

How to Handle Difficult Situations in Officiating

As we prepare for the 2017-18 season(s), I am presenting some summary notes from a Referee Magazine guide regarding diffusing conflict/arguments relative to our game contests.

Do Not 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 is 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 to you the same courtesy. When both sides have been adequately heard, problem-solving begins.

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 this. You have to “keep them in the box,” meaning keep them focused on the play or situation they are complaining about. If they do that, say something like, “Let’s focus on this play and get it resolved.”

3.Choose an optimal time to bring up and address problems – Conflict resolution may be heightened by choosing a time other than the present to discuss an issue. Approach the person when both of you are calm and free to talk. Dead ball situations, during a time out or between quarters/periods may be a great time. Keep the conversations focused and brief.

4.Choose when to touch base with the other person – You want lines of communication to be open, but constant dialogue is not acceptable. Talking should be limited to brief words at appropriate times. Keep in mind you are only sending the message that you are willing to communicate; you are not commenting on all facets of play.

HOW TO HANDLE ARGUERS

You can usually identify four (4) types of arguers at any game. Each combative type requires a different approach to diffuse them.

A.The Chipper – That is a player or coach who won’t confront you directly, but who will make constant little sniping remarks throughout the contest, trying to goad you into a confrontation. Don’t let such a gnat-like annoyance incite your desire to unload on that person. Instead, early in the contest, firmly inform the chipper that you’ve heard his or her comments and do not expect them to continue. If the problem persists, use your proper officiating tools (technical foul, unsportsmanlike flag, ejection) to defuse the situation more decisively.

B.The Intimidator – That is a player or coach who thinks he/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 them. If that does not work and the intimidator crosses the line, take the appropriate action. Remember...give the respect you expect, and expect it in return.

C.The Clasher – This is the player or coach who just does not like you. You’ve officiated numerous contests for that person, but no matter what you do, the clasher is confrontational with you at all times. Prepare yourself mentally during your pregame anytime you know you are going to be dealing with a clasher. Accept that you are not going to be liked by everyone. Confrontations with the clasher may feel more like personal attacks than with arguers, so you must be even more vigilant to keep your emotions under control. Your best tools against the clasher are professionalism and courtesy.

D.The Legitimate Arguer – This is the player or coach who actually has a legitimate concern or point. Understand that the legitimate arguer likely will give you the benefit of the doubt many times throughout a contest. The legitimate arguer will usually only become argumentative if he/she believes there is a call to be made. When that happens, the legitimate arguer will usually be more respectful and professional in voicing their 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 come back to bite you. Don't go there. If you do, you might lose control of the game, your emotions or future assignments. Since that is 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 and you are gone,” you'd better back it up. If you can't (and maybe shouldn't) you are stuffed into a corner. 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 the “delivery” of how you say something. Sure, you think your words weren't that bad. But your tone of voice or body language tells participants you don't care or are so angry you cannot effectively game manage situations. This limits your effectiveness. Monitor your tone of voice. Be firm, be fair, and be nonabrasive. Check your sarcasm in the locker room.
Don't be cute – You may think snide remarks are funny, but you might not be able to control how such remarks come across. If you think you know a remark is designed to poke fun or generate a smile, think again before you issue that remark. Not everyone is on the same page. A too cutesy remark could land you in hot water with your supervisor. Think it, but don't say it!
Don't do it the same way every time – You may have 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 are saying.” “That is a good point Coach.” Make wise adjustments. Using the same lines or statements over and over gets old, and coaches recognize that. Freshen up. Look at each situation as something completely new and adjust your remarks, even if it is only slightly. Experience is the best teacher. Keep your values and character intact and your approaches/responses fresh.

Use these tips to be the best you can be. Strive for excellence and performance.

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