

Boxing Handwraps: Practical Guidance for Referees

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This guide is not intended to teach anyone how to wrap hands. Experienced Seconds Team Members develop wrapping methods through years of practical work. If I personally had to wrap a boxer's hands for competition, both corners would probably become very nervous. The purpose here is different.

This guide also does not attempt to fully define legal and illegal handwrapping. That is a separate and more detailed discussion. The focus here is what referees should understand, observe, and address when handwraps are presented for inspection.

Many commissions and boxing authorities have experienced inspectors, clear rules, and proper corner observation. However, that is not always the case. In some events, there may be no assigned inspector. Opposing corners may not observe each other's handwraps. International events may also involve boxers and teams from several countries with different wrapping customs and expectations.

Because of these realities, the referee may become the primary or final official responsible for observing completed handwraps before gloves are applied. That makes basic handwrap knowledge important for referees, even if they do not personally wrap hands.

Handwraps serve an important purpose in professional boxing. They help support the hand and wrist during repeated impact. This includes the bones, joints, thumb, wrist, and soft tissue. Proper handwraps help the boxer form a stable fist and reduce the risk of fractures or ligament injuries.

Handwraps are not simply padding. They also help keep the hand aligned and stable. Proper wraps provide support without creating an unfair striking surface.

At the same time, handwraps can be misused. A wrap intended to protect the boxer's hand can become improper if it creates a hard, rigid, or cast-like surface. The concern is not only the safety of the boxer being hit. It is also the safety of the boxer throwing punches. The proper balance is hand protection without dangerous reinforcement.

Handwrap rules vary between jurisdictions. Rules may differ on the amount of gauze and tape allowed, tape placement, knuckle padding, tape between the fingers, and wrapping methods. Referees must know and apply the rules of the boxing authority supervising the event.

A wrapping style that appears unfamiliar is not automatically illegal. Experienced trainers may use different methods for legitimate reasons. The referee should not redesign the wrap, impose personal preference, or require identical wrapping styles. The responsibility is to determine whether the wrap complies with the rules and appears safe and fair.

The referee should look for:

- hard, rigid, or cast-like areas
- ridges, bulges, or uneven padding
- tape closer to the knuckles than permitted by the rules
- excessive tape, layering, or “stacking” in one area
- loose, exposed, or shifting material
- water, sweat, liquids, sprays, or other substances that may cause hardening
- anything that creates an unsafe striking surface

Visual inspection alone may not always detect improper construction. Some wraps may appear neat but become excessively hard when clenched. Other wraps may appear unusual but remain legal and compliant.

When permitted, the referee should have the boxer open and close the hand and make a natural fist. The referee should look at the knuckle area and may use light thumb pressure to feel for unusual hardness, ridges, or a cast-like surface. The referee should also check whether the wrap remains flexible, whether padding shifts, whether material is exposed, or whether tape appears closer to the knuckles than permitted by the rules.

Special attention should be given to the knuckle area. Legal padding should protect the boxer’s hand without creating a hardened striking surface. Layering methods that create excessive hardness or reinforcement should raise concern. Damp or treated wraps are also a serious concern because they may harden over time.

Ideally, both corners should be given the opportunity to observe the wrapping process. This promotes transparency and helps reduce disputes. If no inspector is assigned, the referee should encourage this process whenever permitted by the boxing authority.

Concerns should be addressed before gloves are applied. Once gloves are secured, corrections become more difficult and disputes become more likely.

After final approval, the wraps should be marked in a consistent manner by the referee. The marking should be placed in the same location each time using initials or another official identifier. A permanent marker should be used in a color that is clearly visible on the tape. If the tape is dark, the marker color should contrast with the tape. The mark should help show whether the wrap was later disturbed, altered, overwrapped, or rewrapped.

A mark placed across tape junctions or closure areas is generally more useful than a mark placed on one flat surface. The purpose of the marking is accountability and improved detection of later alteration.

Post-bout observation is also important. When practical, gloves should be removed under referee or designated official observation, and the wraps should remain visible. The referee should look for signs that the wraps were altered, loosened, reinforced, or changed from their approved condition. This is especially important when a complaint, injury, or unusual circumstance arises.

The final principle is simple. The objective is not to make every boxer's handwraps identical. The objective is to ensure that every boxer enters the ring with handwraps that are legal, safe, fair, properly inspected, and free from hardened or dangerous striking surfaces.