

Step Up When a Player Goes Down

There's a scramble for a loose ball. Before the ball is secured, the referee hears a scream. One of the players is holding his knee and writhing in pain. Now what? It is difficult to always prevent injuries, but you should handle them properly. Some player injuries can get you in a lot of trouble; you can even end up in court. Here are a few tips on what to do when a player is injured.

Try not to miss the injury. The player isn't going to be any less injured because you saw him or her get hurt, but lawsuits are occasionally rooted in emotions. Players, coaches and parents are often less angry when an official appears vigilant in recognizing and responding to an injury. Those less angry people may be less inclined to sue. I am familiar with lawsuits against gym directors and even coaches who weren't paying attention and missed an injury (the gym director and coaches won — so we can all breathe more easily). It's

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not a stretch to see officials being sued for a lack of vigilance (in fact, there have been some lawsuits that addressed how officials called games). Vigilance and the appearance of competence solve a lot of problems.

Know the rules on when to stop a game for an injury. Officials are supposed to know those rules. People are highly unlikely to sue an official for enforcing the rules properly. If they do, there's not much an official can do and the official is probably going to win the suit anyway.

Don't be a prisoner to the rules if an extreme emergency occurs. If a player clearly has a heart attack, and the rules don't provide for an immediate stoppage of play, well — the rules should be bent. You're probably never going to see a heart attack during your game, but do you really want to be in court explaining that you let someone suffer from a heart attack because his team didn't have possession of the ball? Of course, the flip side of the coin is that if you improperly stop play for a sprained ankle, you're really not doing your job properly. There are some shades of gray here.

An official probably shouldn't treat the injured player. An official is charged with officiating the game. In the wake of an injury, an official has some responsibilities that may not be discharged well if the official is treating an injury. An official doesn't want to be explaining to an assigner, a judge or his partner why he didn't monitor angry players who started a fight in retaliation for a rough play because the official was tending to a bloody nose.

Remember, coaches are required to be first aid and CPR certified in most states. Coaches and school trainers can handle the routine injury. An official doesn't need to treat an injury unless the official is a medical professional treating a non-routine injury.

An official should know whether the player can return and under what circumstances. Many sports have special provisions for unconscious players, bleeding players, whether timeouts can save an injured player, and whether timeouts have to be called for injured players. Some sports have special rules for who can and cannot enter to replace injured players. Officials have to memorize those rules or they'll get into trouble.

Much of the work with injured players can be prevented by acting in advance to make sure that a player doesn't get injured. Officials can prevent a lot of injuries by monitoring field conditions and checking equipment before a game. Advance monitoring can save officials from a lot of the headaches that come where a player gets injured, and can help officials stay out of court.

Written by Don Collins, 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. □

Trust Your Legal Instincts

A lot of officials aren't lawyers. But officials do often have good instincts. If something occurs within the course of your officiating work that "feels" wrong or illegal to you, it probably is just that. Maybe it's an instance that appears to be discriminatory, negligent or simply unfair. Don't just ignore that happening. Follow your instincts and bring it to the immediate attention of your assigner or supervisor of officials. Then, if needed, go to a professional — an attorney — who can tell you if the actions that you experienced actually are illegal and help you take the next step.

Keep Courtrooms at a Distance

Whether it's a situation connected to a game you officiated or your local officials association, put your best effort toward dispute resolution before resorting to the judicial process. Remember that it is always better to work out differences that you may have privately rather than going through the potentially expensive, drawn-out and painful effort of litigation. As an official, you're used to managing people during games. Do the same when it comes to an issue that goes beyond a game.

Sometimes you can't avoid a courtroom. If that's the case, make sure you're prepared to enter it.