

Off The Blocks

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When it comes to self-evaluation, honesty is crucial. Keeping your self-esteem high can be healthy, but when you really want to get serious about improving your officiating, embellishing the truth is a false start. Here is a starting point for a complete self-analysis.

How many times after working a meet do you drive home thinking your work as an official is done? Maybe you spent a few moments thinking back on your performance. Perhaps you came out with the vague notion that you had a good meet or a bad meet. How often do you expand on those notions and ask yourself why? How often do you actually sit down shortly after a meet and ask yourself the tough questions?

In reviewing the manuals for officials of various sports and listening to the training suggestions of instructional chairmen of different organizations, one thing appears almost conspicuous by its absence: Recommendations for any kind of post game self-evaluation. The NFL, however, has a particularly intensive post-game review process for its crews, including videotape analysis of each play in which an infraction was called.

Indeed, it seems to be the practice of many groups to dissuade officials from ever looking back. It is not uncommon to hear or read such maxims as, "Forget the bad games," or, "Never second-guess yourself," or, "Leave the game on the court or field." Those are unfortunate practices.

A great deal can be learned by officials who review recently completed work. Only by recognizing past errors, and the situations in which they occurred, can officials take the necessary steps to avoid them from that point on. Don't ever think your work is done when you walk off the deck. If you're interested in improving as an official, you need to ask yourself the following 10 questions after every meet or contest. Keep in mind that the purpose of the questions is to alert you to any undesirable tendencies in your work or situations that are particularly troublesome to you. As a result, any question answered "Yes" should be followed by the companion questions "Why?" and "In what situations?"

You can only answer the questions about yourself; others cannot answer them. No one but you has access to your experiences. For that reason, complete honesty is a must if these questions are to be of any value. Let's get started.

1. DID I BLOW ANY CALLS?

Blowing calls will always occur regardless of an official's experience and expertise. Officiating is simply not a perfectible craft. It is, however, inexcusable for an official to continue making the same kinds of mistakes or mistakes with the same frequency throughout his career. The purpose of self-evaluation is to eliminate certain kinds of errors and to reduce their overall frequency. By identifying your blown calls you can begin to learn why you blew them and how to avoid blowing the same calls in the future.

2. WERE THERE ANY TIMES WHEN IT WAS FORTUNATE THAT I DIDN'T HAVE TO MAKE A CALL?

In almost every contest there are situations (or potential ones) which could cause officials embarrassment if they were required to make a ruling. Fortunately, most lapses in concentration, improper positioning and failures to hustle go unnoticed by others (coaches excepted). You should not, however, ignore those lapses. Sooner or later such shortcomings will catch up to you.

3 DID I DO EVERYTHING I COULD TO ENSURE A JUST OUTCOME?

In every sport there is a great deal of latitude available for officials in the sanctioning of play. As a result, this arbitrary power could strongly influence (if not determine) the outcome of a contest. The best you can hope to do is to choose a course of enforcement that will be just and bring about a conclusion that reflects the

relative performance by the participants. In other words, do not become a part of the competition.

4. WERE MY CALLS/ DECISIONS CONSISTENT?

Want to drive coaches crazy and keep the spectators buzzing? Inconsistency will do it every time. In fact across all sports if you polled coaches you would find that officiating inconsistency is their largest concern. Inconsistent calls between officials, as well as relative inconsistency by a single official are problems.

5. DID I FAIL TO MAINTAIN PROPER CONTROL AT ANY TIME?

An important part of any official's job is to control the behavior of athletes, coaches and spectators so the meet can proceed in an orderly fashion. Arguments, spectator interference and other unexpected disruptions often endanger the likelihood of orderliness and proper conclusion. Anyone can be surprised and confused by new experiences, but each such situation should be used as a learning experience for future incidents.

6. WHEN DID I FEEL MOST VULNERABLE TO OUTSIDE INFLUENCES?

All officials experience situations in which their confidence and independence waxes and wanes. That is a normal response to an activity that relies so heavily upon subjective judgement. It is important, however, for you to know when you are most vulnerable so that necessary steps can be taken to keep those influences in a proper perspective. By identifying when you are most susceptible to those outside influences, you can bear down with a little discipline and follow your own course.

7. WERE THERE ANY SITUATIONS WHERE I AVOIDED OR USURPED RESPONSIBILITY FOR A RULING AT THE EXPENSE OF ANOTHER OFFICIAL?

It is a human tendency to avoid potentially threatening situations while seeking those that are likely to be rewarding. You should be careful, however, of any action that might reflect badly upon a brother or sister official. Whether you allowed your coworker to take responsibility for a ruling you should have made or you stepped in and overruled your partner, you should be certain it is done in the interest of the meet rather than for any personal motive.

8. WAS THERE ANYTHING ABOUT MY SIGNALS, GESTURES OR STYLE THAT EVOKED AN UNEXPECTED OR UNWANTED RESPONSE?

An official is often unaware of how his work appears to others. As a result, his work may be seen as inappropriate or incompetent. For example, although you may want to appear relaxed during the course of your work, you may be perceived as appearing disinterested. Good officials, on each occasion, should know something about the character of their audiences and adjust their performances to produce the best possible results. Such insight takes time, experience and attentiveness to the changing character of audiences.

9. DID I UPHOLD, DEFEND OR RATIONALIZE ANY IMPROPER RULINGS?

Many officials live by the old adage that to change a decision is to provoke criticism and undermine credibility. It should be kept in mind that the purpose for which an official is appointed is to "call em right." If you are unable to handle criticism or are too concerned with an untarnished image, you probably shouldn't get involved in such work. When a mistake is made, you should accept the responsibility rather than penalize the participants by insisting upon its correctness. In the long run, that type of inflexibility does more damage to your credibility than almost anything else. However, you should never allow those mistakes to continue. If you are consistently accepting responsibility for the same blown call over and over again, you will end up losing credibility.

10. WAS THERE A PARTICULAR ASPECT OF MY PERFORMANCE THAT I COULD WORK ON AT THE NEXT MEET?

The perfect game or meet has yet to be worked. If you ever answer "No" to this question, you are either deceiving yourself or not interested in perfecting your craft. There are always areas in need of improvement. Officials who are satisfied with all past performances are either lazy, disinterested or haven't had their weaknesses exploited (they will eventually). You should always work under the assumption that you are

only as good as your next call and should make every effort to ensure a good one. By understanding yourself and identifying your strengths and weaknesses as an official, you open the door for improvement every meet. If you're committed to improvement and have a desire to succeed in your work, memorize the 10 questions and commit to answering them in detail shortly after every meet.

10 MORE QUESTIONS DID I ...

1. Arrive at the meet site on time?
2. Dress smartly and appropriately?
3. Conduct or participate in a beneficial pre meet conference?
4. Look confident without appearing over-confident?
5. Give the proper signals (whistles, raised hand, etc.) in an appropriate manner?
6. Develop and maintain genuine teamwork with my partners?
7. Maintain proper positioning?
8. Place my hands on an athlete for any reason?
9. Treat all participants with the appropriate amount of respect?
10. Make every effort to defuse potentially volatile situations?... USA Swimming.