

Five Common Errors That Officials Should Avoid



By Donald C. Collins

Modern day officiating involves more than making the right calls. Today's official has legal and business

responsibilities. Today's official should make sure to avoid the following five common errors.

1. Failing to Inspect the Field

Officials have a duty to inspect the facilities prior to competition. Still, officials fail to inspect fields and courts far more often than one would think. Officials often have reasons for not inspecting.

At lower levels, facility inspections can get shirked because lower levels of play often don't provide much time to inspect a facility. Gyms don't always open early. Officials are often tightly scheduled. Game management issues create delays.

There is no excuse for failing to inspect the fields and courts. Take a moment to inspect no matter what the obstacles. The moment you take to inspect may be the moment that keeps you out of court.

2. Failing to Enforce Safety Rules (Especially in Informal Settings)

First, you need to know your safety rules. That sounds as simple as mastering the rulebook. However, it can become complex in sports where various administrative helpers are allowed to be on or near the field of play. An official needs to know the standards for positioning and monitoring those people. Parents working on the swimming pool deck, student volleyball linespeople, and students who rake and retrieve implements at a track meet all need instruction and monitoring.

Even worse, some sports have

supplemental personnel such as photographers and cheerleaders near the field of play. Officials need to know where to place those people, and officials have to monitor them.

Second, knowing safety rules isn't enough. There are numerous occasions where the informality of a competition invites officials to deviate from safety rules. Using informality as an excuse for noncompliance with a safety rule is a good way to end up in court. Those problems arise often in youth and recreational settings. Youth asking for jewelry rules exceptions because they just got their ears pierced, and adults who can't easily remove rings and other jewelry are common requests. Officials must resist the temptation to make safety exceptions in those less formal settings.

3. Delegating Rules Enforcement

Officials can't pass the buck. We are charged with rules enforcement, but there are settings where people claim that they have greater expertise and ask us to delegate the enforcement of the rules. We can't do that.

Concussion rules enforcement is the most recent battleground for a lot of those delegation requests. Occasionally, well-meaning doctors ask officials to defer to them. The problem is that one's sports rulebook or one's state law may not provide for delegation; the rules and/or the law may simply mandate that the official take action if they see signs or symptoms of a concussion. Official who delegate to the medical expert may expose themselves to legal liability. An official who is thinking of delegating in that area may want to think twice.

4. Bad Documentation

We need to take notes when we eject players, when players are injured and when players are removed under the concussion rule. There are also times when we need

to submit game reports. Officials must master the art of writing good, fact-based game reports. The key to remember is to write your reports like the old Dragnet TV show: Just give the facts, and do not inject your opinions or any extraneous thoughts or comments.

5. Being Careless on Social Media

Social media induces officials to believe that they're making private, informal comments. But the comments often can be read by a broad audience. It's kind of like shouting to your friend in a public square. You think it's just you and your friend, but the public can hear you. If you say unprofessional things or launch into personal attacks, you could end up violating a number of regulations about professional conduct. Be very careful on social media. Too many officials aren't.

Officials should note that their association's bylaws may provide some social media restrictions. Virtually all bylaws provide penalties for certain types of unprofessional conduct. Associations may enforce those penalties regardless whether the acts occurred on social media or not. After all, social media is simply a forum for communication. It is the unprofessional nature of the act that governs. An unprofessional act that uses social media is unprofessional in any medium.

Officials should also check their association's bylaws to see if the bylaws specifically regulate social media. If so, officials need to heed those regulations. Officials would be advised to refer to the NASO guidelines on social media (available at naso.org) as those guidelines set our very good professional standards. Donald C. Collins is the executive director of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. He is a longtime basketball official and lawyer. This article is for informational purposes and is not legal advice. □