

Unwritten Rules

Every official knows the importance of the rules of the game. Regardless of sport, there are some unwritten rules you should follow as well.

1. When you “think” you saw something, YOU DIDN’T.

There are times you will be focused on action in your coverage area but something on the farthest edge of your peripheral vision will draw your attention. “Gee whiz,” you’ll say to yourself. “That looked like a foul, but I didn’t see the whole thing. My gut says it was a foul. Better safe than sorry. I’m gonna call it.”

Missing a call is never a positive thing. But most assigners, coordinators and observers will tell you that failing to call something that did occur is more acceptable than calling something you aren’t absolutely positive happened.

Gut feeling is a valuable officiating tool. Many times your instincts will guide you in the right direction. But your eyes trump all. See what you call and call only what you see. Period.

2. The CAPTAIN is not always the team leader.

For whatever reason, the so-called team leader or “captain” can sometimes be anything but a player that will help you to defuse a situation and respond positively with other players during a game.

That player can often be the one causing problems for you and others.

When that’s the case, make every effort to demote that captain. Tell the coach that you need another player to serve as captain because the current captain isn’t doing his or her job. Or tell the captain that he or she will no longer be serving as the leader for his or her team for that game because of his or her actions.

Just because a player attends a captains’ meeting before the game doesn’t mean that he or she will be the player with the best sportsmanship.

3. Keep the game MOVING.

There are few officials who want to be on the field or court for a really long game.

However, there are some games that are just going to be longer than others. That football game that features two teams that throw the ball on every down and have porous defenses can result in a 63-60 shootout that legitimately takes every bit of three hours to finish.

What is not acceptable is for officials to be the cause of a game going long. Do everything possible to make a dead ball live again or to get the clock running as soon as possible.

That doesn’t mean neglecting important duties or rushing teams. It does mean being efficient with recording substitutions or enforcing penalties, hustling to your next position and getting the next play started or the next pitch thrown.

4. Provide COURTESY to players when it’s needed.

While an official should strive to keep the game moving, there are times when you need to it slow down. A baseball or softball catcher works extremely hard during a game and that hard work generally keeps you from getting hit.

So when you see him or her get hit and in pain (but not enough to bring out the certified athletic trainer), take some extra time — dust off a clean plate or walk the ball out to the pitcher.

Buy that catcher a few minutes and, in turn, he or she will probably appreciate it and work even harder for you the rest of the game.

The same thing can sometimes apply to other sports when tensions get high. Take a moment to put the ball in play and use that time to give a friendly reminder as opposed to a premature penalty. When you feel the situation has had a moment to calm down, blow the whistle and get the game moving.

6. Give a LONGER LEASH to those in charge.

Maybe more important is the flip side of this rule: Those who aren't in charge don't get a long leash. Yes, you should listen to head coaches and managers who give their thoughts to you about a call or situation — as long as they don't cross the line. Communication, including listening to perceived grievances, is part of game management.

But assistant coaches, players and other bench personnel should not be given the same patience or privilege. Unsportsmanlike talk and actions by those individuals need to be addressed right away. If warranted, you can give head coaches a chance to take care of other game participants. But if they don't take care of business, you need to step up and penalize appropriately.

There has to be some form of hierarchy of tolerance. And head coaches are at the top. Use preventive officiating whenever you can and tolerate a bit more from them. Work with them until their behavior becomes a distraction.

6. Give the BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT to those who have earned respect.

There will be times — probably in every game — when you get questioned on a decision you made or a penalty you called. How you respond to that question should be determined in part by how you are asked.

Think about the ranting, raving head coach. Anything that doesn't go exactly how he or she wants, and the blame is pointed toward you or your crewmates. You are to blame for his or her team's woes. Now think about the coach who worries about his or her team throughout the game but doesn't get upset at you when penalties are reported. Instead, that coach focuses on "coaching" his or her players.

In a tight moment, both coaches question a call. The coach who doesn't go ballistic on every call deserves a more thorough response than the lunatic. It is as simple as that.

Because it is so out of character for that calmer head coach to question a call, maybe he or she saw something that didn't make sense or was done wrong by the rule. Taking the time to acknowledge the concern or clarify a ruling is time well-spent. The ranter may have seen the same thing, but doesn't deserve the benefit of the doubt since that coach has been on your case about everything.

7. Look COACHES in the eye.

Police will tell you that suspects who lower or turn their heads when providing alibis are withholding information. It is difficult to obfuscate when you are looking someone right in the eye.

Whether you are introducing yourself to the coach before the game or answering his or her question during the course of play, communication should be done face to face and straight on. Even if you are delivering bad news, you will have more credibility and gain more respect by looking the coach in the eye.

Understand that advice applies only when the ball is dead, such as during a timeout or other intermission. If you need to communicate with the coach during play, keep your eyes on the action and wait for action to cease.

8. WHEN IN DOUBT, do what is expected.

An official takes on the task of applying mainly descriptive rules to fluid situations, but there are times in games when that official may not be immediately certain what action to take after observing a play or an

incident. Rulebooks will spell out the intent and guiding principles of the rules and the better officials figure out how to apply them equitably, in context. But there are times when an official faces doubt at the moment he or she is expected to make a call or no-call. When that happens, it's best to do what is expected.

Does it appear that a player sustained a possible concussion even though he or she does not have a loss of consciousness after a play? If there is any doubt, it is best to take that player out of the game to get checked. Should a baseball or softball umpire call a borderline pitch a ball or strike? It is expected that the umpire follow through by calling that pitch a strike. A basketball referee may have doubt when two players collide and go flying to the floor. Block or charge? Rule one or the other.

In any event, do not try to run away from the play or shrug your shoulders. You'll lose credibility fast.

Officials will never be 100 percent sure of what they see 100 percent of the time. That's not humanly possible. In those gray-area moments when a call is necessary, do what is expected and make the call or ruling with a clear conscience.

9. Answer QUESTIONS, not statements.

"That's a bad call." "That was a interference." "He pushed him."

What do all those comments have in common? Ding, ding. You're correct if you answered, "They are statements that coaches say/yell/shout, etc."

Coaches say a lot to officials during a game. And much of what they have to say, whether it is a valid point or not, does not need a response. Statements don't need an answer from officials. Often the only time you need to respond to a statement is when you are delivering a warning or a penalty for one that crosses the line.

What deserves a respectful response when time permits is a legitimate question. Officials can save themselves a lot of headaches and heartburn by answering only what is asked.

10. Don't answer the question you don't have INFORMATION about.

You don't need to answer every question, though. That most often relates to a coach asking a question about a play called by a crewmember. If you don't know what happened, don't guess. If you don't have information, tell the coach you'll find out for him or her at halftime or suggest the coach talk to your partner. Whatever you do, make sure you are supportive of your partner.

Sometimes a coach or player may ask you about a rule or situation that you are not sure about. If you don't have the knowledge or information you need, don't guess at the answer. You'll lose all credibility if you answer the question wrong. Instead, seek assistance from a partner or find out the answer after the game and get back to the coach. Then vow to study the rules more, so that you can answer that question that might come up in the future.

11. Get the game going after a MISTAKE or EJECTION.

Sure, ejections and mistakes are a big deal. But it is the responsibility of officials to make sure they don't become a huge deal and negatively impact a game.

When your game has a situation, such as an ejection or a rule controversy, the best thing you can do is to get the next pitch thrown or the next play started. Once game action resumes, players, coaches and fans will typically worry about that action and forget about the situation that caused the problem in the first place.

While participants will be forced to move on when action resumes, officials should keep the mistake/ejection in the back of their mind. Don't dwell on what happened but keep in mind that it could

lead to future issues. Managing the game by making sure your presence is felt even more after ejections for fighting, for example, is a good way to prevent future problems.

12. CREW TALKS should lean toward official with angle or experience.

Because coverage areas sometimes overlap, there are going to be situations in which more than one official has a call. What happens when you're the other official and those calls conflict? If you are in the role of ultimate decision-maker, which way do you go?

To begin, the officials involved must express certainty. If either indicates doubt, go with the other crewmember. "I think" is not acceptable. There is a difference between calls and opinions.

If neither backs down, consider the angle or proximity to the play. Was one official significantly closer than the other? Was one straightlined? Position and distance are key considerations.

If you're still at an impasse, lean toward the more experienced official who has likely seen that play more often and knows how best to cover it.

13. Be 100 percent sure if making the UNEXPECTED CALL.

Several years ago, a baseball state championship turned on a base umpire's call. With two out, a player whose double seemingly drove in the winning run was called out for missing first base. The run was nullified, the inning ended and that team wound up losing the title.

The coach argued, but within the bounds of sportsmanship, asking the umpire if he was certain. "I am positive," the umpire said. "I would never make that call unless I was absolutely sure."

Afterward, the coach acknowledged the umpire. "He's a good umpire," the coach said. "If he was that sure, he must have seen it."

It's never a good idea to enforce an arcane rule just to let everyone know that you know the book. But if it needs to be called, sell it and be prepared to back it up with confidence. The more unusual the situation, the more sure you must be.

14. Don't insert yourself or disrupt GAME RHYTHM if it's not necessary.

Back off. If you're an official — no matter the sport — and you somehow don't feel "in the game" because little if anything to rule on has occurred in your coverage area, back off. Don't be that official with a quick whistle or flag, looking for something, any kind of violation or penalty, to make it look like you're "in the game." Back off. It's better for you, the crew and the game.

Many officials think they aren't doing their job if they don't enforce the rules, especially if they haven't been heard from early in a game or an extended period of time during the game. It will be an uncomfortable situation for many, but the better officials know when to stay out of the way and call only what needs to be called. Under no circumstances should an official ignore fouls that involve safety of the players, but being too quick to insert yourself when you don't need to will result in too many flags or whistles for minor violations or for phantom violations that are better handled with preventive officiating.

Making a call or ruling can be very straightforward and easy. But withholding a flag or whistle in a situation that is close but doesn't warrant you to stop the game takes discipline and confidence. At some point the game will need you and when it does, be ready. In the meantime, back off.

15. Let the PLAYERS help you make the call.

Generally, players are not award-winning actors. And as you go down from the professional level, to college, to high school and eventually to sub-varsity, the acting skills are dramatically worse.

One of the toughest calls to get right in baseball or softball is the high-and-tight pitch that may have hit the bat or the hand first. Read the batter's reaction: If the batter immediately screams, "Ouch!" and drops the bat, there's a pretty good chance it hit his or her hand. But if the batter doesn't react as the ball rolls into fair territory, in all likelihood, it's a fair ball. Read the reaction of the player and use that to provide you the additional information to make a correct call.

If a player hustles to save a ball from going out of bounds, even if you didn't see which player it touched last, you have an indication of the right call.

In this age of flopping and diving, the "rule" is a little tougher, but reading players' initial reaction to many plays will often still help you when you need it.

16. When a game is obviously over, CONCENTRATION needs to be stronger.

In most any sport, there are games that are decided early on, sometimes in the first quarter or early innings. It's about that time when teams will start going through the motions, if they haven't already, and that makes it easy for officials to do the same.

Thoughts of home, work, meetings or your next game can easily grab your attention instead of the game in front of you. That's the time to increase your focus as much as possible. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by anything. Focus on the game and use it as an opportunity to improve.

A blowout situation offers officials the perfect time to work on certain mechanics or habits or to experiment.

Above all, don't physically quit on the game. Continue to hustle even though you may have the urge to loaf. Apply personal pride, vanity or your competitive streak. Draw upon any inner strength or collection of emotions or memories to stay in the game. Do anything necessary to keep your focus and not let up