

The 25 Most Important Things to Know About Officiating

The task was simple enough: Come up with the 25 most important things to know about officiating. We started with a brainstorming session that resulted in a list of more than 200 items. After combining the ones that were similar and deleting the ones that were specific only to a particular sport, we were left with about 150.

Now, after dozens of meetings, arguments and votes, we narrowed the list down to the essence. The following statements, tips and advice—presented in no particular order—are a referee’s most important things to know about officiating and should serve as the foundation for any official’s career.

- 1. FOR ALL BUT A FEW OF US, OFFICIATING IS AN AVOCATION, NOT OUR PROFESSION**
Recognizing that will help keep your life in better balance. It takes time, hard work and study to become a successful official. But an official must not put officiating ahead of what’s really important: family and work. Devote more time and energy to your family and your job than you do to officiating.
- 2. NINETY PERCENT OF OFFICIATING IS BEING A “PEOPLE PERSON”**
Know how to handle people. Remember that listening is an important skill. If you’re asked a question, answer it. Treat everyone on the field or court with the same respect you demand from them.
- 3. OFFICIATING IS SELDOM FAIR**
Regardless of how much talent you possess and how hard you work, you won’t always work the big games or move up the officiating ladder. Officiating is one avocation in which sometimes it is less a matter of what you know than who you know. There is no use obsessing about things you can’t control. No matter what level you work, you will often be criticized even though you are 100 percent correct. That isn’t fair, but it’s another facet of the job you must accept.
- 4. KEEP PLAYER SAFETY NUMBER ONE**
The rules not only empower but also require officials to penalize rough play. Even if a potentially dangerous situation is not specifically covered in the rules, an official is obligated to make what correction is necessary to ensure player safety. That entails everything from the weather to the playing surface to the conduct of participants. In this overly litigious age, erring on the side of safety is not only the morally correct course but the one that will help keep the official out of court as well.
- 5. DON’T MAKE EXCUSES**
Even if you have the best possible excuse for making a mistake, the error won’t be corrected because you have an alibi. Instead of wasting time and mental energy coming up with an excuse, your first course should be doing whatever the rules allow you to do to rectify the situation. Next you should learn from the mistake so you don’t make it—or have to come up with another excuse—again.
- 6. YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO HOLD YOURSELF TO A HIGHER-THAN-NORMAL ETHICAL STANDARD**
How you comport yourself away from the game is as important as how you act during the game. Poor decisions or bad behavior in everyday life can eradicate all of the good will and good impressions you earn when you’re officiating. Remember that integrity is defined by how you act when you think nobody is watching.

7. **EXPECT CRITICISM AND LEARN HOW TO HANDLE IT**
Most comments from spectators, players and coaches should go in one ear and out the other. Granted, that's easier said than done. But turning a deaf ear to such criticism is crucial to maintaining focus and keeping a positive attitude. Constructive criticism from supervisors, assignors and veteran officials should be sought. If you solicit comments after working with a respected veteran, be prepared for what you might get. It's possible you'll find out you're not as good as you think you are.
8. **OFFICIATING BUILDS SKILLS FOR A LIFETIME**
The qualities that make a great official are also the qualities that make a person a good employee, spouse, parent and friend. Teamwork, loyalty, sacrifice, study, decision-making, fair-mindedness, accountability and honesty are just a few of the positive skills and qualities that can be learned, developed and implemented through officiating.
9. **NEVER LET YOUR SIGNALS CONVEY YOUR EMOTIONS**
Too many officials view fouls or rules infractions as personal affronts. Instead of acting dispassionately, they allow their body language or voice to convey that displeasure. Your facial expression and voice should not suggest you're happy or unhappy to be enforcing a penalty.
10. **UNDERSTAND THE INTENT OF THE RULES—NOT JUST THE RULE**
Knowing why a rule is needed will help you enforce it. In some cases, the intent is obvious (e.g., player safety). In other instances, a rule is intended to ensure that neither team nor athlete is placed at an unfair disadvantage. For example, the infield fly rule in baseball and softball is designed to prevent the defense from achieving an undeserved double play. Ineligible receivers in football are prohibited from going downfield on pass plays so the defense isn't confused into thinking the player needs to be covered.
11. **IF YOU'RE GOING TO BLOW THE WHISTLE, BLOW IT HARD**
In almost every situation in virtually every sport, the rules dictate that an official's whistle causes play to cease. Since that is the case, you might as well blow it hard. The concept holds true for non-whistle sports—make sure everyone knows it when you call time. A strong blast of the whistle conveys the message that you're sure play should be stopped. A weak toot casts doubt about your confidence and judgment.
12. **UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WILL MAKE MISTAKES**
Sometimes they are dreadful mistakes, but we must accept them as an environmental hazard in an avocation that calls for us to make a multitude of split-second decisions under very stressful conditions. To expect perfection is too heavy a burden for any person to carry and ultimately will take the joy out of officiating for even the best official.
13. **DON'T CRITICIZE OTHER OFFICIALS**
Under no circumstances should an official point out a peer's inadequacies or offer a negative opinion about another official to a coach or player. Let your work and the work of others speak for itself. If an official you've worked with or observed asks for a critique, be honest but supportive. If your opinion is not sought, don't offer it.
14. **BE PROFESSIONAL**
No matter the level, dress the part; act the part. In officiating, a book is judged by its cover. Soiled, aged, discolored, ill-fitting and wrinkled uniforms and accessories cast a negative impression before a pitch is thrown or the ball is put into play. Your appearance before and after the game is also important. No, you don't have to wear a tuxedo en route to a game, but it is a good idea to dress a bit better than most people might expect.

15. **KNOW YOUR ROLE**

You are part of a bigger package—don't showboat. When you need to sell a call, it's OK to give an emphatic signal. But actions designed to draw attention away from the players and onto officials are unprofessional and unacceptable. Use the standard mechanics and signals for the level of play at which you're working.

16. **BE PREPARED**

Plan for the unexpected. Don't anticipate the call, anticipate the play. That sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. If you can "feel" what's coming and adjust your position or your visual focus to the right area, you'll see the play better and you'll have a much better opportunity to make the correct call. Good umpires know when to expect a squeeze play. Top basketball referees recognize the times a team is going to apply full-court pressure or change its defense. Football officials know when to expect a deep pass or a quarterback sneak. In soccer, you know when a team will play kick-and-run and when teams will attack the defense methodically. All of those things help you anticipate the play, not the call.

17. **CONTINUING STUDY IS A REQUIREMENT**

How many times have you had to correct a partner who applies an outdated rule? Good officials read the rulebook often. The more often you read it, the more ingrained the rules will be in your mind. That's especially important if you work multiple levels of the same sport (e.g., high school and college) or multiple sports in the same season (e.g., baseball and softball). Attending camps and clinics allows you to keep up with changes in philosophies and mechanics.

18. **BODY LANGUAGE WILL DO YOU IN QUICKER THAN A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE**

Sometimes it's less a matter of what you say than how you say it. In officiating, body language often speaks louder than words. Even a correct call will cast doubt in the minds of participants if you don't appear decisive. During dead-ball periods, don't stand with your arms folded or shoulders slumped, which gives the impression you're bored or would rather be anywhere else. Coaches, players and fans will say plenty during most games. Much is designed to do no more than vent frustration. Understanding which comments or questions merit a response is a key to success in officiating. Yelling in kind can turn a small brush fire into a four-alarm conflagration. More often than not, the "right" response will not be verbal. You might nod your head slightly, smile momentarily, glance at whoever said something, hold eye contact for a moment or two, shake your head or hold up a stop sign. Each alternative communication has a particular meaning; learn to use them wisely.

19. **YOU DON'T CARE WHO WINS**

One of the many sports myths accepted as fact is that the officials are predisposed to favor the home team. But an official should never use calls to favor either team for any reason. Impartiality is the foundation on which the officiating house is built. Officials must be blind to factors that have nothing to do with the game, including who wins or loses.

20. **YOU MUST HAVE A REVERENCE FOR THE RULES**

Before you can understand the spirit behind the rules, you must have an appreciation for them. That doesn't necessarily mean knowing them verbatim. More important is understanding how vital it is to properly apply the rules. The avocation suffers when officials ignore or misapply the rules.

21. **ALWAYS HAVE A PREGAME MEETING**

Just as athletes must warm up before competing, officials must prepare them-selves for the job ahead. Even if you work with the same partner or crew day after day, a pregame meeting provides valuable reminders about how certain situations will be handled. Involving every crew member or varying the routine helps prevent monotony.

22. **DON'T CARRY OVER FEELINGS TO THE NEXT GAME**

It is crucial to treat each game as a new experience. If you work a game involving a player or coach you've had to penalize or eject, your demeanor and actions must convey the feeling that you've forgotten about it—even if they haven't. Even the appearance of punishing a coach or player for something that happened in the past will taint your reputation and perhaps ruin your career.

23. **REMEMBER WHERE YOU CAME FROM**

If you've achieved your goal, it's easy to forget what helped you reach that pinnacle. Few officials make it on their own. More than likely there was a mentor, an assignor or a local association that gave you the boost you needed. You can repay that kindness by helping another budding official. You may impress some people by bragging about your success, but more than likely you will come across as a pompous blowhard.

24. **YOU REFEREE WHO YOU ARE**

Your officiating personality is driven by your everyday personality. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But remember that extremes are often detrimental in officiating. For example, if your job involves supervising people, remember that you can't treat fellow officials, players and coaches the same as you do your employees. If you're in sales, you may have to tone down your personality on the field or court.

25. **CARRY OUT YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES IN A WAY THAT BRINGS CREDIBILITY TO THE OFFICIATING PROFESSION**

Remember the saying that the best officiated game is one in which no one knows who officiated? It's bunk. Competent, professional and impartial officials deserve acclaim, especially from other officials. Think how the public's perceptions of officials would improve if every official remembered that they represent the entire profession every time they work a game.

*This article was reprinted with the permission of the United States Soccer Federation.
It was taken from Fair Play, the official publication for U.S. Soccer Referees*