

Paddling Through Rough Waters!

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Anyone can pick up a whistle and referee, but not everyone can do it smoothly. Even the top officials have trouble sometimes but, not often. We call that Game Management.

Game management consists of dealing with issues that arise during a game and responding to them in an efficient and logical fashion. It does not mean that everyone will be happy with the solution but, whatever the course of action, it is taken in the best interest of the game.

Usually, the reason we find ourselves in a tough situation is a misapplication of one or more of the following principles:

- Rule knowledge
- Mechanics
- Preparation – Allows you to anticipate situations that may occur.
- Experience – Part of maturing and takes time. Make mistakes or learn from others'.

It is obvious that rule knowledge is fundamental to officiating. Trying to referee without knowing the rules is akin to doing surgery without knowing the anatomy of the body.

Mechanics help to put you in the best position to referee the game and allow you to communicate effectively. We can all agree that if we get every call correct on the court, we should have less management issues.

In order to referee a play correctly, think of the following: PLAD

- POSITION
- LOOK
- ANTICIPATION
- DECISION

You must first get into position, to have the look, to anticipate the play, to make the proper decision. If you lack one of the first 3, your accuracy will suffer! Let's look at two of the tougher situations we face in a game and see how our preparation and experience can help us through.

If I were to ask players and coaches for the toughest call, most would say Block/Charge. A recent poll survey in Referee Magazine found that 60% of readers chose the Block/ Charge as the #1 toughest call to make in basketball. Why? Because in that split second, emotion clashes with fact! Players & coaches react with a biased emotion while referees react on the facts of the play. If we know the rules of contact and we apply proper mechanics, this call is not really that difficult. However, during a game, there can be many factors that can complicate things. A moving defender, a secondary defender, traffic in the lane, etc. It's not going to be an exact science with only the benefit of the human eye. But, if we apply proper officiating principles, it can become much easier to call.

Arguably, the Technical Foul is the most emotional call in the game of basketball for everyone involved. The T, however, is like any other call. A rule is violated, the whistle blows and an infraction is called but, with more serious implications. Aside from identifying bad behavior and punishing it, the 2 points and possession can seriously hurt a team. So, how does an official determine when a technical foul should be called? Here are a few guidelines. Eventually, each official, with experience, will establish his/her own level of tolerance and work within the expectations of his/her supervisor.

1. Don't tolerate bad behavior. Taunting, language, threats, accusations and excessive gestures are automatic.
2. Differentiate between two types of emotions : players upset at themselves versus upset at the referee. On the court, players are wrapped up in the emotion & physical frenzy of the game. We have to be aware of that and take it into consideration.
3. Differentiate between genuine and non-genuine reactions : legitimate questions versus constant complaining. Complainers must be dealt with immediately.
4. Right or wrong : if I feel I may have ruled incorrectly and the coach has an emotional outburst, I will give him an opportunity to vent. But, he must remain professional and in control. If I am 100% correct, my tolerance level will be shorter.

One of the most challenging skills for any official is dealing with those stressful moments and then regaining his/her composure after making the call. Here are two Ps that can help :

Preparation and Prevention.

Preparation is critical and starts in the pre-game. If you have knowledge of the teams, key matchups, tendencies and history, then you are in a much better position to anticipate what may occur. You will be aware of game flow and style of play. You will watch and recognize players' emotions and may see signs of frustration or anger. Preparation allows you to be pro-active.

Prevention can take place on the court during the game. Either making a call, or finding the appropriate time to defuse or discuss a problem with a player, coach or partner, can help prevent or control a situation.

Basketball is unique in that there are constant opportunities for coaches and referees to interact during the course of a game, especially in a 3-man crew. Being able to efficiently communicate with coaches, without a doubt, is a very important part of the game. Strong officials master this skill and maneuver through the rough waters more effectively. Communication can be beneficial, however, the degree of interaction will depend on the referee's level of experience, familiarity with the coach and individual personality.

For the young official, it is not recommended to engage in too much conversation with a coach because it takes away his/her focus. With more experience, an official can sort, filter and appropriately handle the situation.

Below are a few tips to keep in mind.

- Communication is not only about talking. We must listen first, before we respond.
- Don't ignore a coach. Respond with a nod, quick answer to a question or a hand signal when necessary.
- Be approachable & responsive but don't be a punching bag. Know when to draw the line to conversations.
- Don't assume the coach wants an explanation. Don't initiate dialogue unless you are sending a message.
- Don't try to win an argument. Just don't argue!
- Don't be afraid to admit an error.
- Treat coaches with respect and expect the same.

- **Treat coaches fairly but not necessarily the same.**

Our body language can be our own worst enemy. When we are arrogant or look disinterested, we become targets for coaches and players. Be professional, stay in the game and work hard to make the tough situations easier to handle.

If you apply the four principles to your officiating, you will have fewer surprises and fewer issues to deal with. Refereeing will become more enjoyable and less stressful as you gain control of the game.