

causes, and establish ways of avoiding repeating them. Seek as much information and help from others as you can. Talking game situations over with new officials who have questions often helps veteran officials at least as much as the newer official. "One of the best things for me to do is sit down with a young guy just starting out in college football," says Newman, "because he'll ask questions that I've never thought of. It makes you think, keeps you fresh and forces you to consider new ways of looking at something."

### **Risks and Rewards**

Success often comes through what could be considered failures or mistakes. Every successful official has made bad calls and poor decisions at one time or another. Officials must strive to make the right calls at the right time with confidence and integrity, and make decisions that you take responsibility for and can support publicly. But don't let the fear of failure keep you from taking decision-making risks

**What does being decisive mean to you?** Certainly your games will go better: Coaches and players will accept your calls most of the time, you'll suddenly start to have an "easier time" of things out there, but you'll also quietly be developing something much more important to any official — a good reputation. Coaches, players and fans all want to believe that their game is in the hands of one of the most competent officials in the area. Want to be one of those officials? Be more decisive.

"Coaches need officials to be decisive, and when they see an official who shows confidence without arrogance they feel more comfortable with that official. All around the country, the officials who are the most respected are the ones who are the most decisive." says Cahill.

Another benefit to increasing your decisiveness is that you will likely be perceived as a leader. "I don't think you can be a leader without being decisive," says Newman. "It is probably the most important element in leadership. You have to want to be a leader; it isn't just given to you."

Decisiveness is one of those intangibles in officiating that can make or break you in so many ways: having your calls accepted, getting the big games, moving up, earning you a good reputation and identifying you as a leader. The good news is: You can work on it. As you do, you'll notice things changing for the better.

Markbreit summarized it well. "To be decisive, you have to be a decision maker, a risk taker and a long term student of the game. Then you'll be super-efficient and successful in officiating."

**MAKE THE CALL** By Dave Sabaini  
In 'The Referee' Magazine - February 2003

### **Contributors:**

Steve Newman, a Big 10 football referee.

Pat Smith, a retired high level soccer referee and current USSE national assessor.

John Cahill, a Division I men's basketball referee (Big East and several other conferences.)

Tom Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Associates, consulting firm

Jerry Markbreit, long time NFL referee

Mike Sanzere a Division I men's basketball referee from Cincinnati, ( three Final Fours)



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## **BUILDING BETTER BASKETBALL**

### ***ISSUE No. 16***



### **Referee Decision Making**



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## **WHAT IS DECISION MAKING:**

Decision-making is the key component of a referee's job. Officiating is all about making decisions. That's arguably the one and only reason why they give us remuneration for officiating. Sometimes, in the process of decision-making, we eliminate alternatives that may actually be better than the one we ultimately choose. That is one reason why officiating is so difficult — truly effective decision-making requires a considerable amount of data analysis, listening and reflection. We're expected to decide sometimes hundreds of times during the course of a game, and we have to do it *now*! Studies have shown that officials make up to 300 decisions in a forty-minute game.

Granted, most officiating decisions are simply a choice of call or no-call, in bounds or out of bounds - but that doesn't make the decision any easier when it's a controversial play and you're trying to replay in your mind what you saw in order to come to the correct decision, while everyone involved, waits. Two seconds can seem like two weeks while you analyse and reflect on the play.

That's why you must be more than a decision maker; you need to be decisive. It's the ability to make the call, sell the call and engender a confidence in your ability as an official from all those involved in the game - players, coaches, spectators and your fellow officials. All that must be accomplished in a mere moment of time.

The problem with decisiveness is that you are not born with it. It doesn't come in the rulebook or with your new uniform. It is the result of a concerted effort on your part to improve in nearly every aspect of your game as an official. It comes with experience, but not automatically. You must strive for it. But once you have it, chances are you'll be considered one of the top officials in your area.

## **THE COMPONENTS OF DECISIVENESS:**

"Decisiveness in officiating is basically being sure of what you call and selling your call. If you're confident in your call, the coaches have more confidence in you, your partners have more confidence in you. They're going to trust you." And that is a leadership quality essential to superior officiating performance, says Steve Newman, a Big 10 football referee.

"Officiating is more of a reaction process than a thought process," says John Cahill, a Division I men's basketball referee. According to Cahill, officiating decisiveness is instinctual because of the immediacy required in a ballgame.

Tom Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Associates, a CEO consulting firm, says that decisiveness in any discipline has four components:

- 1.Speed — the time it takes to make a decision
- 2.Importance — the nature of what is being decided upon.
- 3.Commitment — to carry out the decisions, no matter how difficult,
- 4.Rightness — the correctness of the decision.

Certainly each element has a parallel in officiating. Speed is important. You never want to rush a call, but there is that fine line between pausing to make sure of what you saw and taking a split second too long. All of the calls you make in a game are important.. To you, the players the coach the spectators. To be recognised as a top

official requires strength of your convictions. Make a decision and stand by it. Finally, the cliché is that officiating is the one avocation where you are expected to start out perfect and improve from there. Being right? It's everything for an official!

## **MAKE BETTER DECISIONS:**

Effective decision-making is the process of identifying potential infractions and then taking action. The three main stages of the decision-making process are: **clarifying** what the decision is, **assessing** exactly what is involved and **utilizing** all the necessary resources including rule knowledge, mechanics and experience.

Being decisive does not come naturally for most people. Often, the major hindrance to decisiveness is, fear of failure. Certainly, there isn't an official out there who doesn't want to call a perfect game every time, but the reality is that it rarely – if ever – happens. Another hindrance to decisiveness is that many people see conflicts as "bad", and have trouble being decisive because they fear their decision will lead to confrontations. "Referees are better when they show commitment, courage and confidence A fearless official is dangerous; an official who has mastered his or her fear through confidence can be decisive."

Without question, the best officials at every level are decisive. What areas of our game can we work on to improve our decisiveness?

**Rules Knowledge** — The first element to developing the confidence necessary to becoming a decisive official is rules knowledge, yet often it is dismissed as a given, something too rudimentary to give much more than a passing thought. "You have to have a complete and thorough understanding of the rules and how to apply the intent of the rules to the game," urges Newman.

"There's just no excuse for not knowing the rulebook," agrees Mike Sanzere a Division I, Final Four men's basketball referee. "And there's nothing worse than going in and thinking you know what the rule is and being wrong." Essentially, that is false confidence, flying in the face of the notion that "rightness" is one of the four key components of decisiveness.

**Mechanics and Positioning** — An official could be a walking encyclopaedia when it comes to the rulebook, but that isn't a guarantee that he or she will know what to do once the game starts. Good mechanics go hand-in-hand with rules knowledge "Being in the right place at the right time will help you sell any call," adds Sanzere. "If you are there, coaches will accept almost any call." The mechanics of selling the call is important for appearing decisive. You have to look like you know what you're doing, and that includes being in position and signalling confidently.

**Experience** — Oscar Wilde once said, "Experience is the name everyone gives their mistakes." Nowhere is that more true than in officiating. "Learn everything you can, watch as much of your sport as you can, officiate as much as you can," Learning from your mistakes, that's a necessary step toward becoming decisive." says Jerry Markbreit, long time NFL referee. The more experiences you have the more you learn.

**Continued Learning** — Do you ever get "good enough" to stop learning? Referees learn by mistakes. We need to acknowledge errors, identify the possible