

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE
MANAGING
COACHES,
PLAYERS
& FANS

FROM THE EDITORS OF *REFEREE* MAGAZINE

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BEFORE THE BLOWUP

TO HEAR OR NOT TO HEAR

It's one of officiating's great conundrums: How can you listen to the legitimate complaints of coaches, players and even fans without hearing too much? Virtually everybody has something to say about what we do and how we do it, but what should we listen to, and how much is too much?

There are four groups of people with opinions on how officials are doing the job. Each is unique, and each must have its own set of boundaries.

The Fans. Fans are the most maddening, and sometimes the most amusing, group of people who want to “comment” on our skills. Simply put, if you spend any time listening or giving significant credibility to what fans say, you are bound to hurt your game. Unashamedly biased, fans will get brutally personal with amazing speed.

Keep in mind, few fans know much about the rules or mechanics you are applying. Let their comments fall to the ground with no reaction.

The Players. The key to communication with players is what they say and how they say it.

In virtually every game, you can anticipate players complaining they were held, their arm was slapped, etc. If players bring something to your attention in a respectful manner, give it a listen and reassure them you'll take a look as you are able.

If, on the other hand, the comment is disrespectful, personal or brings your judgment into question, it is time to act more forcefully. Don't hesitate in those situations or the game can spiral out of control quickly.

The Coaches. While some coaches can be categorized as chronic complainers, as a group they know the game better than the other groups. Coaches, then, are the people to whom we must give our greatest attention. Much has been written in these pages about how to deal with coaches, and there's a reason for that: Our communication with them is important.

Most of the rules that apply to player-official communication also apply to coach-official communication. As fellow adults, most officials tend to give coaches one “courtesy notice” if their communication is approaching or has crossed the line.

Vulgarity and personal attacks require instant responses. But if a coach is asking a legitimate question in a calm, respectful manner, don't feel threatened. If a coach asks what you saw on a play, give an honest answer. If the tone turns sarcastic or demeaning, respond firmly and appropriately. Stay in charge.

Communications experts will tell you there is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is physiological; we can't prevent sound waves from entering our ears during a game. Listening, on the other hand, is a conscious choice. It requires our intent and attention. That is something good officials choose to engage in at the right times.

HOW TO CONTROL YOUR OWN ANGER

Have you ever had one of those games where you feel like your head is going to explode? Your rage is welling up inside and you will soon explode like a Mexican piñata filled with dynamite. Your blood is boiling. Your pulse is racing. Every voice you hear becomes a greater catalyst for your rage. You're going from zero to 60 in the blink of an eye, and you're not even thinking about reaching for the brake.

What was it that set you off? Was it the loudmouth heckler in the stands? The nagging parent who rode you all game? Was it the players constantly whining and nagging about your calls, or lack of them? And your day didn't start out on the best note either. Combine those together and you are a time bomb just waiting to explode.

What is anger? Anger is a normal emotion and there is nothing wrong with feeling angry sometimes. Anger is not a bad emotion, but how we deal with it makes our actions either appropriate or inappropriate.

Anger is a secondary emotion in that other emotions, feelings or experiences precede it. The two most primary emotions that occur before you feel anger are stress and frustration. Someone might do something prior to or during the course of a game that leads to those feelings. A coach may continually nag you and, in turn, you internalize the nagging and become frustrated and annoyed.

Anger management problems evolve over time. Often, the situations in which you get annoyed the most are those with which you are too familiar. In fact, you feel frustrated by a particular situation or a specific person and dread it. Each

time you get angry in a specific situation, you think less the next time it arises and are more likely to respond out of habit, out of anger. For example, just the sight of the manager walking out of the dugout at a baseball game makes you clench your teeth and sets your heart racing.

RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN ANGER

It sounds simple, but the best way to recognize your anger is to know yourself. You need to take an assessment of your emotions to know what sets you off and what your limits are. Anger management problems usually stem from repeated experiences with similar people and situations. Plain and simple: Individuals with anger management problems become classically conditioned to respond the same way over time, without having to really think. That is very similar to the work psychologist Ivan Pavlov did in conditioning dogs to salivate whenever he rang a bell. Certain situations or people become catalysts and they ring your bells. Instead of salivating, however, you become angry.

People and situations that we become conditioned to become angry around are referred to as “triggers.” Those people and situations are, in essence, like triggers on a gun. To know yourself is to know your biggest triggers. Who or what do you find yourself getting angry at the most? Is it that coach who always treats you like a rookie when you work his games? Is it a particular school where the spectators “always” are verbal about your calls? Once you identify who or what your trigger is, you then have to ask yourself why it is a trigger.

Often, people are not able to separate their career from their personal identity. It’s not uncommon for players, coaches and fans to see the referee as the “bad guy” who penalizes their team. In their eyes, the referee is the one who costs them the game. Sometimes they treat the referee as an outcast. Depending on how thick your skin is, you may take that to heart and believe the players and fans also hate you as a person, instead of simply disliking your station and uniform. So when the batter starts questioning your strike zone, do you perceive him to say, “You are a bad umpire”? Or do you see him as questioning your integrity as a person? Officiating, perhaps more than any other career, has that fine line.

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Go through the following 10 steps and honestly answer all pertinent questions. You're the only one who has the ability to control your own anger.

- 1** Recognize what situations or people are your triggers.
- 2** Ask yourself why those specific people or situations have become your triggers.
- 3** When you react to others, what are you telling yourself? You cannot get mad unless you tell yourself something to make yourself mad.
- 4** Are you trying to be too perfect? Do you expect too much from yourself and others?
- 5** Are you making a “mountain out of a molehill”? When something minor happens, do you tend to perceive it as a catastrophe and act in desperation?
- 6** Try to look at the situation differently and tell yourself that not all people and situations are the same.
- 7** Don't be so hard on yourself. Know it is not the end of the world if you make a mistake.
- 8** Monitor your feelings during the course of a game in which you know things will really set you off.
- 9** When you recognize feelings of anger coming, take a moment to collect yourself, even if it means taking a deep breath, taking a short walk away from the source of your anger or calling for time.
- 10** When things get too out of hand for you, consider taking an anger management course to better understand and control your anger.

ARGUE EFFECTIVELY

DON'T TRY TO WIN THE ARGUMENT

As an official, when you are involved in a conflict, your goal is to resolve it. You have to fight the tendency to want to win the argument. It's a subtle difference but critical to conflict management.

When resolving a conflict, the best outcome is when there are two “winners.” If there is only one winner, self-esteem and trust erodes in the loser. To avoid that, strive to keep an open dialogue and keep thinking about the words you choose and the way they impact the situation. There's an old officiating saying that summarizes this philosophy: “As officials, we always have the last word. However, we don't always have to say it.”

1. Permit the other person to talk without interrupting. Have the courtesy to listen before you say anything. It is then more likely that the other person will extend you the same courtesy. When both sides have been adequately heard, problem-solving begins.

The late MLB umpire Doug Harvey, one of the most respected ever to work in the profession, applied his “10-Second Rule.” He gave a manager who argued with him 10 seconds to vent before Harvey responded. His theory: The comments from the arguer were so emotional that his breath couldn't last for more than 10 seconds. When he stopped to take a breath, Harvey could calmly begin his explanation.

2. Limit discussion only to the immediate issue that is adversely affecting your relationship. One of the fastest ways to get off to a bad start in solving a problem is to rehash the past or bring the discussion into other non-pertinent issues. A few coaches like to do that. You've got to “keep them in the box,” meaning keep them focused on the play or situation they are complaining about. Coaches may try to talk about things that happened earlier in the game. When they do that, say something like, “Let's focus on this play and get it resolved. Now, how did you see this play?”

3. Choose an optimal time to bring up and discuss problems. Many problems that compromise positive conflict resolution can be avoided by carefully choosing the time to discuss a particular issue. To find that time, approach the other person when you are both calm and free to talk. Dead-ball time, like during a timeout or between periods, is a great time for officials to talk to people. Keep the conversations focused and brief.

4. Judiciously avoid the other person's vulnerabilities or emotional sensitivities. Probably the biggest temptation to avoid is using a team's record or game score as a weapon. When a team is losing in lopsided fashion and a coach or player is complaining about a call, it is very tempting to fire back with, "You've won only three games this year and you're down a bunch today. Maybe you should start focusing on playing instead of officiating. You've got a lot of work to do." While the premise behind that statement is true, saying it gets you in trouble. You've used a team's vulnerability to your advantage, a bona fide taboo.

5. Regularly touch base with the other person. It is customary not to take the time to talk when things seem to be going well. If you don't talk when things are going well, then angry interactions may be the only times when you connect with coaches and players. Make it a point to make periodic comments about the progress of the game, even if those remarks may be innocuous. Continuing dialogue is one of the best possible ways to avoid problems. That concept straddles a fine line too. You want lines of communication open with participants, but you can't have a constant running dialogue with them. Talking should be limited to brief words at appropriate times, such as during a dead-ball interval. Keep in mind you are only sending the message that you are willing to communicate; you are not commenting on all facets of play.

DEFUSE YOUR INSTINCT TO ARGUE

It's clear that being argumentative won't help you as an official, so what can you do about it? First, in any situation ripe with the potential for an argument, you need to take a deep breath and keep your composure. You can't answer a player's or a coach's emotion with your own emotion. That is a recipe for disaster, because nothing gets resolved. To prevent a potential argument from escalating you should keep the following tools in your arsenal:

1. Answer the emotion with empathy. That means responding to someone else's emotion in your own words. Paraphrase what has been said. In order to do that, you must remain composed and objective. That allows the player or coach to hear what he or she said to you, and shows him or her you are in control of your emotions and that you respect his or her viewpoint.

2. Take the edge off the emotions. When a player or coach comes out verbally swinging, try this technique. Rather than let him or her see you lose it, respond in a completely opposite tone. If a player is expressing disgust, show him or

her concern. If a coach has a high level of anger, respond with a soft voice. You might even try humor. Be very careful, though, because you do not want to appear flippant or disrespectful. If a coach is screaming that he or she can't believe you missed the call right in front of you, you might thank him or her. Tell him or her you appreciate his concern for your vision. Whatever technique you use, the key is to defuse instead of responding with fire and getting emotional. That is a way to keep both yourself and the situation composed and controlled.

3. Let it trickle like water off your back. Prepare yourself mentally for your game and do the best you can. Talk to your partners about that component of your officiating performance that you're trying to improve. Tell them that you're striving to become more diplomatic because your first instinct has always been to "fire when fired upon," and that anything they can do to help you meet that goal during the game is appreciated. Go through it in your mind before each game: Don't get in anyone's face. Don't let players or coaches suck you into an argument. Whether you make mistakes or not, strive to be diplomatic. Don't let the emotional component players and coaches bring to the game infect your unbiased and objective nature.

4. Finally, accept that you will continue to argue in some situations. It doesn't mean you've failed to control that aspect of your personality; instead, look upon those times as opportunities to continue to get better. Analyze what triggered your need to argue back when someone got in your face. Is it that coach who always treats you like a rookie when you work his games? Is it a particular school where the spectators "always" are verbal about your calls? You won't overcome an argumentative nature overnight, but you can take steps to turn that aggression into assertiveness - and ultimately become a better official.

HOW TO HANDLE ARGUERS

You can usually identify four different types of arguers at any game. Each combative type requires a different approach to defuse them.

The Chipper — That is a player or coach who won't confront you directly, but who will make constant little sniping remarks throughout the game, trying to goad you into a confrontation. Don't let such a gnat-like annoyance inflame your desire to unload on that person. Instead, early in the game, firmly inform the chipper that you've heard his or her comments and you don't expect to keep hearing them. If the problem continues, use your proper officiating tools

(technical foul, unsportsmanlike foul flag, ejection, etc.) to defuse the problem more decisively.

The Intimidator — That is a player or coach who thinks he or she can win any argument just by being louder or more “in-your-face” than anyone else. When an intimidator comes at you, yelling and animated, assume an opposite demeanor. Quickly put a plug in your gut reaction by focusing on being calm. Place your arms behind your back and speak in soft tones, repeating the intimidator’s words back to him or her. If that doesn’t work and the intimidator crosses the line, take appropriate action.

The Clasher — That is the player or coach who just doesn’t like you. Never has. You’ve officiated many contests for the person, but no matter what you do, the clasher is confrontational with you at all times. Prepare yourself mentally during your pregame any time you know you’re going to run across the clasher. Accept that you’re not going to be liked by everyone. Confrontations with the clasher may feel more like personal attacks than with other arguers, so you must be even more vigilant to keep your emotions under control. Your best tools against the clasher are professionalism and courtesy. If all else fails, don’t take game assignments involving a clasher.

The Legitimate Arguer — That is the player or coach who actually has a legitimate argument. Understand that the legitimate arguer likely will give you the benefit of the doubt many times throughout a game. The legitimate arguer will usually only become argumentative if he or she truly believes there’s a case to be made, and when that happens the legitimate arguer will usually be more respectful and professional in voicing his or her displeasure. As an official, do yourself a favor and listen to the legitimate arguer. The absolute worst thing you can do is escalate a confrontation with a legitimate arguer.

DON’T GO THERE

There are cute comebacks, tried and true tested lines, and then there are statements you make that turn you into burnt toast. Don’t go there. If you do, you might lose control of the game, your emotions or future assignments. Since that’s not your goal, here are a few tips on what not to say:

- **Don’t deliver an ultimatum.** If you tell a coach, “One more word and you’re gone,” you’d better back it up. If you can’t, you’re jammed into a corner.

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Ultimatums can cause you to lose respect. Any hard line approach can exasperate a situation, rather than defusing it.

- **Don't be a jerk.** That refers to “how” you say something. Sure, you think you didn't use words that were bad. But your tone of voice or body language tells participants you don't care or are angry beyond repair, limiting your effectiveness. Monitor your tone of voice. Be firm, fair and nonabrasive. Check your sarcasm in the locker room.
- **Don't be cute.** You may think your snide remark is funny, but you have no idea how that will come across. If you think you know before you issue a remark designed to poke fun or generate a smile, think again. Not everyone is on the same page. A too cutesy remark could land you in hot water with your supervisor or conference. Can it.
- **Prepared responses don't always fit the situation.** You may have the perfectly crafted response, and are just waiting for the right situation to use it. But when your carefully prepared witty line, “Number 54, drop the hot coals from your hands,” draws a blank stare, you realize you've fallen flat. While it's good to think through situations beforehand and be prepared with certain responses, they have to make sense in the context of the game, and the player has to understand your intent.
- **Don't do it the same way every time.** You may have your tried and true lines. Yes, they work, but rather than saying repeatedly, “Coach, I've heard enough,” vary it. “Coach, I hear you. I know what you're saying.” “That's a good point, Coach.” Make wise adjustments. Using the same lines or statements over and over gets old, and coaches recognize them. Freshen up. Look at each situation as something completely new and adjust your remarks, even if it's only slightly. Experience is the best teacher. Keep your ideology intact and your phrases fresh.

AN EFFECTIVE ARGUMENT ENDER

Officials aren't expected (some would say allowed) to argue. In all but the rarest cases, officials are supposed to turn a deaf ear to criticism and arguments, letting the comments bounce off them like bullets off steel. It is one of the most difficult aspects of officiating, but also one of the most important.

In everyday disputes, it's satisfying to get in the last word or come up with a "zinger" that leaves the other person speechless. Take that habit onto the court or field and you'll soon develop a reputation as a smart aleck. Right or wrong, officials are instead expected to be above such pettiness. Absorbing a certain amount of verbal abuse from coaches and players is considered part of the job. It would be wonderful to know exactly how much to take, but that isn't possible. The best an official can do is end the argument as quickly as possible before things get completely out of control.

A phrase that will end many arguments regarding judgment calls is, "Coach, if it happened the way you say it did, I got it wrong." It works because the official is not admitting a mistake, putting up a defense or ignoring the coach completely. Only a coach who wants to argue for the fun of it or is trying to intimidate an official will continue an argument after hearing that phrase. Any coach with those motives deserves to be ignored.

That statement also works when the dispute involves a rule. If the coach doesn't volunteer his take on how the rule is interpreted, the official can ask for it. By eliciting information from the coach, the official turns the argument around and becomes the questioner, the person who actually controls the argument. Once the coach has offered his or her interpretation, the official can tell the coach that if his interpretation is correct, an error was made.

Whether the issue is a rule or a judgment call, the coach may ask you to get help from a partner or crewmate. Don't be bullied into such a discussion, but if you are unsure and believe another official can help, go for help. Be sure the conversation is brief and takes place out of the coach's earshot. When the discussion is over, explain to the coach why you're sticking to your guns or are changing your call. In the latter case, be sure to explain the ruling to the opposing coach.

DEALING WITH...

COACHES

Because of the nature of their job, a few are going to create conflict for officials. Use preventive officiating whenever you can and tolerate a bit more from them than you would other participants. Work with them on their behavior until their behavior becomes a distraction.

Accept that the majority will never see everything the same way you do. It shouldn't be surprising that many coaches will carry on more than you think is acceptable. It's not about you! Not everything sung to us in burps requires a response. The best officials keep the peace with coaches by reacting to the message and not the delivery until the delivery interrupts the game.

Accept that it helps to give a little when the conflict is insignificant. Sense when coaches are trying to be sensible about a bad situation and you need to tag along: Team A has traveled 41 times by halftime and appears unable to help it. Team B has driven 60 miles through the snow and is growing tired of rehearsing their inbound plays. It hopes to be home by midnight. Think about relaxing your standards a little and serving the teams. Work with the coaches to become part of a solution. Heresy, I know, but many coaches respect that over rigid consistency; in that regard, you can all be in it together.

Accept that your style needs to be flexible. Some crews develop reputations for being the threesome-of-choice for certain games: If the last meeting was contentious, send this crew because they'll clean it up. For the rest of us, the game is what it is: It's played by two teams with strengths and weaknesses and, if it makes for a fair game, let them set their tone. Take charge to avert conflict, not create it.

PLAYERS

It's true that for the most part people come to games to see the players play. While that doesn't give players free rein to abuse officials, it does mean officials should do whatever they can with preventive officiating to keep them in the game. If all else fails, penalize. Starting players get a bit more leeway than reserves.

Other people on the bench (reserve players, trainers, team managers, etc.) receive minimal tolerance. They have a job to do (root for their team, take care of players, etc.) and it does not include commenting on the officiating. When it

happens, go directly to the head coach and tell the coach about the problem. More often than not, the coach will fully support you because the last thing the coach wants is a penalty because of other bench personnel.

SPECTATORS

Be more tolerant of fans than any other group. They paid their money to (in their mind) have the right to boo the officials. Never talk back to fans. Doing so only heightens their level of abuse.

At higher levels of play, tolerate more from fans than you would at lower levels of play. For example, a fan using profanity at a youth game shouldn't be tolerated. Fans using profanity at a pro football game will be tolerated by the officials because the officials ignore them. If a fan is using profanity or racially offensive terms to an opponent, have the fan removed from the premises immediately. There's a proper method in doing so.

Do not say anything to the fan. Stop the game and approach the game administrator (sometimes the home head coach if there is not another present). Explain to the game administrator that a particular fan is to be ejected for using improper language.

Let the game administrator handle the ejection. That's what a game administrator is for; it's not your job to notify and escort fans from the premises, except in some youth league situations where a policy may place responsibility for crowd behavior on the officials.

Delay the game until the problem is rectified and consider sending teams to their benches during the interruption.

Have game administrators remove fans who throw objects on the floor. Consider a warning first (from the game administrator), then ejection. At higher levels of play, it has almost become trendy for fans to throw coins and small objects on the floor. If something is thrown on the floor, stop the game and have the game administrator issue the warning. If thrown directly at an official or an opponent, have the game administrator eject the offender immediately. If the offender can't be found in the crowd, consider removing the fans from the section that objects came from. Though you'll be most tolerant with fans, take a no tolerance stance when it comes to players' or officials' safety.

AUXILIARY PERSONNEL

Often, scorers, timers, chain crews, etc., are from the home school. Some can get caught up being a fan and create problems for officials. Remind them before the game that they are an important part of the officiating team and neutrality is important. Most of the time you won't have problems.

However, when a person at the scorer's table makes unnecessary comments or improper gestures, take care of it immediately. You've got two choices: Deal with the offender directly or ask the game administrator to deal with it. If you've got a good game administrator, go that route. If you deal with it on your own, remind the offender that he is a part of the officiating team and that being a fan while in that role is inappropriate.

If improper conduct (cheerleading, ridiculing opponents, or barbs aimed at you) continues, have the game administrator remove the offender immediately. Your job is tough enough; you don't have to tolerate unsportsmanlike behavior from administrative personnel too.