

## Black-Balled

By Donald C. Collins

**Q** A high-profile high school coach did not like a call I made at the end of his game last month. He threatened that he would contact the assigner and have me removed from games in that league. Should I be concerned about being black-balled or scratched from games? If that happens, do I have any options?

**A** The most important factor in determining whether a coach can exclude an official from a league is determining with whom the association contracts. Some officials associations contract with a league. Other associations service a league but really contract with a series of individual schools, some of whom make up a league.

A coach who threatens to bar an official from a league based on a single objectionable call is likely issuing an empty threat. The coach may also be violating league sportsmanship rules depending on where or how he issued the threat. Under such circumstances, associations should report the threatening coach to the league, which can enforce its sportsmanship rules.

It is important to note, though, that a message about whom one will contract with could be a legitimate statement of intent if it is not delivered in a time, place or manner that violates sportsmanship rules. Remember, schools have the right to change providers as long as they do so in a manner that complies with state association rules. Still, it is worth noting that schools do not generally change providers because a coach issued an angry statement in the heat of the moment. Schools have athletic directors and principals who may not wish to have their coach try to leverage business relationships to gain favorable calls.

An association should note that while a coach may be quite

able to speak for his school's desire to ban an official, the coach is highly unlikely to speak for an entire league. That is true where an association contracts with the league. It is equally true — if not more so — where an association contracts with individual schools. There are leagues that have banned an official for a lack of professionalism, extreme misconduct and long-term overall performance. However, a single coach angry about a single call will not normally have the ability to get an official banned from an entire league.

Of course, when we deal with assigners and schools, it is important to look at the details of the actual assigning arrangement. Any official, assigner or association confronted with a coach who wants to exclude an official needs to see if the coach or league has a contractual right to do so. Some contracts may grant a school the ability to exclude a limited number of officials in the league. Other contracts may grant the school the power to select officials from a pool of qualified officials. Indeed, in some parts of the country, an official knows that he or she has a game or a series of games in a league a year or more in advance. In those places, the issue changes from banning the official to determining whether an official who is already assigned can have his assignment revoked. Only a close read of the contract or of the association's bylaws can provide the answer.

Ultimately, market power may provide the answer. Factors such as shortages of officials, the number of competing officials associations in an area, the role of the state association in governing officials, the ability of schools to bypass associations and contract with officials as individuals all are major factors in determining whether a school or a single coach can actually back up threats to exclude an official.

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Now, officials are not without recourse. A coach can apply all the pressure in the world, but assigners have to honor the contract they have with officials. If the contract doesn't give coaches the power to exclude officials, they can't be excluded from the league. Assigners also have to follow assigning policies and officials association bylaws. Finally, no school can exclude an official for a discriminatory reason such as age, race, color, religion and national origin.

Clearly, officials do get excluded from schools or leagues for various reasons. The question is whether the exclusion met the procedural requirements of the contract or policy, and whether any threats a coach made about excluding an official violates league policies, state association policies and employment law. The policies and the law will help carve out a balance between a specific coach's ability to exert excessive control over officials and the need for all of us to ensure that officials are working at the levels that their ratings, and game evaluations place them.

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