

You may be a public figure on the field or court, but that doesn't mean you have to be accessible to the public. There are any number of reasons someone present at one of your games might want to contact you: Maybe an A.D. wants to offer you some games, maybe a coach wants to opine about your great calls or maybe — just maybe — the reason might not be a particularly positive one.

Name, Rank and Serial Number

By Loren Else

The setting is classic. It's Friday night, the gymnasium is packed and you're officiating a big basketball game between two quality high school programs. As the commercial says, "You live for this!"

Late in the game, a kid makes a critical steal and bores full tilt toward the goal for a go-ahead layup. You see it coming and think this is not going to be good. A defensive player is flying in to make the big block. The end result isn't pretty with the offensive player hitting the floor, face first. The appropriate calls are made and the shooter cannot continue. The player is eventually escorted off the court with facial injuries.

The game ends, you shower, pack your bag and head out of the locker room. You're thinking maybe you'll have a couple of beverages with the other officials at the local referee hangout and then head home for a great weekend. Just as you get outside, two people suddenly appear and begin walking beside you. The person you assume is the mom of the injured player excitably says, "Who is going to pay the dental bills?" A male, who stands 6'4" and hasn't missed too many buffet lines, says it's the worst game he's ever seen officiated. He wants your name, address and phone number.

He has a pen and paper in hand. You see in his eyes that he is emotional and this situation could easily turn much worse than it already is. Your Friday night bubble has burst. What's next?

That situation can happen at any level, but very easily at the high school level. There is normally no security for officials leaving high school game sites. With that type of informal setting, those situations can and do happen. The unspoken threat in the above scenario is that the relatives of the injured player are

looking to hold someone liable for the injury and associated costs of treatment. How willing are you to give your phone number or home address to someone like that?

Privacy is a hot issue in today's world and officials need to be especially vigilant in protecting theirs. There is a reason

many police officers, judges, prison guards and teachers have unlisted telephone numbers and unpublished street addresses.

Let's step back and talk about giving personal information from the time the contest starts to when it ends. What personal information should you give, if any? What if someone has been injured in the contest? Should you be more willing to give personal information in that instance? Are you legally required to give personal information?

Before the Game: Nothing like that friendly coach strolling over before a contest and just wanting "to get to know you." In most cases, it's no big deal to answer some routine questions before the game. Keep it short and professional. Don't volunteer anything and don't fudge about your experience because a coach can verify information you give. Certainly it depends on the questions, but there is going to be enough going on once the game starts, so you don't want to start off on the wrong foot by telling a coach you would prefer not to talk to him.

If you encounter a chatty coach, the conversation likely won't involve any requests for your phone number. The best action is to move to another spot and find something to do. Appearances won't be good if you are talking to any coach for an extended period of time. How about the friendly, caring fan that stops by your location before a contest and says hi and wants to know your name? At the most, just tell what association or conferences you are from. Hopefully that will make the fan go away.

During the Game: In the heat of the contest, all of a sudden the coach has forgotten your name and wants you to remind him or her of it — right now! You are trapped in that sense and you can either pretend, "I can't hear you," or provide your name. If the coach has you a little upset, you can always spell it out, nice and slowly with just a touch of sarcasm. Of course, you might kick yourself in the morning if you get overly dramatic with the spelling of your name. In that type of situation, providing your name is probably what you need to do. Patrick Rosenow, a recently retired military trial judge and high school and FIBA basketball official, says, "They'll have the names anyway and to refuse to identify yourself simply looks bad."

A situation could also arise when you're standing near an injured player who is being attended to. All of a sudden the coach takes that opportunity to let you know he or she has some serious concerns about your work. The coach wants to know your name and where you're from. In such a situation, it's best to advise the coach to please take care of the player, move away and not get into giving out information at that time.

After the Game: That is when the interest in who you are may peak! It's the rare official who has left every assignment without some parting gifts or verbal shots.

Don Collins, executive director of the California Interscholastic Federation-San Francisco Section, who is also



The Rules of Responding

We asked members of the NASO LockerRoom e-mail list for their experiences in dealing with coaches, athletic directors and fans who approached them for personal information. Many of those who responded had never been asked for anything more personal than their names. Most who were asked for more, such as contact information, said they responded by referring the person to the league or assigner. If you don't have your assigner's phone number memorized, it's not a bad idea to have it written down and handy after a game. The following are selected responses:

- "I have an officiating business card with my contact info that I give to assigners, A.D.s and other officials. I've even given them to coaches. Under no circumstances would I give one out to a fan. The coaches and A.D.s can have the information because they can get it anyway, but never, ever, a fan — even if they're being polite and friendly."
- "An ejected coach wanted my name, and I told him it was in the scorebook if he wanted it. That was after the game and he confronted me as I was walking to my car, so I didn't feel the need to be gracious."
- "I had a coach who wanted to 'discuss further' a rule he was convinced I kicked (I didn't) and pressed me for my phone number. To get him off my back, I told him our association has specific rules prohibiting me from giving out any personal information. I have no idea if we do or not, but we probably should."
- "A coach wanted our names, numbers and addresses for the father of a player we threw out once. The coach was very polite, and under normal circumstances, we probably would have given it to him, but one of the guys on our crew had the good sense to ask the coach what he wanted it for, and then we saw the father about 30 yards away looking agitated. We gave our names, but told him to contact our assigner for anything else."

a lawyer and basketball official, says, "We do have an obligation to provide professional and common courtesy responses." The officials who worked the game are not a secret and if people press the issue, they have a right to know if you are qualified or properly certified to work that contest, says Collins. If you have someone following you to your car and asking your name, a short professional response could be "My name is (your name here). I'm sorry you feel that way." All the while you are heading to a safe harbor. However, says Collins, there is no responsibility to provide any personal information outside of who you are. "If you feel you need to, tell them to contact the school, the league or assigner, whichever is appropriate at your level," Collins advises. Even if a kid had been hurt in the game, Collins says, there still is no obligation for you to provide any personal information. "There is a formal means to obtain that information," says Collins, "and that's through the assigning entity or governing body."

The Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) tries to keep the schools and the officials, or the public and the officials, from dealing directly with each other. Leaving the site, it's best to advise an admirer to contact the school. According to Kevin Merkle, associate director of the MSHSL, the schools may then file an incident report on an official with his office. They will investigate as is appropriate. Communication from and to the officials always goes through his office. Merkle also indicated the state office would never release specific ratings to the public. If a school has questions about an official's ratings, the league will only give general verbal feedback.

Rosenow recommends that associations or other officials' organizations have a written policy not to release personal information outside of the routine information that is needed for association business or contracts. Even if requested, there is no obligation to release personal information about officials short of a court subpoena.

Let's go back to our opening Friday night scenario. It is truly a personal choice if you want to give out your name. You have no legal obligation to give out any information. However, as Collins said earlier, the names of the officials who work a game are no secret. On the other hand, personal information is. You may tell them your name, wish them the best and you can still have a good weekend.

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