

LAW

ISSUES AFFECTING OFFICIALS

Safety for Officials Takes a Group Effort

By Donald C. Collins

It takes a coordinated effort to deal with the problem of attacks against officials. That coordination begins with local officials associations or, for those officials who work directly for a league, the league that hires the officials.

An association needs to regularly educate its member officials on sport or league rules that pertain to officials' safety. Those rules range from governing ejections and fights to rules governing attacks on officials to procedures governing unruly crowds. Associations should also cover how to handle difficult and/or threatening spectators and review what an official should do if he or she needs to call the police.

An association also needs to reach beyond its membership. Meetings with the school, league and governing body personnel who will be managing sites are essential. Those meetings should not be

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adversarial. People who aren't officials need to be regularly reminded that officials are attacked and threatened often and need certain things done to minimize their risk.

Education and coordination should be emphasized when meeting with the non-officials who help keep officials safe. An association should arrange security escorts, ensure security remains in the visible confines of officials' changing areas and review basic security procedures.

An association also needs to get a commitment to pass the word through the mid and lower levels of the organizations they meet with. A failure to meet and gain a commitment could be the difference between a police officer recording an attack against an official as a fight instead of an attack. It could be the difference between a school official reporting that a spectator jabbed a finger into an official's chest when the spectator actually pushed the official.

All the meetings in the world are useless if officials associations don't evaluate member officials on their compliance with safety protocols. It is very easy for safety concerns to be a low priority item for some officials, and it is not uncommon for safety procedures to become poorly performed rote exercises.

Consequently, officials often directly address angry spectators, even though they shouldn't, and they engage in other breaches of officiating procedures and mechanics that may increase their risk of harm. Evaluations must point those things out. If hustling off the court or exiting together are part of the safety and exit protocol, evaluations must note any breaches.

Associations must also teach officials how to write fact-specific reports. Character judgments, condemnations and even recommendations as to penalties are not necessary. Like *Dragnet*, a report should contain "just the facts."

The key thing for officials and associations to note is that it is a team effort. If the lines of communication are constantly open, officials, in case of attacks, have a better chance of having sports administrators, police officers and others react better.

Donald C. Collins is executive director of the San Francisco section of the California Interscholastic Federation. He is a longtime basketball official and lawyer. This material is for informational purposes only and is not legal advice. □

Six Safety Tips to Remember

Officials should always remember these principals regarding player safety for their games or matches:

1. Enforce all rules relative to player safety strictly and without deviation.
2. Any time a rule requires officials to ask questions and get answers: Ask questions and get answers.
3. Act intelligently and consistently, employing the principle of player safety in enforcing rules.
4. Never make up your own rules regarding player safety or attempt to explain the consequences of one course of action or another to anyone.
5. Take great care in documenting your prudent and correct enforcement of all safety rules, but leave out any extraneous material in game reports.
6. Don't assume anyone else will take responsibility if an injury occurs.

After the Game, Keep It Zipped

Officials must refrain from making any public statements or comments after a game. The need for risk management regarding any controversy surrounding the game continues well past the end of the game.

Offhand remarks or discussions about a controversial or injury situation in a game can lead to unintended legal consequences. It is important to leave the field or court immediately after the game with your partner or crew and refrain from engaging in any conversation with a spectator. There is simply no obligation on the part of the official. That could result in the official having to defend himself or herself physically. Do not discuss the game on the field or make any public statement about the game to the news media. That will only highlight any personal animosity that exists between the official and the player or coach.

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