



Communicating With Officials

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Note: The High School Congress of the NABC is led by the National High School Basketball Coaches Association. The NHSBCA consistently shares ideas for the good of high school coaches

The Basketball Coaches Association of Michigan (BCAM) has a unique committee that brings together our state's athletic association (MHSAA) and official associations from around our state. This group is called the Basketball Officials and Coaches Communication Committee (BOCCC). As an ongoing part of the BOCCC, we offer articles designed to foster thought and discussion. Mindful of the idea that referees and coaches bear an equal responsibility in making basketball a great learning experience for the players, we offer the following forms of communication that detract from the game-day experience.

It is our sincere desire that this article serves to encourage reflection among coaches and game officials for the betterment of our great game.

What follows is a list of things that referees would rather not see or hear from coaches during a game. They are presented in no particular order.

1. Screaming

It is true that screaming is a form of communication. But ask yourself: what is my communication goal here? Your intent is to probably have the game official pay closer attention to the point that you are trying to make. Do you really think that the official is going to improve their judgment after they have been yelled at?

We have all seen a coach scream at a referee. Now think about the number of times that you have seen a referee scream at a coach. **Point to Consider:** Don't scream at police officers, judges or labor arbitrators. It isn't smart and it isn't professional.

2. Dismissive Gestures, i.e. the two hand wave-off

Pretend that you are at practice. The team is working on a drill where the defenders are cutting off the baseline drive. You are

confronted with a player who isn't willing to put forth the effort to fully commit to the technique. You stop the drill and explain to the player why this technique is important to the team's defensive strategy. After your explanation, the player turns his back to you and gives you the two hand wave-off. How would you react?

When we use the same gesture toward a referee, it sends the same disrespectful message. This gesture serves to incite the spectators and by rule is grounds for an unsporting Technical Foul. **Point to Consider:** Treat others as you would like to be treated.

3. Taking liberties with the coach's box

Whatever your opinion is concerning the coach's box, it is here to stay. It is a rule just like goaltending. Officials are not allowed to pick and choose the rules that they will enforce.

When officials are forced to divert some of their attention to enforcement of the coach's box, it detracts from their ability to referee the game itself.

Point to Consider: We, as coaches, aren't supposed to be the center of attention. The focal point of the event should be on the players.

4. Gesturing with officiating signals, i.e. traveling, carrying, double dribble, fouls, etc

Like the two hand wave-off, these gestures just incite the crowd and by rule are grounds for an unsporting Technical Foul.

Point to Consider: At the next free throw opportunity, talk with the referee about your concerns.

5. Ignoring a player's behavior which has led to a technical foul.

Technical Fouls are a serious breach of the rules. Officials tend to reserve this punishment for only the most egregious infractions. If a referee has called such a foul on your player and you ignore the message, you are condoning the player's behavior. This in effect amounts to showing up the referee.

Point to Consider: Depending on the severity of the infraction, temporarily remove the player from the game. In this way you can support the decision of the game official.

6. Constant running commentary on how the game is being officiated.

Officiating a game takes great concentration. Positioning, court coverage, constantly scanning the floor, timing issues, rule interpretations, etc., are continually going through the official's mind. A coach's on-going narrative relating to how the game is being officiated only serves to distract the referee from their primary job.

Just as you have learned to tune out the incessant noise of the kids on the bus ride to the game; the officials will tune out your nonstop complaining narrative.

Point to Consider: Pick your spots, without making a dramatic show of your concerns.

Coach/Official Relationship: One Official's Perspective

In examining this unique relationship there are certain reoccurring themes that should be addressed to help both sides to get the best out of their games. The relationship between a coach and an official is not doomed to be adversarial.

Conflicts will occur. But with a certain understanding of the motivations involved by each, communication can be improved.

I have never worked with an official who didn't want to call the best game they possibly could. Does it ever happen? No. Getting every call right, interpreting every rule right, and being correct on every snap judgment is the goal of every official. Officials prepare to call the best game possible, yet they know they will be judged a failure in someone's eyes every game.

The single most important way to help both sides achieve a level of mutual understanding and respect is through communication. Coaches must understand that the human element will always enter into an official's game and an official must understand that a coach's career depends on wins and losses. The key is to keep communication on a level that is not personal, but always try to understand each others position.

Example: I was an assistant coach under a coach in the Bob Huggins mode - very intense and vocal with his team throughout the course of the game. He also had a great understanding of the coach/official relationship. In the first half of every game when there was a tough call that went against him, or even an obvious missed call by an official, Coach Creola would invariably pat him on the back at the first opportunity he could get and say things like, "that was a tough call, but you were all over it. . . good job, that's a good call. . . I don't know if you got it, but you hustled and were in position, I'll never get on you for that."

Appropriately, the officials would completely ignore his praise. However, it would become obvious that his approach had an effect as the game wore on. The officials were more apt to explain calls and respect his view of what goes on, especially in the second half. It never became an antagonistic relationship, but

one of dispensing information.

Since coach Creola understood the human element, officials were more communicative with him. Did it make a difference? I believed officials would "hear" him over an opposing coach and give him much more leeway in voicing objections. The only tangible evidence I can point to is that in those six years he never was given a technical foul. By implementing this approach, the lines of communication were open, disagreements were handled through discussion, not screaming, and right or wrong, both sides felt they were respected in their point of view.

If you want to get "tuned out" by an official, simply use a stream of negative comments from start to finish. It sometimes can be a form of intimidation, especially on a young or inexperienced official by a name coach who works to establish an edge.

How often have we heard Billy Packer or Dick Vitale evoke the "he's working the ref pretty good over that call," or "they are working the officials to get a call later in the game."

After a while, the coach's constant ravings become a mundane, monotonous soliloquy that over time will be ignored. Intimidation by a coach breeds defensiveness by an official and those two emotions are on a collision course to altercations. This antagonistic relationship can lead to technical fouls or penalties which can affect the outcome of the game. The emotional toll is heavy. The coach feels he is getting screwed and the official feels the game has been taken out of the kids hands. Nobody wins, and believe me, an officials dressing room after a tough game is no different than a teams.

Officials also have to be careful. Much like the cop who takes the law into his own hands because he wears the uniform, officials can fall into the same mental trap. One of the biggest mistakes I've seen officials make when interacting with a coach is applying "the buck stops here," approach when it comes to demeanor on the court.

This can be a reflection of an official trying to generate a perceived confidence

to let coaches and players know he or she is in control of the game. An official who sets himself up as the decision maker who "is right because I have the whistle," invites the wrath of the coach and fans because at some point - no matter what - a call will be missed.

It is at this stage that a loss of control can creep into a game and worse yet, a loss of respect by the coaches and players. The results of this type of attitude by an official are no different than the earlier described coach's scenario. Antagonism, frustration, and ultimately, altercation. Now the official has taken the game out of the players hands. Why? Because of poor communication.

The mark of a good official is to admit mistakes. There is no more single act of competency, courage and character by an official than to tell a coach he or she missed a call. This is not done more than once a game, and it is done discreetly during a break in the action with a quick conversation on the sidelines. During a break, a good official will go over and simply say, "Coach, I understand and to tell you the truth, I might have missed that one."

Conclusion: Ask any coach or official if they preferred to be liked or respected and you get a universal response of respect. It's at this moment of communication and understanding that a coach can vehemently disagree with a call and an official can explain and exert the proper authority, and each can walk away with what they seek the most - getting the mutual respect they deserve.

Working with Game Officials

Three inevitable problem areas tend to produce adversary relationships between coaches and officials:

1. Referees are human. They make mistakes, and when they do, one of the teams suffers the consequences.

2. Mistakes aside, referees and umpires, have a vastly different perspective on games from that of coaches. Coaches are interested in winning games; since calls made against your team reduce the chance of winning, you tend to agree with those that go our way and disagree with the rest. Referees, on the other hand, don't care who wins. Their concerns are to ensure the game proceeds from start to finish in an orderly manner and to have consistency in their calls and noncalls.

3. Aside from the professional ranks, referees and umpires are amateurs; officiating is a second job that affords them supplemental income. Some officials are very good - conscientious, fair, and hard working - but none of them spends as much time working at their craft as a coach does. Unlike coaches, officials aren't fired when a team loses more games than school administrators, boosters, or fans will tolerate.

Here are some traits to look for in good officials: They know the rules and understand the game. They are consistent, fair, honest, and willing to acknowledge their mistakes. They constantly search for favorable viewing angles as the action unfolds on the court or playing field. They have a sense of humor, enjoy their association with the game, and seldom lose their self-control.

Referees to beware of: A few bad referees can make *all* officials look bad by doing such things as: speeding up slow games by ignoring

violations that would stop the clock; overlooking minor infractions or violations by a team that is hopelessly behind in order to keep the game score respectable; trying to call an equal number of fouls against each basketball team as evidence of their impartiality; letting the home crowd influence their calls; holding long-standing grudges against coaches they've had trouble with in the past; or abusing their power by looking for opportunities to penalize a particular coach or team.

Recommendation: Here is what you can and can't do about:

1) You can't correct an official's incompetence, but you can report instances of incompetence (e.g., ignorance of the rules) to the state high school association, conference office, or professional league office.

2) You can arrange with your officials' association to have certain officials barred from calling your games. Be aware that officials have long memories, and you're likely to face those same officials at some point down the road.

3) You can also keep files on individual referees until you get to know them, including such information as temperament, game control, mobility, consistency, fairness to visiting teams, limits of allowable incidental contact, accessibility to coaches, and so on. A good way to ensure objectivity in your assessments is to watch the officials while you're on the road scouting.

Working With Game Officials Part 2

In all team sports, officiating crews divide the playing area into smaller, individual areas of responsibilities. Those coverage zones are somewhat fluid or elastic in sports such as basketball, expanding or contracting with ball and player movement. In all cases, the officials' primary responsibility is to watch the players in their particular coverage areas. They are free to assist in watching other areas only when their own responsibilities are concluded, however briefly.

In sports with continuous-action with ten to twelve players constantly in motion and reacting to player and ball or puck movement, contact is both inevitable and difficult to assess. When illegal contact occurs, it often arises suddenly, unexpectedly, and momentarily while players are moving around the playing area at full speed. It often becomes largely a matter of guesswork for the referees to determine who initiated contact that results in a penalty or foul. The problem may be further compounded by the presence of other players blocking the official's view when the illegal contact occurs. In such cases, referees tend to penalize the player who reacts to the contact. That's why player self-control is such a critical aspect of peak performance, especially in "big games".

Example: In basketball, eliminate the obvious fouls (e.g., reaching in from behind, stepping across the dribbler's path, hand-checking, swinging at opponents' shots rather than merely blocking them, etc.) Concentrate on the fundamentals: stance (stationary and moving) and position (overplaying or blocking out).

Games are often decided by two or three crucial calls—and if your players have a solid grasp of the fundamentals, it can be worth three or four calls in your team's favor during the course of a game. **If the game officials believe, consciously or unconsciously, that your team—or your star player—seldom makes mistakes, they will be inclined to give your team or player the benefit of the doubt in close calls.**

Styles of play effect the way officials call a game.

Example: If a team takes its push-and-shove, bump-and-run, holding tactics to the limit of what is acceptable under the rules, the officials may initially try to enforce a kinder, gentler approach to the game by whistling infractions. As the game wears on and the physical team shows no inclination to let up, however, the officials will begin to overlook more and more of the questionable tactics. There are two reasons why:

1. *Time constraints.* Penalties take time to be resolved. Referees want to move games along for various reasons, whether television related, fan displeasure, or another game that quickly follows.
2. *Consistency.* Every referee, from the top of the list to the bottom of the barrel, wants to be consistent in his or her calls.

Example: since no football game would ever end if offensive holding was called every time it occurred, the officials must exercise selectivity. This means maintaining a standard of acceptable holding. Consistency also refers to calling infractions equally

against both teams. The officials can't seem to be enforcing the rules in such a manner as to penalize one team, but not the other. As a consequence, officials prefer to accept a broader interpretation of holding that will affect both teams equally.

Taken together, these two aspects of referee behavior explain why we so often see basketball games in which one official makes most of the calls and the other one seems to have lost his or her whistle; they aren't consistent with each other. One is calling the game closely, and the other is exercising a more liberal interpretation of what constitutes acceptable contact or movement.

It's important for coaches to know that playing an extremely physical game tends to force referees to accept contact that they might not consider legal in a less physical game. That is certainly true in basketball, and it probably holds true for other contact sports as well. There's not a referee in the world who would admit it, but *every call is a judgment call, in the sense that the official has to decide whether to blow the whistle or not.*

Recommendation: The key is to teach your players sound fundamentals. If you do your job of teaching players along those lines, and if they do their job of dogging opponents relentlessly from the first second to the last of every game, the officials will do their job. And they'll do it in a fair manner, provided that they think your players are fundamentally sound.