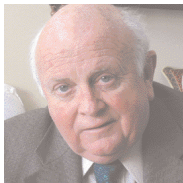




HOW TO BECOME A BETTER OFFICIAL



by Fred Horgan

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Officiating a basketball game can have its moments of ironic humor. One particular example that comes to mind happened a number of years ago when a fellow official and I were assigned to a semi-final game between two of the top teams in a local league. Predictably, the fans were in rare form that evening. Late in the game, my partner called a perfectly correct "charge" foul against the home team and their coach quickly took a time-out. For the next minute, every fan in the building could think of no greater pleasure than to have my friend hanged from the nearest basket support.

The building shook. After about twenty seconds of unbelievable abuse, he slowly strolled from the throw-in spot across the court to where I was standing near the scorer's table. With a smile on his face, he asked, "Is this what basketball is all about, Fred?"

Since that moment, in countless clinics and game situations as an official and later as an instructor, the ironic side to the question has become clear. Too often, an official steps onto the court without really having any idea what it's "all about", and in the process makes a fool of himself/herself and a travesty of the game, not to mention making it very difficult for other officials who have to follow.

Maybe it's time to answer the question, to try to put in plain and simple words "what it's all about". Knowledge of the rules and of proper game mechanics aside, what makes an official a success? What qualities set that person above those who stay for a short while and then are never seen again?

Give some thought to these ten characteristics of a successful official, in basketball or in any other sport.

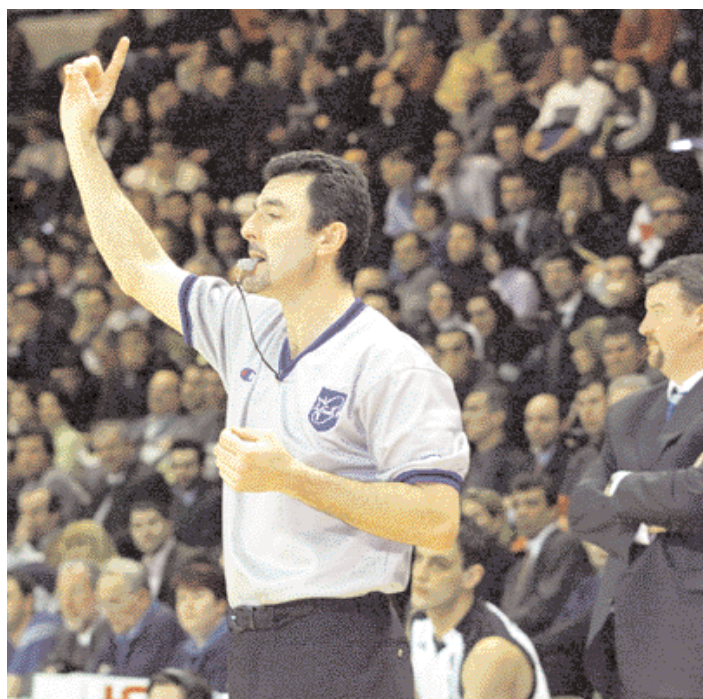
1. The good official is conscious of his/her appearance. The object is to be clean and well groomed without becoming a movie star. The uniform is often dictated by the association he/she represents but appearance is a personal responsibility in which that person takes great pride.

2. The good official is punctual, aware that coaches and players have enough on their minds without having to worry about when the officials will arrive. Even more important is the simple fact that a punctual arrival will set the tone for all pre-game preparations and indeed the first moments of the game itself. "Punctual" does not mean "game time".

The good official allows sufficient time to dress, discuss situations with a partner or partners and approach the playing court professionally. Nothing looks worse than a last minute sprint from the dressing room to the court at the beginning of the game or second half.

3. The good official doesn't referee the game alone. There are not two but three teams in every game, and one of these is the officiating team. The pre-game discussion becomes a priority but he/she is also conscious of the rest of the team, the table officials, throughout the game.

The good official realizes that the table officials have no way to protect themselves from verbal abuse and supports them whe-



never necessary. In post-game reviews, he/she also gives (and welcomes) any constructive, friendly, private criticism which might improve performance in the future.

4. During the game, the good official never becomes involved in lengthy conversations with players and coaches.

Such debates can cause far more problems than they might solve. When it is necessary to address someone, the conversation will be courteous and clear but brief.

On the other hand, conversations with scorers and timers might be more detailed and never rushed. The table officials are a part of the officiating team and it's the duty of the floor officials to provide whatever help they might need.

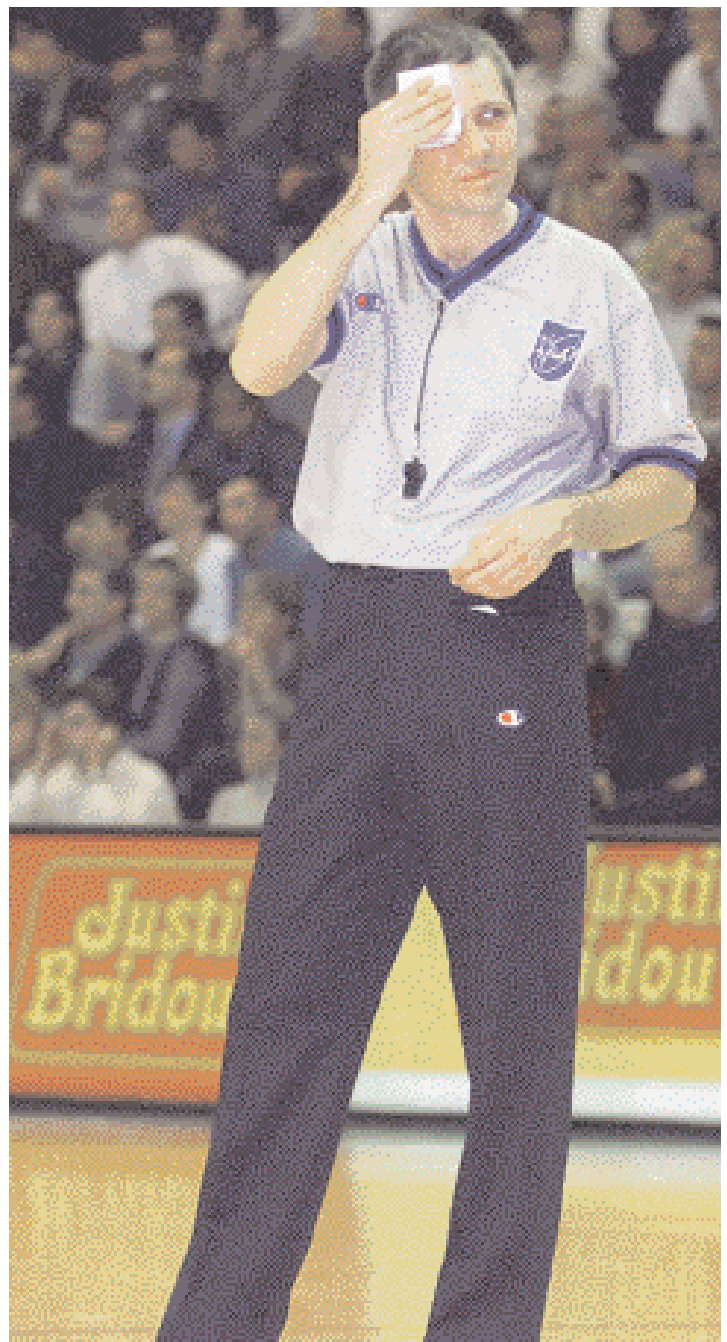
5. The good official tries not to be the center of attention. He/she knows that the official's role is to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Exaggerated signals, an unnecessarily loud voice and facial expressions or body language that might incite players, coaches or fans are avoided. Instead, the voice is clear, serious and confident; whistles are sharp but brief and signals are equally crisp. Play stoppages are kept as brief as possible because the good official realizes that most unsportsmanlike infractions occur while play is stopped. When a player's ego is wounded or pride is hurt, or when that player thinks he/she has been wronged, the best approach for avoiding confrontation is to resume the game as quickly as possible.

6. The good official knows that for every decision that will interrupt the game there will no doubt be five others that will not. Not every decision will require the blowing of the whistle. Most of the time, the official will judge that an infraction did not occur, despite what players, coaches or fans might think, and in this instance the lack of a whistle is really a communication in itself. There's no need to justify such decisions; head shaking and the use of unapproved signals belong in very few sports.

7. The good official is not a slave to a rulebook. He/she realizes that every rule has an intent which reflects a consistent philosophy of how the game should be played, and he/she makes it a point to know this intent. Phrases like "tempo", "flow of the game" and "game management" become just as important as any textbook definition.

8. The good official demonstrates professionalism. A stoppage in play isn't the time for him/her to practice free throws or 3-point shots. At the same time, frequent conversations with one's partner only suggest to others that someone lacks confidence. When the game is being played, proper mechanics dictate where each official should be. During a time-out, the official should stand still at the assigned floor position, using that stoppage to prepare mentally for resuming play.

9. The good official is courteous and controlled, manages his/her temper, and doesn't lose patience with players, coaches or fans, nor does he/she grant post-game interviews to discuss controversial plays. At the same time, he/she is in control without being arrogant. The good official knows who's in charge, and is aware that when authority is challenged there's recourse within the letter as well as the intent of the rules to cope with that challenge without making a fool of oneself. At the same time, the good official realizes that the two most



important phrases in the officiating vocabulary are "please" and "thank you". When someone does a favor by retrieving a ball or preventing a delay, there's nothing wrong with a courteous response.

10. Finally, the good official appreciates that he/she is not infallible. Mistakes will be made, and when such mistakes happen there should be neither hesitation nor discomfort in admitting to them. When the error is correctable, it's corrected; when it's beyond correction, the game must continue. The objective should always be to officiate to the best of one's ability. A day with a perfect game is the day to retire.

The task of officiating is often a thankless one. It's impossible to make a decision that everyone will applaud so forget "everyone" and let honest judgment be your guide. Be neat, courteous, confident and professional, and you'll be a success.

That's what officiating is all about.