

Ten Keys to Successful Officiating

The football season is upon us already. Are you ready? Many of us haven't dug out our gear bags yet to ensure that everything we need is ready to go for either that first scrimmage or our first contest of the year. It's time to dig it out and ensure that all that stuff is just how we left it last year, but more importantly make sure it still fits and still looks good.

With that said, how many factors, other than our stripes, must we work on to make us excellent officials? Below is a list that has been compiled, although there are many other items that could make the list. You'll have to make your list yourself, but in order to complete that task, you'll have to answer one simple question. What is your ultimate goal as a sports official? Is it a high school state championship? Is it a break into small college or even higher? Whatever your desire, there are a few items from this list that might just help you get there.

1. Professionalism

Although we aren't making \$800 to \$1000 a game in high school athletics, we are still getting paid for the job. We, as officials must approach every game, regardless of level, as the most important game that week. It certainly is for the coaches and athletes, so it must also be for us. We need to show up on time, look like we are ready for the contest and we must be ready to work. We will never make everyone happy with every call, but we better be ready to look in the mirror after the contest and say that we were prepared, we hustled and we gave our 110% just as the players did during the contest.

2. Appearance

How you dress does makes a difference in how you are perceived both on the field and off. When you show up to a contest and greet the administrator (or sometimes the head coach), you want to make a good impression. Not that there is anything wrong with blue jeans and t-shirts, but if you were going out for a business dinner, you probably wouldn't choose that for the evening. A professional appearance begins a lot sooner than when you get to the school. Dress for success!

"To beard or not to beard?" That is the question. It is your right to wear facial hair and sometimes it can even help your career. As has been heard from good, younger officials, "They'll think I'm just a kid without the moustache!" And, as has been heard from directors of officials at the collegiate level, "You won't work for me with facial hair!" You'll have to answer that for yourself, however, make sure you don't look like you just jumped off a boxcar and showed up to work a game if you choose to have facial hair. Make sure your hair is neat, and if you choose "to beard", keep it short and neat.

Now let's talk about the uniform. Does your uniform fit or have those few pounds of summer fun made it look like it shrunk in the dryer? Are your hats, flags, bean bags in

good condition? If not, get some new stuff ordered. Many of us have been in the situation of trying to be a tailor in the locker room with 15 minutes left on the clock. Don't let a few bucks for some new pants create the stress that a torn pair of pants creates to both you and your crew. It's not too late to have the correct size gear in your game bag before the opener. If you're carrying a few extra pounds, there's also time to shed them to help you make it through a tough season. Being back down to "fighting weight" is beneficial to both you and those athletes that expect you to work hard all season long. Make sure your appearance sends a message of professionalism - uniform fits, shoes shined, hat is clean, and your personal image is neat and clean.

3. Rules Knowledge

There is no substitute for rules knowledge, regardless of level of play. If you don't know the rules, how can you enforce them? Coaches teach players according to the rules, so we must know them as well. It's difficult to explain a penalty to a coach by saying "It just didn't look right and you know I've got great game sense!" Rules changes occur nearly every year and we must know them. Nuances to the rules that we must be aware of can occur at any moment and we have to be right when we either penalize or pass on the call. As many long time officials can attest, there is no good time for a big time mistake in which a calling official doesn't know the rule and/or exceptions to the rule. Every official gets the books early enough to read them before the first contest so there are no excuses for not knowing the rules. Good officials don't risk putting themselves in a bad situation by not knowing the rules. They constantly strive to improve their understanding and comprehension of the rules- even during the middle of the season.

4. Communication

One of our primary tools in portraying our professionalism and overall approach to the game as officials is communication. Regardless of what we say, our body language sometimes sets the tone for what is heard. Take for instance, we are running down the line and say without conviction, "Coach you need to get your kids back behind the line." That coach will turn to his players and say, without conviction, "you guys step back.", or something to that effect. Chances are, you'll have to say it again if you don't take the time to get it right the first time. Let the coach know that you need his help and cooperation to keep the sideline clear. Stand there and communicate with the coach in the spirit of cooperation.

A few areas we need to be consistent are listed below:

Reporting penalties - get the accurate information and get it to the coach. Don't yell it at the coach, but go and explain what happened at a distance where you don't have to raise your voice.

How and what is reported -Choice of words is critical. Don't just say that 34 committed an unsportsmanlike foul and walk away. Get specific with the coach with the information that drew the penalty in the first place. Coach, 34 spit in 45's face, or 45 is

grabbing 68 around the waist and is not letting him through. If you give the coach the specifics, they'll appreciate it and probably think you got it right.

How we talk to players - In every contest, these young players are just that, YOUNG. We need to set the tone for the contest, get a few plays right, listen to them and talk to them. If we expect them to trust us, we have to set an example of fairness, rules knowledge, hustle, and composure. If we yell at these young athletes, would it be a surprise if they, in turn, yelled at us? There are exceptions to not raising your voice, such as "heated players", a fight or taunting. You can't approach these types of situations in a calm low tone. Take charge of them and get the activity stopped.

Dead Ball officiating - Officials can work wonders by talking to players and coaches during dead ball periods. When we learn to communicate during the dead ball situations, we learn to prevent some bad choices by either the athletes or the coaches. It's not too difficult to catch a player during a dead ball and say "45, maintain your composure, I'll keep an eye on things this play." Or another is "coach I heard what you said and I'm looking for it, although I didn't see it during the last play." This lets the players and coaches know that you are hearing them and are open for positive communications.

5. Poise

Poise on the playing field is critical to our success as officials. Another term for poise is composure. We've all probably been in a situation where a play, a player, a fan, or a coach has just gotten us rattled. How we snap out of that is what you could call composure. When we get rattled, (either by booting a call, or just because a coach snapped at us) it is critical for us to regain our composure in order for us to be effective for the remainder of the contest. If we make a mistake and it is pointed out to us, we have an obligation to correct it if it is within the rules. If we can't correct it, we take our lumps and learn from the mistake. If a coach snaps because you make a mistake and starts chewing on your tail, you probably have it coming, within reason. We still have the rest of the game to officiate and one mistake doesn't give a coach a free pass for the remainder of it. The coach should only get one shot and then it's time to re-gain your composure. Should the same message keep coming, you should stop it. One way to do that is by saying, "Coach, I've heard about it from you already and admitted to the error, now let's move on." Once that communication is complete, it's time to go back to work- for both of you. At that point, put the error in your back pocket and don't discuss it until after the game with your crew. If the coach continues, manage the situation.

Poise also describes our movements on the field. Field movement should be with purpose and direction. When we start moving too much, we might be getting caught up in the game. Hustle to your positions, clean up the play, and move with purpose to get the best look at the action in your area. Don't move just to move. Move with a purpose.

A few items that indicate you are a poised official:

- Don't rush signals - d-e-l-a-y and think
- Communicate calmly throughout the game
- Throw a flag deliberately but not aggressively
 - o Higher is not better
 - o Faster is not better
- Move under control
 - o Don't leave your position and then come back because you misread the play
 - o Let the play develop and then move accordingly
 - o Move at right angles from the sideline to the dead ball spot
- Clean up the sidelines prior to a kick off
 - o Don't run to the middle of the field, break from the crew huddle directly to the sidelines
- Be aware of the clock status at all times
- Do not yell from the field to the sideline or ever to the crowd
- Jog or trot to the sidelines for discussions - don't walk. Keep your head up and maintain eye contact.
- If you make a mistake, admit it, correct it, let it go and move on
- Maintain a consistent pace/tempo for the entire game.

6. Attitude

"If Coach Hercules says one thing to me tonight, he's going to get it!" Attitude separates good officials from mediocre officials. It begins with preparation and self evaluation of why we do what we do. Obviously for a number of us, it is a way to be part of a game that had a significant, positive impact on us as young adults. Starting off the night with the "If coach says..." statement lets everyone know where our attitude and focus is starting.

Regardless of the game assignment, there will always be opportunity for improving your officiating skills. Some of these areas could include, field coverage, enhancing mechanics, crispness and clarity of signals, etc. Once you arrive at the game site, it is time to check your day's baggage and get ready to work. Don't bring your bad day's events to the game with you. The players didn't have any impact on what has happened during the previous day or week, so don't vent your frustrations during the contest. After all, we are supposed to be neutral, fair and consistent in our work.

All of us have the opportunity to work with weaker and/or younger officials during the course of a season. Experienced officials can easily take charge of a situation and get the crew through it, however, we must ensure that we don't lose sight of the educational opportunity at hand. We must not show displeasure or disappointment or frustration with our crew, because everyone in stripes has been on the lower end of experience. It is also good to remember that we are facing a severe drought in newer officials, so experienced

officials must be willing to work with the younger folks and also work a little harder to protect them- as long as they are willing to listen and learn.

A few other points:

1. Get to the game site in plenty of time to dress and have a solid pre-game.
2. Walk onto the field professionally and ready to work.
3. Be positive during the game.
4. Don't complain about the game.
5. Stay alert and responsive, especially during dead ball periods.
6. Work together as a crew.
7. Be mindful of body language- be attentive, maintain composure.
8. Remember the game is more important than "I".
9. Look for learning opportunities.

7. Mechanics

Mechanics can be self evaluated by either an evaluator in the stands, or by you and your crew. The Federation has the manual outlining the best positions for us to make the correct calls a majority of the time. The manual also helps ensure that our judgment is sound since we should be in the best position to get the call correct.

Our initial position dictates a number of things leading to making the correct call. If we have a wide field of vision, chances are we won't miss activity in our coverage area. How many times has your field of vision been minimized because you moved without purpose and got caught in the play? Starting wide and letting the play develop before moving will greatly minimize being in the middle of the action. When you misread a play, adjust accordingly. If you read run and they pass, hustle to get in the best position possible. If you read pass and they run, let the play come to you. Think about other factors such as down and distance, time remaining, team tendencies, what has worked for the offense and what hasn't in order to anticipate the next play.

Dead ball officiating is probably more critical than live ball officiating in some instances. Once the ball is dead, maintain your presence. This is a great time to communicate or employ preventive officiating techniques. Watch and respond to possible conflicts, trash talking, and above all else, *displays of good sportsmanship*. Talk to coaches, players and your crew during dead ball situations as necessary. Know what down it is, time on the clock and how many timeouts each team has left.

Ball handling by officials is something that everyone can see. When relays are made, toss the ball underhand in short, crisp tosses. We aren't trying out for the quarterback position, so we don't have to prove our arm strength.

Make sure you have adequate room to work on the sidelines. Make sure the sideline management is clearly communicated and enforced throughout the contest. If people are

in the restricted zone during live ball situations, enforce the rule appropriately and by the book. Keep team attendants off the field unless they are allowed to be there. Players, coaches and team attendants are all restricted to the team box. Chain crews must move 2 yards off the field after the clip has been set. The restricted area is your working area and it is also for your safety to keep it clear.

We've all been in the situation where the ball is still moving or loose but our whistle just went off. OUCH!! All players know, or should be instructed, to stop when the runner is down or the ball is dead. Playing hard between whistles is a dangerous message to communicate to players since action has to stop when the balls dead. Whistles don't kill the ball unless it is inadvertent, the rules kill the ball. When watching seasoned crews officiate, there are times during their games where the play ends but you never hear a whistle. The players and coaches know when a play is over; a whistle just confirms it. If one whistle sounds, there is usually not a good reason to echo it. A patient whistle is a good whistle. Know where the ball is, before filling your whistle with air. Players are getting quicker, both football skills and acting skills seem to improve each year as well. Many officials will watch a play develop and "almost" blow it dead as the runner, whom they *thought* had the ball, gets tackled; only to look around and see the quarterback running untouched down the sideline with the ball. We can all imagine the fury of the head coach with that play if we have a whistle shrieking as the QB scores. If the runner goes down with his back to you, you are screened out. Let the official that can see the runner and the ball have the whistle. Bottom line: see the ball before blowing your whistle.

Work the game from the outside in. For wing officials, start from the sideline (and never work inside the numbers unless necessary after the play is dead) and let the play come to you. This allows you to maintain a wide field of vision and keeps you from getting caught in the play. Working wide also forces you to only move when there is a reason to move. On passing plays, focus on and move down field with the appropriate receivers according to formation strength as outlined in the Federation manual. For running plays, take your key from the tackles and either clean up the back side action or get ready to accept the runner. Should the runner sweep wide to the outside, turn your attention to the tight end or wide outs for holding or crack back blocks and be ready to accept the ball carrier as he crosses the line of scrimmage. The referee should, at this time begin shifting his focus to the action behind the runner.

At the back judge position, work your normal 15 -20 yards beyond the line of scrimmage. Read your keys and move accordingly. As back judge, you should never get beat; after all, you have at least a 20 yard head start. Take your keys from the tackles and be ready to accept your receivers as appropriate by strength of formation. As back judge, a good rule of thumb as your first priority is the widest receiver on the linesman side. It makes it

a bit easier for the linesman to ensure the down marker is ready and the chains are right for the next play if they know you have their deep receiver covered.

If you are the white hat for the contest, position on the throwing arm side of the QB, 3-4 yards deeper than the deepest back, then let the play develop. Once the ball is snapped, you have 2 keys - pass or run. If it turns into a passing play, focus on the quarterback. Since you'll be to the side and slightly behind him, you should see when he releases the ball and what pressure he is under. Protect the quarterback from late hits and be ready to handle unnecessary action once the pass is released. If it turns into a running play, trail the play or clean up the play as it moves away from you. On a running play around either end, release the play to the wing official when the runner crosses the line of scrimmage.

Umpires can work anywhere they want as they are usually the biggest person on the crew and usually tougher than the rest of us. Most umpires will attest to frequently being used as a shield, or even a blocking dummy. In order to prevent this treatment, vary your starting position between the tackles so you don't develop a pattern of movement that will allow the offense to use you as a screen. Maintain your starting position 7 to 10 yards off the ball and somewhere out of the way of the linebackers.

A simple checklist for mechanics:

1. Maintain a good, wide field of vision.
 - Start wide and work outside in.
2. Know the manual.
 - Cover it frequently during the season for game situations. It can even be reviewed as part of your pre-game conference.
3. Read game situations.
 - What down is it?
 - How much time is on the clock?
 - Read your keys.
 - Adjust to the situation - hurry up or two minute offense.
4. Goal line situations.
 - Start thinking about it when the ball is inside the 10 yd line.
 - Make sure your crew members know about it - signal to them.
 - As appropriate, move quickly to the goal line at the snap and let the play come to you.
 - Delay the TD signal until sure you know the ball crossed.
5. Bean bags
 - Don't throw it, drop it. All you need is the yard line.
6. Whistle when you're sure
 - Always, always, always know where the ball is before you fill your whistle.
 - If you don't see the ball, don't blow your whistle.

7. Field movement

- Move with a purpose, working outside in.
- Don't exaggerate signals and use only approved signals.
- Move parallel with the sideline and cut at 90 degree angles to mark spots.

8. Body language

- Move with your head up
- Maintain a wide field of vision by simply turning your head.

The above section is merely a slice of good game mechanics and could be used during your crew's pre-game to get the conversation flowing. Crew's that don't have a good pre-game consistently set themselves up for disaster. Another portion of the game not covered above are scrimmage kick and free kicks. If anything goofy is going to happen, it's likely to happen during kicks. Know where you are supposed to be, and know what the rules and exceptions to the rules are that govern the kicking game. Be ready for the "not so obvious" to happen, like first touching, kick out bounds that was last touched by R, grounded scrimmage kick, kick blocked beyond the neutral zone, etc. Don't be the official that always asks "Why does this stuff always happen in my games?" Be prepared to handle the situation in accordance with the rules and start your preparation by knowing the rules and then talking about these situations during your pre-game.

9. Alertness

Good officials are aware of the game situation and are always ready to help out if something doesn't seem right. Good officials pay close attention to the little things going on in the game to ensure that it is played and administered fairly and consistently.

All officials are responsible to know down and distance prior to every snap. Even in those games that are completely one sided, paying close attention to the little things will help get you through these tough to work contests.

Be constantly aware of the clock. We've all been in a situation where the clock malfunctions and one guy has to come up with the time. Help out your crew by being aware of time remaining throughout the game. After all, we succeed or fail as a crew. Know how many substitutes enter and how many replaced players leave the field.

Two in two out, three in two out...oops, is it a substitution infraction or illegal participation? That depends on the snap now; although, if we are paying attention to the little things, we shouldn't have illegal participation if we catch those 12 players prior to the snap. We also have the second player count once the teams come up to the line of scrimmage and a corresponding signal from our partners to double check. Field position is critical during so many downs that we all must know where the ball is spotted. Is the goal line a factor? Is the offense getting close to a first down? What hash will the ball be placed on for the next down? These may seem trivial;

however, all this information helps decide what you could expect on the next snapped ball and what you do with the play.

The kicking game, as mentioned previously, can be a whole separate can of worms. Are we alert enough to inform the receivers about giving us a good fair catch signal and what is accepted as shielding the sun? Are we ready to rule on whether or not the kick went 10 yards prior to being touched by K? Are we ready to rule on kick catching interference or if K was blocked into the receiver?

Penalties should be administered by the umpire and the referee. But, every crew member must know what the appropriate penalty is for the situation at hand. A good wing official will be ready at the succeeding spot and provide a double check for the umpire. This not only makes it easy on the crew, but also elevates the crew's credibility by avoiding enforcement mistakes.

Many officials have been on the field when the clock is still running but the game is over. Do we officiate differently when put in that situation? I'd like to think we don't but we all know it happens. It seems our focus shifts to protecting the players and keeping the wheels on the bus. What is meant by keeping the wheels on the bus, is that we don't lose control of the players, coaches or the game in total. We tend to adapt to the situation, although we tend to talk to players more than we would during a 10-7 game. Do we and secondly should we throw that same flag for holding during both contests? I'd like to think we talk to the player during the 35-0 ball game instead of tossing the flag even if it affects the play. BUT, with that said, unsporting acts and those acts that involve the safety of the players should never be compromised regardless of the score. Once we pass on those, we just lost two wheels. We can all see where that bus is going.

10. Integrity

A fellow official always ends our pre-game with "Let's get them to trust us quickly." If we do what should be done on each down and during dead ball periods, both the players and coaches will trust that we will administer the game correctly and fairly. This is another way to define integrity. A solid crew is able to work either on their home town field or one clear across the state and still be viewed as doing a credible job. If you don't have enough integrity to work on one field, you probably don't have enough integrity to work on another. Enough said.

Integrity within the crew is an entirely different subject. All five officials may be viewed in high regard with coaches and administrators, but the crew may not be a solid crew because one of the officials is viewed as lacking integrity. There are many ways that a fellow official falls into this category. Here are a few of them. While watching a game as a spectator, you consistently offer opinions as to the crew getting it wrong on the field or offering your prowess of the rules to those sitting around you. "Once an official, always an official." As a brother or sister of the black and white,

you are above all else an official. Your actions, even as a spectator, speak volumes about your integrity. Will you cut your partner(s) down, just to get that next contract? If you'd act as such in the stands, how will you act on the field when the heat gets turned up a notch? There is no room in the ranks for an official who openly and publicly criticizes a fellow official. Those critiques are for the locker room after the contest.

Officials are, and have to be leaders, and thus we are held to a higher standard than others. We need to separate ourselves, but not avoid coaches, players and team followers at the conclusion of a contest. This methodology allows us to reflect on the job we did without having to justify anything to someone who wasn't on the field with us.

These 10 principles are just a start to creating your own 10 building blocks for success. Use what you can, change what you want, but above all else, get prepared to have a great season.