

'Just the Facts' When Report Writing

Don Collins is the executive director of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation and an NASO consultant on matters regarding association management. As a high school athletic administrator and an attorney, Collins receives many game reports. How should officials properly administer game reports in the event of a player ejection, fight or injury? Collins says, it is very simple — just the facts.

He offered his thoughts on the topic as one of the featured speakers at the NASO Summit's "Law, Lawsuits and Liability Landscape" session last July in San Antonio.

"As a high school commissioner, I still receive reports that do not help us when we have hearings, injunctions, etc.," Collins said. "The primary reason is that you and I believe 'just the facts' means 'Charles left the coach's box after a block-charge call, came on the court, told me I stunk, and I gave him a technical. Three minutes later Charles exited the coaching box and told me I was America's worst official. I gave him a technical and ejected him.' Nice, succinct, basically what we mean by just the facts. The problem is that we get reports that say, 'Every time I go to the gym Charles is yelling and screaming at me. He did his usual

yelling and screaming. I swear he's the worst coach in America so I threw him out.'

"If we think about it, the official did give us just the facts. Every time I come in the gym Charles is yelling and screaming are the facts," Collins said. "I think what we need to do is focus not just on telling people the facts, because your game reports are my evidence. They back up my penalties. They back me up in administrative hearings and even injunctions. The game report is a recitation of the things that occurred in that specific game and only that game that led to the action you took in that game and only that game, combined with the declaration of the actions that you took. That might help those people understand a little better."

An official should *just* report the facts. He or she should not attempt to look more credible or make the participants/coaches look less credible. For a regular ejection, an official should keep it simple. An ejection report should state the act that led to the ejection, and the official's action.

For example, Collins says, write, "Player number 24 said '(Expletive) you!' to player number 15 on the opposing team." Don't write, "Player number 24 has a bad attitude. I was keeping a close eye on him and I caught him saying, '(Expletive) you!' to player number 15 on the opposing team." There is no reason to get into the player's attitude. It's not at issue.

If an official goes too far down the path of tearing down players, he or she could say something defamatory. Opinions are not generally defamatory, but if the opinion implies that you have knowledge of something that would be offensive, you can defame somebody. If you stated that you knew that an ejected coach often has a few cocktails after lunch and may not have been fully in control of himself when you ejected him, that's pretty strong and that can be defamatory since you implied that it is true. Focus on the acts that led to the ejection.

For fights, Collins stresses that an official needs to provide the game situation, the score, the time remaining and anything that showed tension in the game. The official should identify the players fighting, describe their actions, note the location and acts of bench personnel, and report on the coaches' actions. Finally, the official needs to report on his actions. At all times, the official should stick to facts and avoid characterizations.

Fights and ejections should be reported immediately. They are needed for league disciplinary and administrative procedures. They are also useful if a participant challenges league discipline in court. Officials may not be a party to those challenges, but a poor report could make it harder for a league or court to back the official's action.

Injuries are a different story, Collins says. "Injuries don't generally link to league-required actions," he says. "If an injured party files a lawsuit, a school or league may not be inclined to back the official. Ejections and fights tend to force leagues to back an official through league disciplinary rules; injuries don't. Indeed, injuries may force leagues to distance themselves from an official in order to establish that the league doesn't exercise control over the official."

An official may be best served by not filing an injury report unless required to, although an official may wish to provide notice of the injury in situations where he or she is filing a full-blown report. An official should keep very good file notes of field conditions, his or her field inspections, the game itself and the play that led to the injury. The official doesn't want to forget those things, and you never know when you'll be asked about an injury.

Ultimately, Collins says, officials associations and sports governing bodies must work together to train officials on report writing. It is not something that an official should have to master on his or her own. □

