

How We MAKE THINGS WORSE

The old saying among officials is, the only friends we have out there are our partners and ourselves. If that's true, why do we so often stick the knife into our own backs?

Sports officials get it from all sides. That's not news. Coaches are on us all game, players beg for calls — don't even get started on the spectators. We're in enforcement, and like cops and school principals, we're not always super popular.

But nobody does more disservice to officials than officials themselves. From badmouthing each other out of earshot, to cramming our successes down our colleagues' throats, to getting lazy and complacent with our work, to thinking that, "Yeah, I know what's best for this game and I don't care what my bosses or the rules say," as a group we're guilty of sabotage. We torpedo ourselves and then we wonder why we don't get respect.

It's time to take a look at how our attitudes shape our profession and ultimately the games we officiate.

"It's a problem when an official puts him- or herself first and the game second," says Jack Folliard, the executive director of the Oregon Athletic Officials Association, a statewide high school officiating group affiliated with the Oregon School Activities Association. "Our emphasis needs to be on fairly officiating games and not the politics of self-achievement. The guys who hurt officiating are the guys who are more concerned about their career than they are about being the best officials they can be."

It's human nature, of course, and like most other people, we officials tend to focus on ourselves, wonder how we can get an advantage and search for ways to get ahead. A little bit of that is nothing more than being human and, kept in check, it probably doesn't present any serious problems. Left unchecked and allowed to run amok and we have a population of officials whose focus is away from their games and on themselves and inevitably, the games and our avocation suffer.

It's time to take a hard look at where we are and where we're going if we want the best for ourselves. Let's break down the most likely ways in which we, as a profession, can become self-defeating:

Getting a Little Too Friendly

The Scene — Official arrives at a game and immediately makes a beeline for a coach he knows. "Hey Bob! How're you doing, pal? How's the team this year? Say hi to your wife for me." Meanwhile that official's partner or partners stand uncomfortably to the side while the conversation deepens. Anybody at the venue, including the opposing team, can see the coach and the official whooping it up like a couple of old college roommates reunited.

Whether it's the officials who get too chatty before the game, the rec league ump's who have beers with the players and coaches after the games or the refs who hang out with players and coaches in the offseason — you can easily lose track and be in danger of giving the perception of favoritism.

"Hey, it's human nature to want to be liked and it's a good thing to develop some rapport with coaches," says Tom Robinson, Colorado High School Athletic Association assistant commissioner in charge of officials. "But it's crucial to make sure everything is fair and looks fair. Whatever talking and kidding you do with one coach you better do in equal

amounts with the coach on the other side. Make no mistake, coaches notice everything."

When officials develop an attitude that says, "Hey, I've been doing this so long — everyone knows me," you know they're in danger. Familiarity doesn't only breed contempt; it breeds familiarity, and officials who have worked games involving the same participants for a long time can let their guard down. It's as if they've begun to think the rules don't apply to them or they're needy enough that they're looking for friends all over the game.

"Follow what your own organization guidelines and rules say about such things, if there are any, because sometimes it gets very difficult to define. It's tough to say where the line is and when you're crossing it," said Robinson.

It is important to be cordial and it's important to develop relationships but if you want a friend — as Harry Truman said — get a dog.

By Tom Schreck

Gossip, Sniping and Backstabbing

The Scene — A couple of officials are talking at an association meeting. "Did you hear about Chuck?" says one. "He's going to state."

"You've got to be kidding me," complains the other. "That guy is worthless."

"You're telling me? You should have seen him work the South game last week. Absolutely pathetic."

Meanwhile, Chuck ambles up to join the conversation. "Hi fellas. What's new?"

"We heard about your state assignment," comes the reply. "Congratulations, pal. You deserve it, buddy!"

You'll see infighting in lots of different ways. Guys will get the cold shoulder for no good reason. It might mean

nitpicking on small things or it could mean petty arguments over something insignificant.

"Sometimes you'll see guys putting down other officials behind their backs to try to elevate their own status," says Folliard. "It's one thing to break down a game — that's a good thing to do — but it's never a good thing to focus on personalities and talk about people who aren't there."

You can want the same successes a fellow official enjoys, but it's something else entirely — and much more malevolent — to want it and resent your colleague for having it. Sure, you can be disappointed but when you turn that disappointment into hostility toward others you've crossed the line.

Letting Yourself Go

The Scene — Your crew chief arrives at the game site 20 minutes later than he's supposed to, rushes through a pregame (if he even has one at all), puts on his too-tight uniform, which was new when George Bush *senior* was president, and hits the field or court none-too-ready to work the game.

It's not uncommon for a veteran official to gradually drift away from certain aspects of professionalism. After all, as long as his onfield or oncourt work is exceptional, what's the problem? Plenty. When you start to think you know it all, that you'll always get games because you've been around for so long and the coaches all know you, you're headed for trouble. Those are the same types of officials who haven't read the rulebook in a decade, who don't attend association meetings and who coast along on their past success or reputation.

It is our job to treat our work with the appropriate respect. Think back to when you began as an official and remember how you used to do things. You got plenty of rest the night before, you got there early, you looked good and you riveted your attention to the action. You even kept yourself in shape knowing that would impact your performance. That's respect for the game.

How's it different today? Are you pulling in just before the contests start, wiped out from a poor night's sleep, wearing a dirty uniform that doesn't fit anymore because of all the weight you've put on? Professionalism isn't just for the overenthusiastic new guys, it's for everyone, especially for officials who've been doing the work the longest. It's the experienced officials who should know the right way of doing things and who need to lead by example.

Singing Your Own Praises

The Scene — Local ref makes good and gets tabbed to work games in a big-time college conference. Everyone's happy for the colleague (or not; see the section on "Gossip, Sniping and Backstabbing"). What's the problem? Say the ref still works high school ball in another sport and he starts showing up to game sites and association meetings with his college conference logo prominently displayed on his shirt, his bag, his jacket, even the pen in his pocket. It's not overt, sure, but just to make sure you catch the message, he opens conversation by mentioning how tough things were in his last college game and how that nationally known coach everyone loves is really a big jackass, and oh by the way, he might not be able to make the next association meeting because he's scheduled to work as a clinician at a camp for college hopefuls.

When an official shows up at an assignment and he's got the warmup suit, the briefcase and the collection of ballpoints from the last big-time contest he or she's done, what are they really saying? They're saying look how cool I am and how cool you aren't.

Sure, there's some room for pride and there's room for passing on experience, but you don't have to have the difference spelled out for you. You know when you're being big-timed and when you're the guy without a ton of big-time experience, it's a lonely feeling.

Usually though, big-timing is a much more subtle thing. Sometimes you see it when a team of officials gives the new guy the cold shoulder or doesn't include him or her in pregame conversations. Often it takes place when the big-timing official makes sure he drops all the big games he's done when he's talking to a less-experienced official. When you hear someone say, "You know, I remember feeling a little nervous before my first four state assignments but not anymore." Or, "Boy, the thing I hate about working the conference championship is the travel."

Tony Mariconda is an off-ice NHL official and he's also very involved with U.S. Hockey at the amateur level. He also works prep football and softball in New Jersey. His positions in both the pros and the amateurs put him in an interesting position. "I avoid talking about my involvement in the NHL when I'm working an amateur game or doing an officials' seminar," he says. "It has nothing to do with U.S. Hockey and if I went around

talking about the NHL all the time, it would easily turn a lot of people off. I feel uncomfortable with it when I'm working as an amateur."

Mariconda plays it smart. The fact is that the other people he works with probably know his NHL experience and they undoubtedly respect it. He lets it speak for itself and in that way he engenders respect for it, not resentment. So much of officiating is about building relationships, and putting yourself above others is *not* a way to do it.

Playing With the Rules

The Scene — You're working with an official who says he's a "Let 'em play type of ref." Next thing you know, he's passing on calling fouls left and right, offering up a few warnings here and there — even on very obvious infractions that require no judgment. "Aaah! That's a stupid rule anyway," he explains.

As officials we have a certain amount of leeway in our interpretation of how our game's rules are to be enforced. A good official has enough in the wrist to be able to know when to come down hard with enforcement and when to lay off a bit. The official, however, who gets lost in that gray area or begins to define all the rules as gray is doing the game a grave disservice.

Officials who spend too much time rewriting their own rulebooks have lost their way and they put the integrity of the sport in danger. It's faulty interpretations that hurt every official because they makes us look unprepared, incompetent and unprofessional. It sabotages everyone who has to make a difficult call and when the time comes to massage a rule a little bit for the sake of the game, it's going to make it that much harder for the poor official who has to do it right after the guy who does it way too much.

"Sometimes guys will kind of blend two rules together and take part of one regulation and part of another. I've seen it when it comes to enforcing major penalties and game misconducts. It could be something as simple as guys not wanting to fill out reports and not wanting to call attention to themselves or their games," says Mariconda.

We use our judgment and the flexibility of some rules in ways that benefit the game. If you're bending the rules to make your job easier, to avoid confrontation or to get back at a coach for personal reasons, then you're way out of bounds. It is important to choose your spots and keep the focus on the game because when you play with the rules, the effect can snowball out of control. If you bend something here, pretty soon you may have to bend it back over there, and before you know it your game is all bent out of shape. The results can be embarrassing.

Case in point: "We had a case in girls' softball that got a little crazy," recalls Robinson. "There's a rule about hair barrettes for the players. Well, the ump noticed one in the last inning of a game in a girl's ponytail and because of it, he disallowed her run and called her out. It made the difference in the game and really approached the absurd."