

Communication with Coaches

The following information is pulled directly out of the Football Officials Mechanics Manual, 4th edition.

Most coaches identify communication as the single most important attribute of an official. Knowing when not to communicate is as important as knowing what to say and when to have a dialogue with a coach. Officials must understand the importance of the relationship with coaches and manage it for the benefit of all of those involved in the game.

When the Coaches conference is held, it represents a transfer of power. The coach has been in charge all week and has had complete control in the gym but now the referee is a superior authority, and that might cause strife in some situations. It is helpful to keep in mind that coaches and officials have different goals. For the officials, it is an avocation, and the primary interest is implementing the rules of the game to have a fair and safe contest. The coach is there to win. It is true he or she is also an educator and he or she wants their players to learn, but at game time education may sometimes become secondary. A coaching career may pivot on winning so he or she may have an elevated interest in the outcome. We should accept that they don't always see things unbiasedly, and he or she won't agree with every call. The officials must remain steady and without emotion. Officials must understand they are a component of a game that is part of the education system and get to be part of the formative phase of the players' lives.

The assistant coaches are there to help the head coach. Technically, they are not entitled to any information from the officials. However, that doesn't mean ignoring them all the time is the best option. Telling the assistant coach "I only talk with the head coach" may be a valid statement, but is not likely to be helpful, especially if the coach is sincere and respectful in his approach. If an assistant is affecting the officiating and becoming a "challenge", let the head coach know and give him a chance to take care of it.

Consequently, it's OK to answer questions that are asked in a polite manner that don't interfere with the ability to officiate the game but that is the key takeaway, don't think that you need to justify each call throughout the contest. Appropriate times to talk with the head coach are during timeouts and dead ball periods such as free throw attempts.

Active, effective, listening by officials is the biggest part of the communications process. Officials need to understand thoroughly what the coach is saying. It's important to listen carefully to coaches and ask pertinent questions, if necessary, to discover exactly what is on their minds. Treat them as a valued customer when they think they have a problem.

Officials should never be confrontational or short-tempered, nor can they be timid or easily intimidated. Effective officials convey a calm, relaxed, demeanor, including direct eye contact. When a coach's emotions become elevated, the official must stay calm. Be careful to not take the coach's comments personally but apply any appropriate warnings and or penalties when warranted.

Under no circumstances should an official engage in an argument with a coach, and under no circumstances should an official reach out and touch the coach. Standing beside the coach, with hands at the side, or behind the back without using gestures is the best posture. When a coach is convinced, a call is incorrect, no amount of discussion is going to change his or her mind. In some instances, allowing the coach, to explain what he or she saw and providing them the

assurance that you respect their opinion will be good for the game and make you a better official. Arguing only inflames the situation and reverts the officials' concentration from the job at hand.

When a coach asks about a call, they should never be told "That's not my call coach". It is permissible to say, "I'm sorry coach that's not my coverage area on that play, but I'll try to get you the information when I get a chance" or "I'll ask the covering official when time allows".

Officials must also avoid what is commonly referred to as "rabbit ears". The term we use to describe an official who has excessive sensitivity to criticism and uses selective hearing to pick up on comments not necessarily directed to them.

Finally, we should always remember that we were given, two ears and one mouth for a reason. Always listen more than you talk when dealing with coaches.

Steven Riker
CSBOA
Rules Interpreter