwise fashion described earlier. Put the balls in the cans provided at the umpire's stand. If this is the last match of the day on your court, you are done for the day. If there is another match

to follow, and it is in your shift window, stay together as a team, near the court, and be prepared to re-enter the court with the officials for the warmup period. Maintain the same runner positions for the duration of your shift.

So what are the specifics of a corner runner's duties?

All corner runners have identical duties EXCEPT that the near corner runners nearest the umpire have the additional duty of sheltering the players from the sun during changeovers using the umbrellas which will be located near their chairs. For this, wait until the player sits, then move to the area, open the umbrella, and shield her for the sun. When the umpire calls "time", put the umbrella away, and return to the corner post. The far corner runners, during breaks, merely stand in place during the changeover.

Beyond that, the corner runner's job is to collect errant balls, and get them to the net runner if they are on the non-server's side, and to present them to the server if they are on the server's side. The presentation occurs immediately after the point ends, with the corner runner extending her/his arms to display the balls or to display that she/he has none. Upon seeing none, the server will look to the other corner runner. Upon seeing balls, the server will nod, at which point the corner runner gets ONE ball to the server on ONE bounce that should end up waist level. Continue to display balls, if the server nods again, provide another ball. If they nod again, a third. If the first corner runner is out of balls, the server may turn to the other corner runner, who should have balls by now, and ask for a third to examine. Eventually, the server will bunt one or two balls back to a corner runner. The corner runners will ultimately learn the server's routine. Do they only have one ball at a time (like Serena), or do they carry two (like most players)? Do what the server wants.

When the corner runner gathers a ball and holds it, put it behind the back during the point so the sight of a ball in hand doesn't distract the player. If the corner runner fails to do this, the umpire will make it a point to correct this.

When a ball is being gathered or rolls to the corner runner, do NOT stop it with your feet. Squat down, pick it up with your hands.

Remember too that if you are a corner runner and have 3 or 4 balls, transfer a ball or two to the other runner expediently to keep each corner runner on the server's end with two balls.

Finally, be very careful not to anticipate that a point is over. These are pro athletes and their ability to get to a ball is remarkable. Wait until the ball bounces twice and then...and only then...go get it. Until that time, remain stock still. This includes a ball in

play that is coming towards you. Don't run out of the way, put your hands out, etc. The player views you as a solid, stable part of the court, and will avoid hitting you. If you move, you throw them off, so don't. The exception is a judgment call...if there is a hard driven shot heading right for you that in your judgment will not be touched by the player, move slightly and let the ball hit the back fence. Don't try to catch it—you'll only risk your hands and fingers!

What are the specifics of the net runner's duties?

First, net runners needn't kneel. One net runner stands to the immediate left or right of the umpire's stand. The umpire will advise if he/she wants the net runner to stand closer or farther away—all umpires a bit different. The other net runner stands on the opposite side of the court, on the opposite side of the net, outside the doubles alley. Again, remain stock still during the point.

If a serve is netted, the net runner on that side of the court runs to retrieve it, and then runs to the nearest post. If the net runner is crossing the court, the opposite net runner may cross quickly to "balance the court". Again, hold the ball...no ball movement between serves! After the point ends, the net runners roll the ball to the corner runner on the server's end, on the same side of the court. Balls are rolled "down the alley", never cross court. Net runners keep mental track of where all the balls are, so that, at point end, they know which corner runners have balls that need to be relayed to the other end of the court. They also move quickly to relay balls when even numbered games end.

At changeovers, and set breaks, both net runners move to the net post nearest the umpire and face him/her. If the umpire has a special request, he/she will ask one of the net runners to fulfill it (get water, get a towel, etc).

I think I have all of this. Now, can you tell me what to wear?

Easy. The shirt and hat will be provided to you. If you forget to bring it, see Mr. Lane, Mr. Hahn, Ms. Hahn, Ms. Spears, or Ms. O'Daniel and we'll try to get an extra for you. Return it when your shift is over. Wear tennis shoes of your choice, and socks, and shorts. Khaki shorts are preferred, but any plain shorts will work fine. You may wear sunglasses but refrain from other jewelry that may reflect the sun.

What do I do during break?

During your break between shifts, we recommend you cool down. Find some shade, wash your face and hands, drink plenty of fluids. If it is time for you to eat, get a meal

ticket from Mr. Lane. Take a restroom break. Report back to the runner area at least 15 minutes before your next shift. Don't go back to the court you were on previously. You may be assigned to the same court again, or you may not be. You may be assigned the same court position, or you may not be. Almost certainly, the make up of your runner team will be different.

Anything special I need to do if I'm a shift captain?

Again, as shift captain, you let the umpire know, during a changeover, that the new ball runner team is ready to enter. Also, as shift captain, it is VERY important that from the time Mr. Lane gives the court assignment, you keep your team together. Don't let people wander off. If someone does, do not replace the previous runner team until your full team is again together. If you are on court, and your shift is over, but the new runner team is not ready, keep working the match until the new team is ready.

OK. Now...do I have to handle the players' towels??

Good news! You don't! The towels are the players responsibility. Don't touch them. The players will be instructed of this.

Finally...on safety.

Very likely, it will be hot. Remember to hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. If you are feeling faint, don't be a hero. Notify the shift captain, or the umpire, when you begin feeling poorly, that you are not in a good way. The match is not worth your health, and the pros will understand. Leave the court with one of your runner mates, and get the help you need. We will find replacement runners—don't worry about that.

Same thing if you happen to injure yourself...twist an ankle, you name it. Don't be a hero. Notify the team and get the help you need.

Wear sunscreen. The sun is intense, so protect your skin...arms, nose, ears.

Finally, if you work a night shift, it may actually get quite chilly. Remember a jacket between shifts.