

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY – INTRAMURAL SPORTS

How to Manage Conflict in a Hostile Environment

Managing Conflict

“The official is often called upon to manage conflict and attempt to resolve disputes. It is virtually impossible for sports officials to avoid dealing with conflict, even when they have implemented prevention strategies.”

Introduction

Sometimes, the hardest part of being an intramural official isn't the officiating itself, it's managing the players and their actions. Conflict can arise from many sources and can take many forms. Verbal abuse, taunting, physicality, threats, dissent, and general unsporting acts can all disrupt or ruin a game. Tension and conflict can be between a player and a player, a team and a team, or between an official and a player. Sometimes spectators can become involved. If knowing the rules, regulations, mechanics and signals weren't hard enough, the official is often called upon to regulate and defuse these situations as they arise.

The following will offer tips and suggestions for managing conflict. It will cover verbal, physical, mental and preventive tactics to avoid a potentially ugly situation. Remember that no two situations will ever be the same and that despite your best efforts sometimes conflict is unavoidable.

Finally, remember that you are employed as an official; your basic job is to officiate. While managing conflict is a part of your job, taking abuse in any form is not.

What Is Conflict?

As an official, you must understand that conflict in sport may happen. If you understand why conflicts occur, you will have a better knowledge of how to work through each potential conflict.

Why Does Conflict Occur: *Conflict can arise in a number of situations.*

- Disagreement from participants over penalties and violations
- Perceived bias shown by the official or staff
- Misunderstanding the rules of the game or the instructions of the official.
- Athletes may blame others for lack of success.
- Cultural differences in sport.
- The values of sportsmanship are rapidly diminishing, being replaced by a total desire to win at all costs.
- Lack of information and or a misunderstanding of rules and policies of Intramurals
- An inability to communicate effectively.



Recognizing Conflict:

- Look for player's facial expressions and body language for clues about their feelings.
- Frustrated players tend to complain or demonstrate non-verbal signs of disgust.
- Look for players who start to become more aggressive to their opponents
- Captains who tend to be very repetitive in their comments to officials is usually a sign of either frustration or an attempt to manipulate the officials.
- The volume of comments to players and officials is often a sign.

Minimizing Conflict

There are occasions when conflict in the sporting environment is inevitable, however developing strategies to minimize conflict from arising is vital. The following tips may assist officials.

Tips for Preventing Conflict:

- Prevention is always better than a cure! If action is taken early in a game, conflict is less likely to occur.
- Make the players aware of your presence by reacting immediately to rule infractions.
- Remain objective - regardless of the past histories of the players or teams.
- Be definite and firm with decisions and communication.
- Look sharp and act sharp - this will gain respect as an official.
- Don't take criticisms personally. Remember, the players have a different perspective than officials.
- Provide structure and guidance to the players and open a dialogue with them.
- Speak clearly and firmly in times of conflict. This will indicate authority and confidence.
- Keep your cool.



Planning For Conflict:

- The official should be mentally prepared for the game, paying particular attention to having a clear head, temporarily forgetting other stresses in their life.
- The pre-game conference should include a brief discussion of potential conflict situations and a basic management plan.
- Preventative officiating should be a critical component of the plan.
- Knowledge of the participants, making sure any prior info is dealt with objectively and without prejudice.
- Do not take things personally - "players see the game with their hearts, referees see the game with their eyes."
- Understand the context of the game, the closeness, the time, and the state of play.



Conflict Management Tools:

- Court presence is an effective selling tool for officials. Officials should look good and come across as someone with authority and in control of the situation.
- The voice, the tone and the way the official talks to the participants has a tremendous impact on the response received. Firm, loud enough but not challenging. Be respectful!
- Body language expresses how an official is feeling, even when under pressure officials should always look to be in control.
- The whistle, its tone, volume and length of sound is an effective conflict management tool.

“Referees must approach any contest with the notion that a central part of their job is to handle conflict successfully. They must recognize the signs of conflict and try to prevent it from escalating.”



Resolving Conflict:

The official is often called upon to manage conflict and attempt to resolve disputes. It is virtually impossible for sports officials to avoid dealing with conflict, even when they have implemented prevention strategies.

Tips for Resolving Conflict:

- When resolving a conflict the best outcome is when everyone "wins".
- Avoid arguments or debates and never try to bluff your way through with unjustified rulings.
- Remain calm. Don't over-react. Use a level voice and relaxed body language.
- Aim to solve the conflict - Not to win or lose.
- Address the problem and not the emotions. Deal with the facts of the problem.
- Be definite and firm with decisions and communication.
- Learn to stop your impulses, as it is human nature to fight back when challenged.
- Focus on the person. People are not objects and are not permitted to be treated that way. Recognize that they may have something to say, don't dismiss them.
- Be fair and never act in a biased fashion. Integrity is one of an official's greatest assets.
- Be confident and open, avoid getting defensive or justifying your actions.
- Be firm. Deal with unacceptable and unsportsmanlike behavior firmly and quickly. Set boundaries in a polite and professional manner.



Learn How To Communicate:

- Communication involves both active listening and the use of words
- Permit the captain to talk without interruption - practice being a good listener.
- **Limit discussion only to the immediate issue**
- In a discussion, remain focused on the subject that was the original point of discussion. Do not allow it to be changed, by saying "Let's get on with the game and we can discuss any further problems later."
- Try to keep the communication short and sharp during the game. Practice the key phrases, like:
 - "I hear what you say"
 - "I will have a look at it"
 - Turn a complaint into a question saying, "How did you see that play?"
- When approached aggressively, refrain from asking them to "calm down" (this makes them more aggressive) Rather use "let's talk."

- Avoid killer language like:
 - "No"
 - "How dare you,"
 - "You're wrong..."
 - "Stop..."
 - "Don't ... "
 - Avoid the other person vulnerabilities or emotional sensitivities.

- Try communicating from the positive.
 - "Thank you..."
 - "Please..."
 - "Excuse me..."
 - "Would you..."
 - "Could..."
 - "May..."

Dealing with conflict takes training and plenty of practice. Work on various ways of handling difficult situations. Remember players and captains know if they can get under your skin they're going to own you.

