

Secrets of Game Management

Something both typical and extraordinary happens when a group of officials gets together. Referees and umpires love to talk about officiating, particularly when there's no game to work.



Most groups are dynamic, with individuals flowing into and out of the group every month and every season. Topics vary. Expertise develops over time. In fact, a group's conversation topics are predictably progressive. New officials tend to talk mostly about rules, journeymen focus on mechanics, true veterans pay much closer attention to communications and philosophy.

It's important to understand these topics are not exclusive. A rookie may ask one question about a three second violation, and his next may be about talking with players and coaches. But as a career progresses, most officials want to talk about game management: coaches and how to deal with coaches.

We've got a lot of guys that have pretty good judgment. That's true at every level from 'Y' ball to Division I. As a game progresses they'll get their percentage of plays right, and they know the rules, but they struggle with the bench – usually while wondering *why* they struggle with the bench.

There's a way to handle the bench and I think there's a lot of conversation among officials in that regard. There's lots of talk about which coaches and which teams are the most difficult ones, and which are the ones that are easy to deal with. Here's one tip you can use.

In my league, the ACC, we have 12 coaches. Every coach is different. All have different personalities. Some simply are not into questioning any calls, and with them you don't have to do a lot of bench management. Then we have a few coaches that are more contentious, and they want an explanation on a lot of calls.

When a game matches these two types you have to size up the situation. You have to look at each coach, not only the complainer but also his adversary. You can't give one coach too much attention without getting the other coach nervous. This forces you to use your experience, to know what you can do and what you can't do.

When officials get together lots of war stories are told and the majority of them lead to some laughter, but the stories I listen to and remember are the ones that include details of how an official handled a situation; what he said or did to deal with the coach or player, how he got the game moving again.

These conversations are critically important. In some ways, a young official climbing the ladder can learn more by talking with veterans than by working games. Listen closely and you'll find important lessons in these conversations. Granted, some of the lessons demonstrate what not to do; others offer viable advice that simply does not fit your personality. You have to be able to understand those lessons and realize you'll probably never use the suggestions.

Then, once in a while you'll hear about a game situation and an official's on-the-spot solution and you'll think to yourself, "I see why that worked and it could work for me!" Latch onto one or two of those in an evening and your time has been well spent.

Game management is one of the truly challenging aspects of officiating. Learning established techniques, deciding what might work for you, and becoming innovative enough to try some original ideas takes a tremendous amount of time. You might compare the process to filling a water glass with an eyedropper, particularly when you may glean only one idea from an evening's conversation. Patience really is a virtue.

I've always been a believer that officiating is an art and not an exact science. You have to talk officiating at every opportunity, then trust your instincts and know what you're good at. Nothing is too defined in officiating. We have our rules, we have our points of emphasis, and we have our mechanics, and that's all well and good. But a good official takes all that, puts it together, and is able to add to it for his own personality, how he handles difficult situations, and that's where the art of officiating comes in.

Now all you have to do is figure out where your fellow officials get together to talk, and be sure you do plenty of listening.

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