

## **ASSAULTS AND BATTERIES – ON BASKETBALL REFEREES – THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SURVEY**

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August 12, 2009

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2001, I issued a survey on attacks against sports officials to 105 basketball referees in a city in Northern California. 48 of these officials responded. These officials cover middle school, high school, and adult recreational games.

### **SURVEY RESULTS**

#### Attacks

Information on attacks was obtained by asking officials whether they had ever been: (a) hit or kicked or had an object thrown at them; or (b) shoved or pushed with a significant amount of force. Officials were asked whether they had ever been attacked at youth, high school and adult recreation games, and by spectators, players, coaches and parents at those games.

39.6% of the respondents have been attacked at some point in their career. 22.9% have been attacked at a youth game. 20.8% have been attacked at an adult recreation game. Only 10.4% have been attacked at a high school game. Readers should note that some respondents have been attacked at more than one level of play.

27.1% of the respondents have been attacked by a player. 22.9% have been attacked by a spectator. Only 6.3% have been attacked by a coach. Finally, only 4.2% have been attacked by someone whom they could identify as a parent. Again, some respondents have been attacked by more than one of these groups.

Breaking down by level, gives the following results: 14.6% of the respondents have been attacked by a player at a youth game. 12.5% have been attacked by a spectator at a youth game. 4.2% have been attacked by a parent at a youth game. Finally, 4.2% have been attacked by a coach at a youth game.

16.7 of the respondents have been attacked by a player at an adult recreation game. 8.3% have been attacked by a spectator at an adult recreation game. No respondent was attacked by a parent or coach at an adult recreation game.

4.2% of the respondents have been attacked by a spectator at a high school game. 4.2% have been attacked by a coach at a high school game. 2.1% have been attacked by a player at a high school game. No respondent was attacked by someone they could identify as a parent at a high school game.

### Injuries

14.6% of the respondents have been injured in an attack. The officials weren't asked who injured them, but they were asked where the injuries occurred. 10.4% of the respondents said they have been injured in an attack at an adult recreation game. 6.3% have been injured at a youth game. 2.1% have had been injured at a high school game. Some officials have been injured more than once. *These results and the results on attacks are in Table A.*

### Bumps, Shoves and Pushes With Or Without Significant Force

The officials were asked whether they had ever been bumped, pushed or shoved with or without a significant amount of force. This question seeks information on inappropriate physical contact, but it excludes hitting and kicking incidents. 45.8% of the respondents said they have been bumped, pushed or shoved in their career. 39.6% said a player has done this to them. 14.5% said a spectator has done this to them. 10.4% said a coach has done this to them. Finally, only 8.3% said a parent has done this to them. Some officials have been involved in more than one incident. *Table C breaks this down by level. It should be noted that the fewest incidents by far occur at the high school level.*

### Verbal Threats

The officials were asked whether they had ever been verbally threatened with harm. The question was intended to go beyond mere booing and reveal how often people cross the line and threaten to hurt an official.

An extremely high number of officials have been threatened. 41.7% of the respondents have been verbally threatened at some point in their career. 29.2% have been threatened in youth games. 25% have been threatened in high school games. 20.8% have been threatened in adult recreation games. Many officials have been threatened at more than one level of play. *Spectators, parents, players and coaches all do a high amount of threatening as revealed in Table D.*

It should be noted that high school players and coaches do the least amount of threatening – only 10% of respondents have been threatened by a high school player. Only 12.5% of respondents have been threatened by a high school coach.

*Table D does show that adult rec spectators, parents and coaches engage in very little threatening behavior.* The primary reason for this is because there are relatively few spectators, parents and coaches at most adult recreation basketball games. The players – freed from a coach's supervision and free from any scrutiny from observers make almost all of the threats at the adult recreation level.

### Frequency Of Occurrence

The average respondent has officiated basketball for 14 years. There are respondents who have officiated for as many as 44 years, and as few as 0 years. 17 of the 48 respondents have officiated over 1,500 games. Many of these respondents are probably well over 1,500 (the survey does not ask how far over 1,500 they are). 6 of the respondents have officiated over 1,000 games. The remaining 25 respondents average 438 games officiated.

This survey asked how many times specific acts occurred. This question was too imprecise to have statistical value as some officials gave the number of games an act occurred in, and others gave the number of times an act occurred. Future surveys will phrase the question better. Nonetheless, the answers are revealing.

Attacked respondents reported an average of 5 attacks over their careers. However, some of these attacks were clearly multiple attacks during one game (the officials said so in margin notes). Attacked officials probably average from 2 to 3 attacks over the course of their career. The average for the entire pool of respondents is about one and a fourth attacks per career. Most of these attacks have not caused injuries – however, 1/3d of the attacked respondents have been injured. If one eliminates hits and kicks and just counts any bump or push regardless of the degree of force, the respondents average about one and a half incidents per career.

The respondents work in an incredibly hostile environment. They reported an average of 7 verbal threats per respondent. The respondents who were threatened reported an average of 16.9 threats per official. While these numbers reflect the career experience of the pool, it is still a staggeringly high number of threats. Indeed, each respondent averages a threat every 2 years. People clearly are doing more than cheering and booing when they participate in or attend basketball games.

### Conclusion

The respondents are engaged in a dangerous avocation. Someone will make inappropriate physical contact with almost half of them. Approximately 40% of them will be seriously attacked. 15% of them have been injured in an attack. To make matters worse, the respondents are subject to an ongoing barrage of threats.

It should be noted, though, that the attacks occur in an incredibly small percentage of games. The survey pool only experiences about one – maybe one and a half – attacks per year. It should be noted that the number of attacks and injuries are extremely lower at the high school level. Thus, officials should be especially careful during youth games and adult recreation games.

Anyone old enough to carry out a threat poses a danger. Indeed, the survey shows that youth players committed almost as many attacks on officials as adult recreation players. It is extremely unlikely that these are committed by anyone below the 7th grade. However, after 7th grade any player poses a risk. I would guess that older children (17 to

18 years old) are the biggest threat amongst youth, but the survey did not ask the age of youth attackers.

The greatest risk, however, clearly comes from adults. Adults attack officials when they are playing. They attack officials when they are spectators and they attack as parents. More officials are attacked at the youth level than at any other level. The bulk of those attacks were from spectators or parents.

Attacks by players tended to be hard shoves. Indeed, players commit an extremely high number of bumps. Player attacks are often a result of a bump turning into a shove – a willful failure to control adrenaline in protesting or complaining.

However, the survey shows that spectators and parents come out swinging. Spectators and parents commit a lot of bumps, but when they attack they're going to throw a punch – spectators and parents seldom shoved or pushed with excessive force. In short, spectators and parents intend to hurt officials when they attack them.

The survey shows that a high school setting is the only successful deterrent to attacks from spectators, parents and players. Unfortunately, the survey cannot tell us why fewer officials are attacked at the high school level.

It is possible that the formality of the high school setting discourages attacks. It is also possible that the spectators, parents and players defer to the coach more at the high school level than they do at the youth level. It is also possible that the coach, school administrators and league administrators exert more control over sportsmanship at the high school level. This increased control – combined with severe sanctions against coaches, players and even the programs of schools which behave improperly – may be another key deterrent to misconduct at the high school level.

In summary, it is clear that the surveyed officials work in a very dangerous setting anytime they stray from the relatively safe confines of the high school games they usually work. When the officials restrict themselves to their high school games, their setting is hostile but they are only occasionally at risk of harm.

**TABLE A: PERCENTAGE OF OFFICIALS WHO HAVE BEEN ATTACKED\* (out of a pool of 48 responses)**

	YOUTH	HIGH SCHOOL	ADULT REC	ALL LEVELS	LAST YEAR - YOUTH	LAST YEAR – HIGH SCHOOL	LAST YEAR – ADULT REC	LAST YEAR – ALL LEVELS
ATTACKED BY SPECTATOR	12.5%	4.2%	8.3%	22.9%	0	2.1%	4.2%	6.3%
ATTACKED BY PARENT	4.2%	0	0	4.2%	0	0	0	0
ATTACKED BY PLAYER	14.6%	2.1%	16.7%	27.1%	2.1%	0	4.2%	4.2%
ATTACKED BY COACH	4.2%	4.2%	0	6.3%	2.1%	2.1%	0	4.2%
TOTAL OFFICIALS ATTACKED	22.9%	10.4%	20.8%	39.6%	2.1%	4.2%	8.3%	10.4%
INJURED	6.3%	2.1%	10.4%	14.6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note: The “Total Officials” row and the “all levels” columns will not necessarily equal the numbers of attacks by spectators, parents, players and coaches and attacks at youth, high school and adult recreation levels because some officials were attacked more than once.

\*This survey defined attacked as being (a) hit, kicked, attacked with an object or having an object thrown at you or (b) being shoved or pushed with an excessive amount of force.

**TABLE B: PERCENTAGE OF OFFICIALS ATTACKED (BREAKDOWN BY TYPES OF ATTACKS) (out of a pool of 48 responses)**

	YOUTH	HIGH SCHOOL	ADULT REC	ALL LEVELS	LAST YEAR - YOUTH	LAST YEAR – HIGH SCHOOL	LAST YEAR – ADULT REC	LAST YEAR – ALL LEVELS
HIT OR KICKED BY SPECTATOR*	12.5%	4.2%	8.3%	22.9%	0	2.1%	2.1%	4.2%
HIT OR KICKED BY A PARENT	4.2%	0	0	4.2%	0	0	0	0
HIT OR KICKED BY A PLAYER	8.3%	0	14.6%	20.8%	2.1%	0	4.2%	4.2%
HIT OR KICKED BY A COACH	2.1%	2.1%	0	4.2%	2.1%	2.1%	0	2.1%
TOTAL OFFICIALS HIT OR KICKED	20.8%	6.3%	18.8%	37.5%	2.1%	4.2%	6.3%	8.3%
PUSHED OR SHOVED (PS) WITH SIGNIFICANT FORCE BY A SPECTATOR	2.1%	0	4.2%	6.3%	0	0	4.2%	4.2%
PS WITH SIGNIFICANT FORCE BY A PARENT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PS WITH SIGNIFICANT FORCE BY A PLAYER	8.3%	2.1%	6.3%	14.6%	0	0	0	0
PS WITH SIGNIFICANT FORCE BY A COACH	4.2%	2.1%	0	4.2%	2.1%	0	0	2.1%
TOTAL OFFICIALS PS WITH SIGNIFICANT FORCE	12.5%	4.2%	10.4%	22.9%	2.1%	0	4.2%	6.3%

Note: The “Total Officials” row and the “all levels” columns will not necessarily equal the numbers of attacks by spectators, parents, players and coaches and attacks at youth, high school and adult recreation levels because some officials were attacked more than once.

\*The exact phrasing of this question also included attacks with an object and having items thrown at you.

**TABLE C: PERCENTAGE OF OFFICIALS WHO HAVE BEEN BUMPED OR PUSHED – WITH OR WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT FORCE (out of a pool of 48 responses)\***

	YOUTH	HIGH SCHOOL	ADULT REC	ALL LEVELS	LAST YEAR - YOUTH	LAST YEAR – HIGH SCHOOL	LAST YEAR – ADULT REC	LAST YEAR – ALL LEVELS
BUMPED OR PUSHED BY SPECTATOR	12.5%	4.2%	6.3%	14.5%	0	0	4.2%	4.2%
BUMPED OR PUSHED BY PARENT	8.3%	2.1%	0	8.3%	0	0	0	0
BUMPED OR PUSHED BY A PLAYER	16.7%	8.3%	22.9%	39.6%	0	0	6.3%	6.3%
BUMPED OR PUSHED BY A COACH	6.3%	8.3%	0	10.4%	2.1%	2.1%	0	2.1%
TOTAL OFFICIALS BUMPED OR PUSHED	25%	18.8%	27.1%	45.8%	2.1%	2.1%	10.4%	12.5%

Note: The “Total Officials” row and the “all levels” columns will not necessarily equal the numbers of attacks by spectators, parents, players and coaches and attacks at youth, high school and adult recreation levels because some officials were attacked more than once.

\*The exact phrasing of this question asked for all bumps, pushes and shoves. This question includes acts that lacked significant force and it includes the acts in Table B that had a significant amount of force.

**TABLE D: PERCENTAGE OF OFFICIALS WHO HAVE RECEIVED VERBAL THREATS (out of a pool of 48 responses)\***

	YOUTH	HIGH SCHOOL	ADULT REC	ALL LEVELS	LAST YEAR - YOUTH	LAST YEAR – HIGH SCHOOL	LAST YEAR – ADULT REC	LAST YEAR – ALL LEVELS
THREATENED BY A SPECTATOR	25%	18.8%	8.3%	31.3%	18.3%	10.4%	0	12.5%
THREATENED BY A PARENT	20.1%	16.7%	0	29.2%	2.1%	6.3%	0	8.3%
THREATENED BY A PLAYER	16.7%	10.4%	20.8%	31.3%	2.1%	2.1%	10.4%	14.6%
THREATENED BY A COACH	18.8%	12.5%	4.2%	22.9%	2.1%	6.3%	4.2%	10.2%
TOTAL OFFICIALS THREATENED	29.2%	25%	20.8%	41.7%	8.3%	14.6%	10.4%	22.9%

Note: The “Total Officials” row and the “all levels” columns will not necessarily equal the numbers of attacks by spectators, parents, players and coaches and attacks at youth, high school and adult recreation levels because some officials were attacked more than once.

\*The exact phrasing of this question asked whether officials were verbally threatened with harm.