

When  
They're  
in  
Your

and how  
to deal with it

From the publishers of *Referee* magazine  
and the National Association of Sports Officials

## Introduction

No matter what levels you officiate, again and again you will find yourself in tricky people-handling situations. After all, officiating is a people-handling business. You may find yourself the target of heckling by fans or of more direct verbal challenges from players or coaches. You may have to deal with fights between players. Worst case scenario, you may be physically assaulted. Whatever happens, when people — players, coaches or fans — are in your face, you need to deal with it, and deal with it effectively.

Excerpted from articles and columns that have appeared in *Referee* over the years, the short articles and lists that follow are intended to help you handle a variety of tough situations. You'll learn ways to manage conversations, develop thicker skin and resolve conflicts. You'll learn why you shouldn't take most verbal abuse personally, whether you're ready to handle verbal challenges, why not to threaten with "One More Word ...," and why players must learn to argue, too. Finally, you'll learn what to do when a fight breaks out and what to do, and what not to do, if you're physically attacked. Those aren't light topics, but they are important, at all levels of officiating.

From the editors of *Referee*

*When They're in Your Face and How to Deal With It*

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P.O. Box 161, Franksville, Wis. 53216.

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Cover and layout by Matt Bowen

Printed in the United States of America

## Simple Steps to Handling People

Dealing with people and their ever-changing emotions is among the more challenging aspects of officiating. Here are some tips.

### **Look like an official.**

Good officials are physically fit and appear athletic. They walk confidently and with good posture. The better you look, the more accepting people will be. The more accepting people are, the less conflict you'll have to manage. Your physical presence also refers to where you are in relation to the conflict. Sometimes you can defuse a situation merely by being in the area of the problem.

### **Use your voice.**

The way you talk has a tremendous impact on the response you receive. Your voice is one of the most important tools you have.

### **Defuse situations; don't add emotion to them.**

When an official barks at a player or coach, the coach's or player's first instinct is to snap back. This does nothing to help the situation.

### **Avoid threats.**

Ultimatums place officials in corners as much as coaches and players. Don't say, "Shut your mouth, or you're out of here!" Use phrases like, "I've heard enough." That's far less provocative, yet gets your message across.

### **Ask questions.**

This is one of the best conversation management techniques. For example, when

a coach or player is harassing you, calmly ask the coach what he saw. More often than not, the coach will stop yelling and redirect his efforts into explaining. After the coach's explanation, tell the coach what you saw. You're obviously going to disagree, but if you've asked the questions, it is only a disagreement — not a venom-filled argument.

### **The more you say, the less it means.**

Officials are often guilty of "yeah, but" syndrome. When someone challenges them, too often officials say, "Yeah, but ..." and give some defensive response. In many cases, your best tools for handling a situation are your ears, not your mouth.

### **Never use profanity.**

As an official, you are held to a higher standard than the rest of the participants in the contest.

### **The obvious way to avoid an argument: Don't argue.**

Even when a coach wants to argue, don't. Simply state, "When we can talk to each other instead of screaming, I'll enter the conversation." Don't get drawn into the argument. Avoid aggressive body language and talk in a calm, slow manner to slow the pace of the conversation. It's not an argument if you don't participate. □

## **Seven Ways To Manage Conversations**

Dealing with adversarial relationships can be tough. These seven tips can make your difficult job a bit easier.

### **1. Pause before responding.**

Let the other person speak. Don't cut him off; that will only exacerbate the situation. In responding, avoid using words like "but" and "however" because they usually cancel out the first part of a sentence, lessening the message. "I understand the situation, *but* we're going to have to ..." is an example of how the word "but" lessens the effect of the initial positive statement, "I understand."

### **2. Discreetly praise players.**

Congratulate them on good plays and encourage sportsmanship. You can win-over many players with a kind word; that can help you later in the game if problems arise.

### **3. No matter whom you're dealing with, apply the "golden rule."**

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Choose your words and your tone wisely. That will go a long way toward handling situations effectively.

### **4. It's OK to say you made a mistake.**

Honesty is the best policy. Under no circumstances should you try to lie your way out of trouble. People can tell, and then they'll think you can't be trusted. Lying also fuels people's negative perceptions of officials.

An old school of thought in officiating was "never admit making a mistake." That theory has gone away over time. If you blow a call,

it's OK to admit it quietly to the coach or player. Generally, they'll respect you more for that than if you tried to twist the truth and equivocate. Most coaches understand that you can't change judgment calls, but admitting you missed it often ends the argument. Do it too often, however, and your reputation will suffer.

**5. If a coach or player is begging, listen.**

If a reply is necessary, use an even tone. Be brief. Do not use sarcasm or put-downs. Acknowledge that you've heard and understand the complaint. That's not an admission of guilt or error on your part; it merely shows that you are listening. Many times, all the player or coach wants is to be heard.

**6. Smile or use humor in a potentially volatile situation.**

A smile and a deflective word may help. An official who can chuckle or smile is in control. You shouldn't, however, get into joke telling. It's simply too dangerous given people's widely varying senses of humor. What you think is a great joke might offend the listener. Try humor sparingly and keep it as light as possible.

**7. Never utter the phrase, "It's just a game."**

Few phrases turn participants to rage quicker than that one. Remember, they've worked all week, all season and all their careers for this game. It is critically important to them, no matter what the sport or level. "It's just a game" is often interpreted by coaches and players as a flippant "I don't care" response. It's demeaning.

Follow those seven tips when dealing with players and coaches and the relationships developed will be positive for the game. □

## Are You Ready to Handle Verbal Challenges?

Being caught off guard by a coach or player is embarrassing and awkward for all officials, but especially for rookies.

Imagine this scenario: Top of the eighth. Two outs. Runner on third. Visiting team losing, 5-3. The batter blasts a game-tying, two-run homer ... or so it seems.

The batter-runner eyes his towering shot and misses first base by two feet as a rookie umpire watches in disbelief. A series of thoughts rushes through the umpire's mind: "Please, turn around and touch it!" "Oh, no. What if the other team saw it and properly appeals?" "If I call him out, the place is going to go crazy!" "If I don't call him out, my integrity is shot."

The panic-stricken rookie glances casually at the first baseman, who smiles, knowing that they both saw the same thing. The rookie moves behind first base, a calm before the storm.

The first-base coach asks the ump, "Are you going to call it?" The rookie responds, "Call what?" The coach's answer erases the rookie's indecision: "He missed first by two feet, and I know you saw it." "I saw it, so I have to call it," says the rookie. "In 10 seconds, all hell is going to break loose and I'm going to remember that you said you saw it, too."

The team properly appeals and the batter is called out, canceling both runs. The batter runs out of the dugout screaming obscenities, bumps into the umpire and is quickly ejected. The umpire says to the manager: "He missed it by two feet. You can ask your first-base coach. He saw it." The manager turns to the coach,

who responds, "Looked to me like he hit the base dead square."

The emotions explode and, in short order, the rookie ejects the first-base coach for not having any "guts" and thumbs the manager and three players. The home team wins, 5-3.

In that scenario, the rookie believed that the first-base coach would support his call and things would settle down. It never entered his mind that the coach would change his story. Four of the six ejections probably could have been averted if the rookie had kept his emotions in check in the face of the verbal challenges.

Let's say you're a coach who "works" officials. Are you more likely to needle a 48-year-old vet or a 24-year-old rookie? Many coaches test rookies because there's a perception that they are more easily influenced than vets. Realizing that, you must be prepared to deal with verbal challenges. Think about what you're going to say before you say it. Ask yourself, "If I say something, will it do more harm than good?"

There is no surefire way to handle verbal challenges. Through experience and by judging others' reactions, you will learn what to say and when to say it. Each official's parameters are unique. Find your comfort level, without sacrificing game control, and your verbal "wars" will diminish. □

## 'One More Word ...'

Imagine this scenario: It's a heated basketball game. There's a crucial shot. The ball is knocked out of bounds. The official moves to get it back in play. The coach comes storming off the bench: "Are you blind? That was goaltending!" The official, already fed up with this coach, turns to him and shouts back, "Not one more word, coach. One more word and you're gone!"

Now imagine the same scenario, but with the official turning to the coach and calmly replying, "Coach, tell me the three parts of goaltending." Imagine the coach sputtering, looking surprised and finally saying, "I don't know." The official then says, "Well, I guess you're going to have to trust me. I'll be glad to explain it after the game." The coach backs off but actually does show up for a postgame lesson on the fundamentals of goaltending, a lesson which clarifies for him that the official was right all along. Which scenario is more positive? Clearly the second is the better approach; it solves the problem without backing the coach into a corner. (Of course, you better know the rule to the letter before asking the coach.)

When dealing with angry coaches, it's best to be diplomatic and non-confrontational. After all, this is a people-handling business. If coaches ask reasonable questions, answer them, but don't allow anyone to question your integrity or embarrass you. Some officials give warnings the whole game. Set guidelines for yourself regarding what you'll tolerate, and stick with them. But, you paint yourself into a corner with statements such as, "One more word and you're gone." They're counterproductive; you end up calling each other's bluff. It

would be better to say, "Come out here again *without a good reason* and you're gone." Or, "Do you want to repeat that?" Those phrases allow the coach the opportunity to reconsider his verbal assault, and they're not as provocative.

Saying "Shut up!" is confrontational. "Knock it off" is less confrontational. You must control your temper if you want coaches and players to control theirs. After all, it's human nature to respond aggressively when you're approached aggressively.

Controlling yourself as an official and presenting a professional face at all times is only half of the solution. The belligerent coach or player must also take responsibility for keeping his or her cool. Sometimes no matter what you do or how carefully and respectfully you handle a situation, the coach or player is going to continue to lob verbal challenges at you. Coaches and players who go this far know what's coming next, and you shouldn't disappoint them. Those situations require decisive action; don't allow them "one more word"; toss them. □

## Resolving Conflicts

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. The difference between resolving and winning is subtle, but critical to conflict management.

When resolving a conflict, the best outcome is having two "winners." If there is only one winner, self-esteem and trust erode in the loser. To avoid that, strive to keep an open dialogue and keep thinking about the words you are choosing and the way they will impact the situation.

In "Count to Ten," a *Referee* feature story, psychologist Dr. Bruce Baldwin detailed a plan to help resolve conflict.

### **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.

### **2. Limit discussion only to the immediate issue.**

One of the fastest ways to get off to a bad start in solving a problem is to rehash the past or bring other issues into the discussion. Coaches may want 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. Approach the other person when you are both calm and free to talk. Dead-ball time, such as 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.**

Everyone has personal vulnerabilities, and it's very tempting to hit below the belt. It is a sign of maturity to avoid those areas when engaged in conflict. A deliberate strike at a personal vulnerability is irrelevant and hurtful. It also invites a counterattack focusing on your areas of sensitivity. No one will trust you with emotionally sensitive information if you use it as a weapon whenever there is a problem. Also avoid using a team's record or game score as a weapon. When a team is losing 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. Maybe you should focus on playing instead of officiating." While the premise behind that statement may be true, saying it will get you into trouble. Using a team's vulnerability to your advantage is taboo.

#### **5. Regularly touch base with the other person.**

Continuing dialogue is one of the best possible ways to avoid problems. However, that concept straddles a fine line. 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 exchanges at appropriate times, such as during a dead-ball interval. Keep in mind that your goal is to send the message that you are willing to communicate; you are not commenting on all facets of play. □

## **Players Must Learn How To Argue, Too**

In rookie classes and officials association meetings around the country, the basics of officiating are taught. Invariably, one of those topics deals with game-management skills. "Game Control," "Keeping Your Cool" and "Be Careful What You Say" could all be chapters on a young officials' syllabus.

In those sessions, officials must learn such things as, "Don't get into a shouting match," and the old favorite, "You can't be misquoted if you don't say anything." But there's another factor in the argument equation: the player. As important as it is for an official to learn how to handle an argument, it is equally important for a player to learn how to argue.

#### **Two basic principles**

Officials need to understand and accept two basic principles of arguing. The first is that players will argue. Accept it. Yes, there are different levels of arguing, but to expect an entire game to pass without being questioned is either naive or arrogant. In a youth game, the player arguing might simply roll his eyes with the "You can't call that, Mister," look on his face. In high school or adult games, there might be someone in your face. Like it or not, you will be questioned.

The second principle is that you can learn from the way players argue. By understanding how a player should argue, officials will be better able to handle the situation.

## Jordan rules

There is clearly a right way and a wrong way for a player to argue. Just ask Michael Jordan. The retired basketball star and one-time minor league baseball player learned that flailing arms and wild demonstrations are ineffective with minor league umpires. Jordan played outfield for the Chicago White Sox Southern League (Double A) farm club, the Birmingham (Ala.) Barons. The *Palm Beach (Fla.) Post* in May 1994, published an article about Jordan's argument-education process. The *Post* said that in early April, Jordan was called out on strikes by umpire Andy Fletcher. In response, Jordan stomped around the batter's box and went face-to-face with Fletcher. Jordan then angrily flung his bat toward the dugout. Most officials would probably agree that Jordan argued incorrectly.

Jordan learned. In mid-May, Jordan was called out by Fletcher for sliding out of the basepath while trying to break up a double play with the bases loaded. Jordan stayed calm. Instead of making a scene, he let his manager handle it.

At the end of the inning, as he ran past Fletcher on the way to the outfield, Jordan stopped and calmly said: "Andy, I'm 6'6". I think I can reach the bag from there." Fletcher patiently pointed out that he didn't think so and Jordan jogged quietly to his position. No arms flailing, no pointing to the slide, no kicking dirt.

"I think the problem early in the season was that Michael didn't know how to argue with an umpire," said Brian King, Fletcher's Southern League partner. "He's gotten much better at it. He uses our names now when he argues. He didn't do that before. There's nothing wrong with him questioning a call. There's just a right way and a wrong way to do it."

Jordan offers his own assessment: "I always try to get along with officials. Sometimes they won't let you. They build a wall when they won't admit they're wrong. I admit I'm wrong when I am wrong. One of the greatest things about (retired NBA referee) Jake O'Donnell was he could say, 'I blew it.' I can respect that."

## Automatic no-nos

Certain forms of arguing are unacceptable at any level, in any sport. The most obvious: making physical contact with an official during an argument. Other no-nos (depending on the players' skill levels, ages and league rules) include: using the words "You" or "You're" directly before a derogatory term, flailing of arms and legs, swearing loudly enough for fans and others to hear and tossing equipment.

Regarding the interference play in which Jordan was called out, he said: "I saw the film the next day and I was out. That night, I went up, apologized to Fletcher and told him I was wrong."

No argument with that. □



## Don't Take It Personally

Listen to this from a coach: "Shake your head; your eyes are stuck. You're terrible. If you had one more eye, you'd be a cyclops." Now, deal with it, but don't take it personally.

One of the most difficult things to understand about officiating is that, generally, people are not yelling at you, they are yelling at your uniform and what it represents. "You mean to tell me that when a coach tells me I'm the worst official he's ever seen, I'm not supposed to take it personally?" The answer is: "That's right!"

Consider the sources of most negative comments: coaches, players and fans. All of them have a vested interest in the outcome of their games, and their judgment is frequently clouded. Understand and accept that a coach is going to view things

differently than you are. And when he says something insulting, he is generally commenting to "the uniform," not you, personally. Despite those assurances that it's not really about you, however, many officials *do* react to abuse.

What's really happening when coaches and players and fans are coming down on you like the proverbial ton of bricks and you're becoming flustered and losing concentration? Answer: You are doubting your abilities. You are losing confidence in yourself. The methods for regaining, or better yet, never losing, your composure and your concentration seem simple enough, but they take practice to be effective.

### Preparation breeds confidence.

Working in front of several thousand screaming people can be intimidating, especially when you don't feel prepared. Know your rules. Know your mechanics. If

### Seven Ways To Develop Thick Skin:

- 1. Prepare completely.** Know rules and mechanics. Work every game and scrimmage you can. Although you'll never escape it completely, the better prepared you are, the less likely you'll be the target for abuse.
- 2. Accept that you are human.** You *will* blow some. Every official, from youth leagues up to the majors, blows a call every now and then.
- 3. Learn from your mistakes.** Don't keep blowing the same call again and again. You leave yourself open for jeers — deservedly so — if you don't strive to learn from past mistakes.
- 4. Choose not to be offended.** You have the power to choose — Use it. Keep telling yourself that they're yelling at the uniform, not at you. You may understand that concept, but until it

becomes ingrained in your thinking, you may not truly believe it.

- 5. Monitor your physical responses.** The earlier you catch yourself reacting emotionally to comments, the easier it is to bring yourself back under control. Know your physical responses to anxiety: jaw clenching, a flushed face, stomach tightening, etc.
- 6. Have a pre-planned response.** Snap yourself back into the game when you feel the warning signs coming on. Visualize yourself as a fan or repeat a calming phrase. Eventually you will condition yourself to get past the comments and be ready for the next play.
- 7. Don't forget a postgame self-evaluation.** How did you handle the jeers from the crowd and the criticism from the coach? How will you handle them better in the next game?

you can be where you're supposed to be to see the play, you'll be more confident. When you are prepared, you will know when a coach doesn't have a clue what he's talking about. Your confidence will go a long way toward keeping you from being distracted by the tirade. Without solid preparation, you'll never feel confident enough to fend off personal attacks.

**No matter how good you are, you will never get them all right.**

There is a chance, however slim, that the coach or player is right about the call you just made. You *will* make mistakes. During the heat of a game, calls come too quickly for serious reflection. A thorough postgame evaluation will help your confidence and get you ready for the next game. During the game, you must put that call behind you and rid yourself of doubts so you are ready for the next one.

**Don't let them get you down.**

Coaches have bad days, too. Remind yourself, again, that it's your uniform they're yelling at, not you. If you find that you are reacting emotionally to something a coach has said, stop yourself. Analyze the play and your ruling. Are you sure? If not, why not? What should you have done differently? Where should you have been? If you did blow it, how will you assure that you won't make that mistake again?

Your own emotional level is arguably the most difficult aspect of a game to control. If you commit yourself to blocking out the jeers, barbs and criticisms and concentrating on the next play, you'll be a better official. It all sounds so simple. Eventually it actually can be, but not without practice. □

## When a Fight Breaks Out

Fights on the field or court are a danger to players, fans, officials and anyone else who happens to get in the way. Fights can break out with very little notice and, while there has been a lot said on how to prevent a fight, very little has ever been said on what officials should or should not do when the fists actually start to fly.

### Some general guidelines:

**1. Have a plan in place.**

Each fight situation is different and should be handled according to the circumstances, using good judgment. Discussing the possibility of a fight should be an essential part of any pregame conference. While there is little that three officials can do to prevent the mayhem of a dozen athletes, having a plan can keep injuries to a minimum.

**2. Rely on your partners.**

Immediately ask for any assistance available from partners when a fight erupts, and enlist the help of the coaches and managers in getting the players back under control.

**3. Keep bench players on the bench.**

Once a fight starts, the best thing you can do to keep it from escalating is to keep the benches from clearing. Coaches and managers can be very helpful in keeping the bench players where they belong.

**4. Isolate the players.**

Ideally, isolate the instigating players and get rid of them right away.

## 5. Practice preventative medicine.

Prevention is your best tool when it comes to player fights. You must be able to have a feel for the tone of the game so that you can head off most altercations before they ever become full-fledged fights. But, when push comes to shove, control the situation to the best of your ability while keeping self-preservation at the forefront of your mind. Rely on your partners; use the coaches when you can, and make sure to have a pregame plan in place in the event of a fight.

No matter what, maintain your composure. With so many physical assaults occurring during sports contests, it is essential that you use very good, reasoned judgment. When you see a volatile situation, invoke penalties as you deem necessary. □

## If You're Attacked

In rare instances, games, or situations within them, turn violent. In the worst cases, fans may brawl with other fans, players may go into the stands to confront spectators or a fight may break out on the court and spill into the stands.

Assaults against sports officials are drawing unprecedented attention. Many states have passed legislation designed specifically to protect sports officials. More and more assaults are given media attention. It's an unfortunate reality.

When a situation involving brawling fans and/or players escalates to the point where the game officials and the game administrator can't control it, the game administrator should call the police to restore order. In most higher level games (high school varsity and above) in high profile sports (such as basketball and football), uniformed police officers are already assigned to the game site. Know where the police are located so you can find them if you need them.

Get the police involved if you or your partner(s) have been assaulted. File appropriate police reports and follow through with charges as appropriate. One way to help deter violence against officials is to stand up and fight it the proper way — in the judicial system. You do a disservice to the avocation if you're involved in a physical altercation and decide to look the other way to avoid trouble.

The late Mel Narol, who was an attorney and an authority on legal issues involving officials, offered advice on the proper procedures to follow if you are physically attacked.

**1. Don't strike back physically at the player, coach or fan who assaulted you.**

If your attacker is injured due to your retaliation, you could be subject to criminal liability and/or a reduction of any potential monetary award. By fighting back physically, you may be placing yourself in a no-win situation.

**2. As soon as possible, obtain the names, addresses and phone numbers of witnesses.**

The information they supply may be critical to you and your attorney.

**3. Immediately write down a complete version of what occurred and how you were injured.**

Be sure to include the names, addresses and phone numbers of your attacker(s), appropriate coaches/managers, your fellow official(s) and the scorers and timers.

**4. Determine if a videotape of the game and incident has been made; if so, obtain a copy of that tape.**

Visual evidence can be of great value to you and your attorney.

**5. Discuss the incident only with those who 'need to know.'**

Obviously, you must discuss the incident with your partner(s), game management personnel, law enforcement officials, etc., but with everyone else, simply gather information. Many times what you say is misunderstood or misinterpreted, which may return to haunt you during litigation.

**6. Obtain competent legal counsel.**

Discuss whether you have a civil or criminal complaint to make against your attacker(s). If

you are assaulted during or after a game you've worked, you have the right to pursue both civil and criminal actions. Those options should be discussed with legal counsel.

**Review the incident.**

Following any game in which you had an ejection or other unsportsmanlike conduct incident to deal with, ask yourself these important questions:

1. Did I do anything to lead to the ejection?
2. Did I challenge the player or coach?
3. Did I lose self control?
4. Did my body language show I was the aggressor?
5. Did I let the coach or player have a chance to get his or her emotions in check?
6. Would I do anything differently if a similar situation occurred in the future?

Take a hard look at yourself to see if there's anything you could have done better. Ask your partner(s) for their views, or review the incident with respected veterans to gain further insight. Some bad situations can't be prevented or avoided, but many can.

**The next game:**

After you personally analyze the difficult situation, you need to get mentally ready for your next game. You've got to learn from the incident, but also clear your head to officiate the next game. It's unfair to the game and its participants for you to carry over bad feelings from one game to the next.

Be sure that you deal with new challenges as you would have before the incident. If you have a shorter fuse in your next game, you're not mentally ready to officiate.

The biggest challenge is seeing the offender again. Many times, the incident has been forgotten by the offender; you need to forget it too. Other times, the bad feelings have festered in the offender. Deal with it professionally, and implement your entire conflict management plan again. □