

# SCRIMMAGES



BOB MESSINA

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# THE SAME, ONLY DIFFERENT

By Jennifer Rardin

**The season's about to start so why not suit up and go work a few scrimmages? It's good practice and gets you prepared for the real games ahead. But they're not real games. They're actually very different, and those differences can affect you in ways you probably haven't considered.**

True story ... a college football team in Michigan is scrimmaging; they're running a no-huddle offense and pretty much steaming through their plays, while the 14 or so officials working the practice as part of an officiating camp switch on and off so everyone gets field time. The deep wing on one particular play is expecting the center to hike the ball quickly; that's been the rhythm so far. But on this play the quarterback keeps popping up, signaling and calling audibles.

Eventually the kid's 25 seconds are up and the official, a young man himself, throws the flag. Absolutely the correct thing to do, right? Wrong!



Instead of quietly accepting the penalty for the obvious infraction, or even yelling at his waffling quarterback, the coach runs out onto the field screaming at the suddenly embarrassed young ref, "Pick up that flag! We're going! We're not calling that sh— today!"

And there you have one of the many differences between practice games and real games: Officials aren't necessarily the folks in charge. Instead of being the main facilitator responsible for the integrity of the contest, officials are often little more than paid advisors (or, as is often the case, *unpaid* advisors).

With the officials' capacity on the field or court drastically different during scrimmages, what other differences spring out of that role change?

There are no general standards, no hard and fast rules, no undeniable laws of officiating when it comes to scrimmages and practice games. Spring training contests look like the real thing. Everybody's in uniform and the umpires call it like they see it. But preseason football scrimmages can resemble P.E. class, with players wearing shorts and T shirts and officials overlooking minor infractions. And if some poor schmuck in a striped shirt asks to talk to the guy in charge, he's likely to be pointed in five different directions. Luckily there are a few experts who can help identify the differences between the roles you must play during real games and practice ones.

"Regardless of whether it's a game or a scrimmage," says Ted Curtis, a journalist, attorney and professor of Sports Management in the graduate studies program at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida, "regardless of whether or not you're getting paid, if you're on the field or court, you have a certain responsibility to the participants. First and foremost, you have to act responsibly." And that is the number one, unbreakable, unassailable rule an official can live by no matter what he or she is working. Even if the coach has asked you to bend a few rules here and there in the name of practice, emphasizes Curtis, you must still act responsibly.

So what does that mean, exactly? That means if safety is an issue, you must still act. "You can't ever take a chance of a player or anybody else getting injured during a scrimmage," says Bruce Hulion, commissioner of officials for the South Carolina High School League. Hulion says he and his fellow officials won't call some of the more technical fouls during a scrimmage if the coach requests it, but whenever someone's health is at risk, flags fly. "If it's something that could cause an injury, you don't talk them through that, you flag it," Hulion asserts.

The same holds true for dangerous weather conditions. However, you may come upon one of those rare instances when the coach disagrees that the scrimmage should be stopped.

"In a game, the official would be the final arbiter of what conditions were safe and what were not, and would have the power to stop the game due to the unsafe conditions. That's not entirely true with scrimmages," says official and lawyer, Don Collins, who is also the executive director of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. "In a scrimmage, the official doesn't have the power to stop the scrimmage, although officials do still have the discretionary authority to make a statement that they will not work the scrimmage because they have determined the conditions are unsafe."

In such a case, the official then has every right to stop officiating. It's important to keep those responsibilities in mind when you work scrimmages because liability can become an issue.

"Each insurance carrier might have different standards and scrimmages can occur in different settings," Collins points out. So while your own liability insurance might cover a scheduled scrimmage the same as if it were a game, it might not protect you if you agree to officiate a hastily arranged practice session a coaching acquaintance put together.

Knowing the limits of your liability can become incredibly important in those cases, because there might not be a large entity like a school or a league, which would normally be the target of a lawsuit, officially sponsoring the scrimmage. Instead, *you* could become the target. Bottom line — find out whether or not your officiating insurance covers scrimmages, and if it does, how far its definition of scrimmage stretches.

What complicates those definitions is the definition of a scrimmage itself. We all know what a game is because there are rulebooks to define it; there is uniformity among games, regardless of the sport or level. But two different scrimmages — even of the same sport and at the same level — can be radically different.

## Preseason Preparation

Like any valuable tool used properly, scrimmages can make the difference between shoddy work and fine craftsmanship. Especially for sports with months of downtime between seasons, scrimmages provide a chance for officials to put the final finish on their game — before the actual games.

Four-sport official Richard Harmon, who serves as the president of the Sunshine Officials Association in Florida, says, "Basically we look at scrimmages as training for the kids and for us to get into the flow of the game. If you've been off for eight or nine months, you've got cobwebs in your brain. Usually when you come into the full fall season for football, for example, it gives you a chance to get your mind focused on the game."

Whatever sport you're involved in, for rookie officials especially, scrimmages provide an excellent chance to learn from experienced mentors and to discover the rhythm of their chosen game.

Scrimmages are also where players continue to learn the game. According to Harmon, part of any official's job during a scrimmage is to talk to both the players and coaches, making sure that even if you didn't call a foul, they understand you would have in a game situation and why.

What you don't want to do with the scrimmage is use it as physical preparation. "We have some people who use scrimmages to build up stamina for the season," says Bruce Hulion commissioner of officials for the South Carolina High School League. "I tell people if you wait to use scrimmages for that, you're too late."

— Written by Jennifer Rardin.

"It can depend on the sport and it depends on the rule that the governing body for that sport sets up," says Curtis. "In Major League Baseball, spring training, even though it's a scrimmage, the umpire's responsibilities are no different than if it was the World Series," he says. "If, however, you were talking about a youth soccer game, the rules of that league might instill the referees with different responsibilities for scrimmages than for games. In that instance, the (governing) league might give the coaches the responsibility for monitoring the field or setting up the field, and give the officials just the responsibility of calling the (practice) game itself."

"Remember," adds Collins, "a scrimmage is not a game. Consequently, in many scrimmages people won't have all of the normal game equipment on or you could have basketball scrimmages in which someone wouldn't be removed for a small cut like they might be during regular play."

It sounds a little like being sent into Wonderland without even a stressed out rabbit to follow. Beyond assuring everyone's safety, what are you supposed to do?

"You don't really know the ground rules until you get there," says Hulion. "Different teams need different sorts of practices at different times. So make sure the coach lets you know what he or she is looking for before you begin."

Better yet, says Curtis, get a contract. "The officials association really needs to set out specific rules with the league or the park or whoever is in charge of the athletes as to what the responsibilities of officials will be during scrimmages," says Curtis. Take football for instance, he says. Many times officials will be asked to work scrimmages that are either played at half speed or without full pads. Because of that, the officials associations

need to contractually agree to such stipulations with the league sponsoring the game. Associations may want to go so far as to ask the league to indemnify the official for any injury resulting from that sort of situation.

Contracts also help in that they spell out payment expectations, specify what agency is in charge of the scrimmage and detail the officials' powers up to and including stoppage of play and ejection of players, coaches and fans.

"It's hard to say all scrimmages should be run under a contract because, practically speaking, that's not going to happen," says Collins. But he strongly recommends that if the association books the scrimmage, it should use a contract.

Despite the fact that coaches shape scrimmages according to their needs at the time, officials are still the final arbiters of the rules. With that in mind, says Curtis, you still need to make sure the playing surface is safe. You need to call any foul that endangers players. In case of weather that endangers everyone on the field, you must make your opinion clear to the coach and be prepared to walk off the field if he or she insists on continuing the scrimmage. And, for your own safety and peace of mind, check with your insurer to make sure you're covered during all the types of scrimmages you work, no matter what sport or level.

While precautions are necessary, especially in sports involving physical contact like football and hockey, never avoid working scrimmages. The liability risks are minimal and the practice is a valuable tool for everyone involved. Problems are rare, especially if you take the aforementioned steps to protect yourself.

The best step is to work scrimmages with the same professional demeanor you use in games. A game-day attitude is also the best way to ensure personal and player safety regardless of whether or not there's a contract or whether or not you're being paid.

But one last thing to remember — you may want to let that 25-second clock run a little long. Just in case. *Jennifer Rardin, from Robinson, Ill., is a freelance writer whose husband officiates high school football.* □

# Scrimmages vs. Actual Games

## Scrimmages

- Meet with coach to find out how he or she would like the scrimmage to run.
- A scrimmage is practice for everyone. Keep that in mind at all times.
- Do not call minor infractions as you would in a game. Instead advise players and possibly coaches that the mistake would draw a flag or foul in a real game.
- Let the coach worry about the speed of the play.
- If there ever was a time to talk, this is it. Talk to players, coaches and other officials as much as possible.

## Games

- Meet with coach to go over the rules and expectations.
- Practice is over; it's time to be the pro you are.
- Call the infractions you see.
- The clock's not running backward anymore.
- Communication is still key.