

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflicts in officiating are inevitable. Whenever two teams meet to compete, conflict is already present. It may not manifest itself in every game, but conflict will arise between players, coaches, fans and officials and it is the role of the official to manage the conflict, regardless of when and where it occurs.

Officials should approach each game with the understanding that a big part of their job is conflict management, and when conflict is managed well, officials can take a measure of satisfaction in their role. You will not make calls that please both teams so since your goal is not to please people, the best you can hope for is to earn respect for the job you do. Officiating will never be a popularity contest.

As well, officials need to understand that conflict that arises in a game is not always an official's fault. We live in a society that loves to place blame and often this blame is placed on officials unfairly. Officials can be a convenient scapegoat for the frustrations of a coach, player or parent. Understanding this will help officials deal with conflict without taking on all of the pressures that fall on those who are asked to arbitrate the game in a fair and safe manner.

One way to understand or prepare for conflict is to know the environment you are going into and act appropriately. Be aware of the context of the game. If it is city dwellers versus country folks, there may be potential for additional conflict. Similarly there may be conflict between rivals, or teams made up of different nationalities or religions. If the teams have played recently in a game that had a lot of conflict, some of the emotions could carry over.

Officials are often accused of "having rabbit ears" when they seem to hear everything that is going on and possibly overreact, but it is also important an official does not go deaf either. Ensure that you hear the different types of verbal communication going on in the game between opponents.

Rule 47 (f) in the CHA Rule Book calls for a Game Misconduct to be assessed to any player or team official who engages in verbal taunts, insults or intimidation based on discriminatory grounds (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language). Hockey is notorious for allowing players to talk "smack" or use verbal insults to intimidate. The CHA is calling on officials to ensure they penalize players who indulge in this kind of behavior.

In particular, any insult that starts with the word "you" or could start with the word "you" should be penalized. You may be able to ignore the words "that's brutal" or "that's a terrible call", but as soon as it changes to "you're brutal" or "you're terrible" the remarks have become personal and you must penalize the offender.

Many times you may not hear the comments made, but only see the reaction of the player being insulted. Confronting the perpetrator can be helpful, and sometimes penalizing the player may be the best solution. Ignoring these types of situations or choosing not to hear it is not the appropriate response.

When you make a tough call, expect controversy. Whether it is verbal harassment, negative body signals or other forms of disagreement, expect it and know where you draw the line on how much you will accept. If you handle conflict successfully, your overall game management skills will be enhanced.

Let's look at some general situations that may occur in a game and examine appropriate and inappropriate responses.

Verbal challenges occur frequently during the course of a game. If a player or coach challenges you, it is imperative that you listen carefully, weighing all of the information that is presented at that time, and also considering other game factors. Perhaps a coach is trying to seek an advantage or edge on future calls through intimidation, save face after a move goes wrong or protect a player.

Adversity between coaches and officials often comes down to one factor, coaches care who wins and referees don't!

Once challenged, an official usually must respond in one of two ways, to deny the challenge (which may take skill in verbal diplomacy), or offer a solution to the perceived problem. If at all possible, take a few moments to let the attack sink in and determine your response. If the objection has some merit (you may not have seen the whole incident, made a marginal call), an additional penalty may just compound the problem. As well, the initiator may show instant regret and depending on the severity of the challenge, you may be able to ignore it. You are not obligated to deliver a reply to every challenge. Use the pause to determine whether a reply is really needed, and whether a verbal or non-verbal reply is most appropriate.

Remember as well that some coaches yell as a psychological tactic. They know you won't change your call but perhaps they can plant seeds of doubt that may get them a break on the next call, may intimidate you, or may get their team and the fans fired up. They generally are not yelling at you as much as the uniform and what it represents.

Be aware of when the coach may be using you to accomplish his goals. A coach who jumps on the boards or flails his arms is usually trying to rally his players and get the fans involved. This would usually occur when they are the home team, and are down a goal or two late in the game.

Let's look at some specific responses, positive and negative that an official may use in various situations.

If a coach questions a certain play, try this response. “Coach, here is what I saw...”. This gives the coach the idea that it may have played out differently than what he saw happen. A variation of this is to ask the coach “what did you see?”, which puts the coach on the defensive, although caution must be taken into getting into a prolonged discussion on what he saw and what you saw.

On occasion, a comment like “I heard you and I’ll watch for that”, “I don’t think so” or “I don’t see it” will indicate to the coach that you have heard the concerns and rejected it. Compare the above responses to possible responses like “Oh, come off it”, “That’s ridiculous” or “What are you looking at?” which cancel the validity of the coaches observations and will only increase hostility levels.

Another approach might be to acknowledge that an incident may have happened the way the coach describes it, but that you either missed it or didn’t see it in the same way. With that type of acknowledgement you are admitting to a possibility that things may have happened the way the coach described it without admitting you were wrong.

Another option may be to totally disregard a comment from the bench. If the coach does not continue to press the point, then a non-response may be the ideal response. Sometimes a head nod of agreement will resolve the issue quickly whereas defending the call immediately leads to further dialogue, with both sides trying to defend their positions.

If you feel that you need to go to the bench to discuss a situation with the coach, or to deliver a warning keep the following guidelines in mind. First of all, deliver the message directly to the coach. If they are standing on the bench or boards, get them to move down to your level and make eye contact to ensure they are not standing above you. Try to avoid facial expressions while taking in information as things like a scowl or shaking the head can increase the animosity of the complainant. Do not get into prolonged discussions or arguments at the bench. Deliver the message quickly and get the game going again as soon as possible. You can not get into an argument with a coach if you do not participate!

When you go to the bench to resolve an issue or deliver a message, ensure that you are only there to handle that problem. If a coach brings up an incident that happened earlier in the game, simply remind the coach that the issue at hand is what you are trying to clarify, not what happened earlier, and turn the conversation back to the present issue.

If there is an issue that the coach wants to discuss, but the period is nearly over, advise the coach that you will discuss it with him after the period. Often this allows the coach some time to cool down or forget about the issue totally, and even if the conversation does take place, it does not have players and fans waiting for play to begin again.

Going to the bench can escalate a situation and officials must be very careful not to lose their cool. Officials are charged with keeping control of a game and there is never a valid excuse to lose control. Work on maintaining and controlling emotions in emotionally charged situations. Never use vulgarity and “treat disrespect with respect”.

Be very careful about using threats. Avoid “If, ...then” statements as they can put you in situations where it may be difficult to follow through. If you tell a player “not one more word or you get an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty” and the player then says “I’m sorry”, you are in a box. The player said another word and how do you penalize an apology? Rather use words such as “that’s enough” or “you made your point, now let’s move on”.

In the same way, if a coach is vocally harassing you, words like “I’ve heard enough” or “You’ve said enough” are about as strong a reply as you should use. Adding the word “please” indicates additional respect. However, words such as “shut up” or “shut your mouth” cross the line of respect.

Non – verbal signals can be very helpful in these situations as well. If a player or coach is verbally attacking you and your first response is an unsportsmanlike conduct call or hands to the hips to assess a Misconduct, you give the impression that you have a short fuse and can’t take any controversy. Instead of the above, if a player is berating you, hold up your hand to indicate that the action must stop (along with a verbal warning). If the player continues the verbal attack, and you then assess a penalty, the people observing the action will see that the player had a clear warning to cease his actions and chose not to. Since the warning wasn’t heeded, the player has no one to blame but them self for continuing the action and getting the subsequent penalty. An alternative to the “stop” signal with the hand is finger to the lips to indicate the verbal chatter must stop.

When dealing with abusive fans, never get into verbal exchanges or gestures. Be more tolerant of fans than any other group, but if at any time they cross the line, stop the game and use the arena staff or the home team staff to eject that person from the arena.

In any situation where you enter a discussion with a player or coach, tell the truth. It's ok to say you made a mistake or a bad call. Honesty is your best policy. If you try to lie your way out of a situation, you lose credibility and damage the reputation of all officials. Work hard to ensure you do not make the same mistake, as too many mistakes will hurt your reputation as well.

Officials should be quick to commend positive behavior by a player. If a player helps out a member of the opposition, or makes an attempt to avoid unnecessary contact, officials should acknowledge such acts of good sportsmanship with a complimentary word in passing. This will further enhance good sportsmanship.

Knowing the rules and procedures and techniques will help you in your officiating, however knowing how to handle people and conflict situations separates the best from the rest. Work on your people handling skills in each game. After a game think about situations that occurred and determine if certain situations could have been handled better or differently. Learn from each situation and your overall skill as an official will improve.

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