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No matter how wild the game was, how nuts the fans were or how mouthy the coaches and players got, you could always count on escaping it all back in the locker room, where you could get a breather and reflect on your performance. If you're not safe there, how safe are you anywhere?

SAFE HAVEN

BY VAN OLER

As he prepared for his postgame shower, referee Timothy McCann undoubtedly thought the toughest part of his night was over. Had he anticipated being attacked outside the officials locker room, he would probably have been wearing more than just a towel.

McCann and partner Rodger Hill had just finished calling an Iowa high school varsity basketball game that had ended with a one-point defeat for the visiting team, which denied it a share of its conference title. An angry parent eventually found his way to the officials' supposed sanctuary and began pounding on a glass window near the room. When McCann, clad only in his towel, opened the door to ask the fan to leave, the fan attacked him, inflicting injuries that required a treat-and-release trip to a local hospital.

An arrest, lawyers and courtroom appearances resulted, and in the end Iowa District Associate Judge Douglas McDonald assessed the judicial equivalent of a technical foul, a 10-minute misconduct, a 15-yard penalty and a called strike three against the defendant.

"I think the conduct (of the defendant) was outrageous," noted Judge McDonald as he sentenced the man to seven days in jail and a \$500 fine. "It's a real affront to the behavior that should take place at a high school athletic event."

So the officiating community exhales yet again as another official survives unscathed another trip to another courtroom. However, true officiating bliss is found not in prevailing in court, but in avoiding litigation altogether. Any journey into the legal system, no matter how clear cut and unambiguous it seems to be, puts at risk one's reputation, avocation and possibly even freedom. The courtroom machinations, while vindicating in McCann's case, masked an important and apparently unasked question: How was a fan possessed of malice aforethought able to walk right up to an official and assault him in the doorway of the one place where the official is supposed to be insulated from such madness?

More and more states nationwide are adopting laws that punish those who subject sports officials to physical or excessive verbal

abuse. Illinois and Florida are on the cusp of becoming the latest states to adopt such legislation (see "The News" p. 11). Attacking an official can now buy a person up to three years of prison time. The existence of those laws is, among other things, prima facie evidence that assaults on officials are increasing nationally.

While it's good to know that the person who bonked you on the head is in big trouble, it doesn't change the fact that you have a very sore head. In addition to emphasizing that those

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who assault officials should be punished, the officiating community needs to take steps to ensure that assaults are prevented in the first place. The physical security of officials and their personal property is best achieved through a partnership between the officials and the event manager.

At one end of the security spectrum are the precautions taken on behalf of professional officials working at the major league level of their respective sports. With the public perception of their multi-billion-dollar industries at stake, the major leagues take impressive measures to protect officials from both direct physical confrontations with angry fans, players, and coaches as well as subtler but equally dangerous approaches from gamblers or other crooks.

"We now arrive at all of the league's buildings through a secure, private entrance, but that wasn't always the case," explained NHL referee Kerry Fraser. "None of the newer buildings require us to walk through a public area. We receive cards from the NHL Security Office that have the name of a security representative in each city and they meet us at the dressing room. Usually they have an extensive law enforcement background and we always see them scanning the crowd. They also provide the dos and don'ts for a given city and they inform us of known undesirables that we should refrain from having contact with."

At the other end of the spectrum, of course, are the conditions that most of the rest of us experience: a harried game manager (if there even is one) to whom the security of officials may rank 17th on a list of 15 top priorities.

Gameday accommodations are not something individual officials will generally be able to dictate themselves; that's one

more item on the event manager's checklist and local or state officiating associations may or may not have much say in the issue.

"We expect schools to do the best they can with whatever they have," noted Hank Zaborniak, assistant commissioner of officiating for the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA). As a Big 10 football official, Zaborniak and his colleagues have firsthand experience dealing with the inherent limitations of a given school or stadium.

"At the Big 10 level, some of the stadiums we work in are very old," he explained. "Some of the facilities were built in 1920 or 1930 when games were covered by just three officials. (But) the universities take the security of officials very seriously. At the University of Michigan you are never without a police officer escorting you."

Since the diversity of conditions precludes a "one size fits all" approach to locker room security and accommodations, Zaborniak advocates an educational rather than directive approach to the schools within the OHSAA's domain.

BIG LEAGUE LUXURY

Red M&Ms were anathema to lunatic rocker David Lee Roth during his days with Van Halen. If the caterer responsible for the preshow buffet failed to remove every last little red pill from the M&M bowl, Roth and the boys would supposedly refuse to stumble onstage and perform until it had been done.

Pro level officials probably aren't going to delay a game over an inappropriate salsa-to-chip ratio in their dressing room, but they do have the option to enjoy some pregame snacks in conditions significantly better than your average prep official.

"As the newer buildings have gone up everything has become nicer, and that includes the officials rooms," noted veteran NHL official Kerry Fraser. "If you wanted to stretch at the old Boston Garden, you had to do it in the hallway. Showering and changing after the game was basically done in shifts. Now, every team in the league has installed exercise equipment for us, and we have a full compliment of toiletries, clean carpeting, hot packs and all the medical treatment we may need."

Officials in other sports concur with Fraser's observation that the quality of accommodations is directly related to the age of the stadium or field.

"The old stadiums in New England and Detroit come to mind as places that were awfully small," noted veteran NFL referee Bob McElwee, who retired after last season. "Guys barely had room to get by each other. When someone else came in, we basically had to stand on our heads to make room."

Retired AL umpire Vic Voltaggio talks about how big league locker rooms used to be no better than some of the cramped broom closets many high school officials are offered. "In Minnesota, they actually forgot about an umpires' room when they built the stadium," he says. "They ended up knocking out a wall to make a space for us."

It's much different today, especially in the newest ballparks and arenas.

"One of the good things that has happened with the new stadiums in our league is that officials in the cities where they're being built have been able to shepherd the design of the officials room," says McElwee. "They have been able to talk to the architectural team and have some input in to facilities we end up using."

At least for officials at the top of their respective sports, the days of dressing in unheated and spartan broom closets are, for the most part, gone. Today, the rooms are bigger, the water perhaps a bit hotter, the towels a little fluffier, and the M&Ms are on a buffet table just inside the door, red ones and all.

"At the state level, the only time we would provide specific security guidelines is for a tournament contest," he said. "For regular season games we attempt to educate the game managers and let them know that good game management includes providing proper security and facilities for officials. One of the things we try to get across to our school folks is that if you don't prepare, if you don't have adequate security for your fans, officials and spectators and there is a problem, the first thing a sharp legal mind will point out is there is negligence."

You didn't think we'd get all the way through this story without consulting a lawyer, did you?

"An officials association in any sport should attempt to negotiate as part of its contract a secure facility for changing as well as a designated person to escort officials to and from the floor or field," stated Don Collins, practicing attorney and commissioner of the California Interscholastic Federation-San Francisco Section. "The fact of the matter is we (officials) bring problems on ourselves by not negotiating a secure area. Not having negotiated for one, we're relying on informal customs. For 50 games people go in and out of the room. We end up with a sporadic security situation when, following that 51st game, there is some sort of confrontation."

Even when officials have reached what they believe to be their safe haven, other people may have different ideas. During the 2002-03 basketball season, *Referee* Editor Bill Topp and his partner were in their locker room following a tense high school game that ended with a home team loss. During the second half Topp had "invited" the home team's head coach to depart early.

"All of a sudden we hear some rustling of keys and the door flies open and in comes this woman and about six other people just going nuts," recalled Topp. When Topp's partner indicated that he was going to call the police, the two officials were both stunned as the woman replied, "You can call anybody you want because I'm the principal of this school."

"We had no idea who it was," said Topp. "No identification whatsoever; never met the woman. It never got violent but it had the potential."

L'affaire Topp became a minor media sensation in southeastern Wisconsin, and one thing that emerged after the fact was that the administration of athletics exists parallel to, but distinct from, the administration of the school at large. In other words, an agreement reached between an association and an athletic director is not a de facto agreement with the principal. As Collins puts it, "You can, during negotiations with an athletic staff, designate some area as 'off-limits' to non-officials. Then, to keep that area 'off-limits,' the athletic people will have to educate the school administrators in ways they're

not accustomed to.” In less formal terms, the A.D. must be willing to tell the principal or assistant principal to stay out of the bloomin’ locker room no matter how righteous they think their anger.

And what if they don’t stay out? What if a school official violates a provision of an agreement? Collins notes that the agreement itself should lay out penalties as well as provisions.

“I strongly suggest writing in some remedy or sanction or else you will have minor violations all the time and that will weaken sanctions that may exist for larger ones,” he explained. “A school official (such as the principal) suffering severe sanctions is not practical. A more plausible remedy will be one directed at the school’s athletic department. It could include making a financial payment to the association if the agreement is violated in some way.”

Thus, the school’s athletic department, having the responsibility to implement an effective security plan, will have a financial incentive to do so as well.

That’s not to say nobody has thought of putting such rules and penalties down on paper before. The state of Arizona has adopted what amounts to a “zero tolerance” policy regarding officials’ accommodations. “We have a bylaw that prohibits anyone from entering the officials’ dressing room,” said Gary Whelchel, officiating director for the Arizona Interscholastic Association. “School personnel shall not invade the privacy of the officials. If that happens the school will be cited and could be up for sanctions.”



ED PURCELL

Even at the college level, officials like Jack Tietz (left) and Don Swanson don’t always have the luxury of a security escort in going to and from the locker room.

The 21st Century Pregame

Remember when the pregame meeting consisted of discussing tricky plays, coverage areas, team tendencies and maybe where to go for a postgame meal? You’re lucky if you still have the luxury of time to get to those topics. More and more, officials’ pregame meetings are consumed with issues of safety and security. Here’s a checklist of security discussion points for your next pregame meeting:

■ AN EXIT STRATEGY

Where will we meet when the game ends? Let’s make sure to exit the field or court together. What’s the quickest route to the dressing room? How can we best avoid spectators when we’re leaving?

■ THE GAME MANAGER

Who is the game manager? Where is he located? Will he be at the field or court the entire time? We need to prep him on our expectations of him if something gets out of hand.

■ THE LOCKER ROOM

Is our room private or will coaches be coming and going? Can we arrange for coaches and players to stay out while we’re using the room? Are our personal items safe? Will the room be locked after we exit for the game?

■ SECURITY ESCORT

Will someone be escorting us from the locker room to the field or court? What about to the parking lot after the game?

The Arizona bylaw was drafted in response to confrontations no different from those that take place periodically in the other 49 states. The Arizona bylaw goes a bit further, Whelchel says, by reminding school administrations “they have a moral responsibility to protect the officials and their belongings.”

While the phrase “security escort” brings to mind the stern-faced state troopers who are always in the photograph with Southeast Conference football coaches, an Arizona school has actually found that when it comes to bodyguards, less can be more.

“We have one school that does a marvelous job of using students as escorts for the officials,” Whelchel said. “The students are members of the athletic club, and some of their responsibilities are to meet the officials when they arrive, provide them refreshments and whatever else they may need, and then walk them to and from the field or court. There are always going to be idiots who yell profanity at the officials, but a lot of that kind of talk is deterred when the officials are being escorted by 14-year-old students.”

Officials may need to intervene on their own behalf if accommodations or security concerns are inadequate. Assigning officials to dress in a coach’s office may seem like a perfectly good idea when proposed around a conference table in August, but on a frigid night in February when a technical foul in the final minute costs the home team a conference title, that same idea may seem ludicrous if not outright hazardous.

When a school hosts a sporting event, it assumes certain explicit and implicit responsibilities for the safety of all spectators and participants, including the officials. A fan wearing the visiting team’s colors is entitled to believe that she should be able to walk to a venue without being harassed excessively or



BRIAN SPURLOCK

Even when accompanied by security personnel, as D-I basketball refs (from left) Bryan Kersey, Larry Rose and Duke Edsall are here, it's a good idea to plan your exit and leave together.

assaulted by rowdy spectators. Officials are entitled to the same degree of confidence that the school will take appropriate measures to protect them. In addition, though, officials have the obligation to help the security measures succeed by maintaining a professional demeanor above and beyond that expected of spectators. The referee who responds to repeated heckling with an undignified hand gesture has made life for his security escort much more difficult.

"If officials will deal professionally with what happens on the floor, that will help game management officials do their job protecting officials," explained Zaborniak.

A professional demeanor also helps solidify one's legal position should trouble ensue. "Officials usually show a great deal of professional restraint," noted Collins. "That's probably why we don't hear about more confrontations between referees and spectators or administrators."

The techniques employed to defuse hostile athletes, such as being a sympathetic listener (or at least imitating one), calm and respectful explanations and humor, may also have a place in postgame situations as well. Describing an ongoing encounter with a vociferous New Jersey Devils fan (is there any other kind?), Fraser employed a maxim that has served him well on and off the ice for decades: "You are best served to respond to disrespect with respect."

The final piece of the security puzzle is usually one's departure from the venue. Since officials may be among the last people to leave, one result of their later departure will be fewer cars for hostile spectators to watch as they keep the parking lot under surveillance. In the absence of a protected parking area, one may wish to reconsider that request for the "IMAREF" or "YEROUT" vanity license plates.

Baseball umpires and soccer officials may be forgiven for reading about dressing rooms and security escorts with a wry smile. Football and the indoor sports can usually be counted on to provide a designated room for officials. As spartan as that room may sometimes be, generally it still has a door that can be used to isolate and protect officials when necessary. The only door that will thump shut on behalf of the "outdoor officials" may well be that of an automobile.

"Many of our baseball fields do provide a small room for changing," said Jeff Murray, multi-sport official and past president of the Oklahoma City Metro Officials Association. "Even when they do, though, umpires still have to walk through the crowd to get to the field. During the season there aren't any special security precautions taken, but we have asked for increased security at the state high school tournaments, to include escorts to the field."

"We have been very fortunate in that baseball hasn't been the source of many problems, even though the umpires walk to and from the field in the open and unescorted," noted Ohio's Zaborniak. "There are usually fewer people attending those contests because they're afternoon games. However, that is the sport, along with soccer, that it most likely to have a significant problem because there is nobody around to intervene."

"We have had most of our parent-official confrontations in soccer," concurred Whelchel. "Many times it is an afterthought to put someone out there to protect the officials."

One of the legal considerations that has significant influence on these circumstances is the same one under assault from everyone from credit card companies to the federal government: privacy. It seems odd that privacy is much of an issue in a vocation whose practitioners willingly put themselves at the very visible center of public events. One of the primary requirements of officiating is the ability to endure gracefully (or at

"When a school hosts a sporting event, it assumes certain explicit and implicit responsibilities for the safety of all spectators and participants, including the officials."

least pretend to ignore) verbal abuse that might well be, under other circumstances, legally actionable. However, once a sporting event ends the official is no longer performing his or her official duties. In legal terms, an official's expectation of privacy jumps significantly as the echo of the game's final whistle or horn fades away. In non-legal terms, once the game is over, an official is off-duty and is entitled to a locker room into which no one can barge unannounced or uninvited. However, while it may seem like an inalienable right to have privacy in an officials locker room, it's probably best to take a cue from a tried and true business maxim: "You don't get what you deserve. You get what you negotiate." *Van Oler is a freelance writer and hockey official from Cincinnati.* □