

# Backing Up Officials When the Media Attacks

By Donald C. Collins

If an association member is blasted in the newspaper by a coach or ripped by name by members of the media on TV or radio, what are some steps an association can take to protect/defend the official? Is a defamation suit appropriate or should the association fight back in the media?

The law is not the right forum to solve verbal attacks on officials. An official may be tempted to sue, but defamation law has an exception for opinions. That legal protection covers the type of comments made about officials even when those statements sound authoritative. For example, a coach who says that an official is the worst official in history sounds authoritative, but he's stating an opinion.

Protecting opinions from defamation suits is good for society, but it's not good for officials. People who verbally attack officials don't operate in a vacuum. The sports culture can often be a non-reasoning, partisan culture. Forceful verbal attacks often lead to intimidation which occasionally leads to physical attacks against officials. We can't afford to have officials lambasted in the media because it creates the sportsmanship problem of making the partisan environment worse, and it creates the security problem of encouraging some partisans to either intimidate or attack an official. Defamation law is not designed for such an environment.

Media fights aren't helpful either. Once an official is bashed in the media, the damage is done. An association's attempt to fight back will often be through a letter to the editor or a call to a local

radio show. Letters do not effectively rebut a newspaper column and radio show rebuttals don't undo the damage already been done. Worse, though, if an association fights back in the media, it runs the risk of prolonging the story, inviting the one-day bashing to become a multiple-day affair.

The problem with associations fighting back is that the association is perceived as an advocate of the officials, not as a neutral entity giving a neutral explanation (which hopefully helps the official). Leagues and governing bodies are more effective in defending an official; first, they're not perceived as the official's advocate; and second, they're often asked to comment in the original article or column, giving them a chance to reduce the harm before it starts.

Officials associations do not have to wait for a verbal attack. They can and should get out in front of the problem. Doing so requires a three-part strategy of: (1) working with governing bodies/leagues; (2) cultivating the media; and (3) developing a government relations plan.

## 1. Work With Sports Bodies/Leagues

Associations must work with governing bodies and leagues to encourage them to create strong disincentives for coaches and school representatives to verbally attack officials in a public forum. Ideally, leagues would create media policies that penalize coaches and school representatives if they make negative verbal comments about officials in the media. Leagues that don't have media policies can achieve the same end with well-crafted sportsmanship and conduct codes that bar school

representatives from making public comments that cast opposing schools, team members, coaches and officials in a negative light. Associations must be vigilant in asking leagues and governing bodies to enforce the policies.

## 2. Cultivate the Media

Associations need to humanize their officials. Associations and their officials are part of the community. Member officials hold a wide array of jobs, and do a number of things that benefit the local community.

The association should tell the media what its members do. If a writer gives pause before criticizing an official because he knows the official plays a valuable role in the community, that is good.

Value is a two-way street. Local writers and reporters with a radio or television show also have value in the community. Associations should recognize those reporters by inviting them to clinics, letting them take the rules test and bringing them to the banquet. Obviously, associations will want the local reporters to know about the issues that impact officials, ranging from attacks on officials, to lack of facilities, to hostile crowds, to the recruiting needs.

## 3. Have a Government Relations Plan

An association must work with member schools to develop good relations with the local police force, and with elected officials. The police and elected officials won't stop officials from being attacked in the media. But they can help offset the impact.

A supportive police department may assign extra officers to a game, making the environment safer. A supportive elected official may help with legislation criminalizing attacks on officials if verbal attacks result in physical ones. An elected official may also be able to work behind the scenes to help school officials get the support needed to make for a safer site.

Ultimately, the law may not prevent media attacks on officials, but a strong and well organized association can limit the attacks by it outreach efforts.

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## On Your Side

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## Move Up Continued from page 1

**JV** — A junior varsity official should be able to lead approved or freshman officials in lower level games, and hold their own in a competitive JV contest with other qualified JV officials. They may be asked to work a non-conference varsity game, or one where a lower skill level is expected.

**Varsity** — Our local association used to split between “A” and “B” varsity, but that wasn’t well received. The assigner is tasked with placing newer, less experienced varsity officials in a “no fail” situation with strong partners. As their experience level and ability increase, they are placed in more difficult contests.

That is a basic system that has worked for us for the last 20-plus years. The key is to get a system, if you don’t have one. Don’t leave your officials confused as to where they’re at on the road to advancement.

### Evaluations

We evaluate our officials at least once every three years. If they are “bubble” officials and think they’re ready to move up, they can request a formal evaluation. If a complaint is received concerning the performance level of an official, that may be another reason to have a board member or varsity official observe the official. If you’re dealing with officials new to your association, you must have a solid starting point so the assigner has an idea of what level they are capable of officiating. That type of evaluation usually occurs in the junior high or rec-ball season, before high school ball starts.

### Mentorship

New officials must have a mentor. Unfortunately, in this day and age of everyone being busy, it usually falls on the “available” officials to mentor multiple officials instead of each varsity official mentoring one lower level official. The bad part of that is overloading the willing mentor. The good part of it is having a mentor who really cares about teaching less-experienced officials the correct way to officiate, and how to take the right steps to advance.

### Education

Our association has monthly meetings during the season, September-March, and there are training segments at each general membership meeting. We discuss odd

plays or rulings that have surfaced in our online postgame reports, as well as covering a specific topic picked for that meeting. Our vice president is the overseer of the training program and is tasked with having speakers or presentations ready. We also have classroom clinics in September and early October, covering rules, philosophy, sportsmanship and professionalism.

General membership meetings and classroom clinics are required for officials wanting to officiate with our local association. We maintain a training documents section on our website, allowing our members access to various training tips and methods, pregame conference guides, evaluation forms, signal diagrams, etc.

### Assignments

For the most part, assignments are based on availability, ability and attitude. If you see officials who have done what is requested of them, have worked on the problem areas covered in their evaluation and continue to improve, give them an opportunity at a higher level contest. Reward them. They don’t have to be a “grizzled veteran” to get an opportunity to work a varsity contest.

We have a few college officials in our association. On rare occasions, there is a scheduling hiccup, and they get called at the last minute to work a college game. In those situations, the board needs to have a solid policy on turnbacks. If at all possible, replace them on their high school games. They will appreciate it, and will probably work harder for you on future assignments, knowing that you’ve done them a “favor.”

### Leadership

As a leader, think of others before yourself. Be available by phone or email to discuss plays or rulings, and how they were handled. If the rule was misapplied, how should it have been administered? Get out on an off night and watch one of your “mentees” work. Be ready to give feedback.

Your association will only grow and get stronger if the board members and senior officials take care of the “kids” and bring them along at a pace that they’re comfortable and confident with. Training and encouragement go a long way toward timely advancement for all officials.

*Carl Smith, Anchorage, Alaska, is the treasurer and assigner for the Anchorage Sports Officials Association. □*

## ▶ How to . . .

### Keep Up With Technology Trends

It isn’t easy to please everyone when it comes to association training meetings. The key is to use technology to enhance your meetings whenever possible. Here are some tips to help you find and utilize the latest in technology that will work for you and your association.

#### Step 1 — Take the first step

If you aren’t using PowerPoint and video, it’s time to start. Your association will automatically be upgrading meetings significantly by just picking out some game action to show, playing it for the group and then discussing it. Even if your play editing skills are limited or non-existent, showing the action to you members is important.

#### Step 2 — Utilize tech-savvy members

If you or other board members have limited abilities related to technology, it’s important to use the skills of a member or members who excel in that area. Add the members to an association training committee or get them to introduce you to the latest presentation technology aids. Professionalizing your association meeting with the help of members can boost your recruitment, retention and overall officiating product.

#### Step 3 — Do some research

If you want to find better editing software to improve your video presentations for training meetings, research on the Internet what options are available. With some associations having limited funds, cost may factor in.

#### Step 4 — Keep up with other associations

Sometimes better technology options are just a phone call or email inquiry away to other area associations. Find out what they are using for presentations and whether they like it or not. They might have the solution you’ve been looking for.

#### TELL US WHAT YOU USE:

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