

Communication - Key Factor in Game Management

Author: Matt Palumb

Supervisors often say what separates good officials from the great ones is the ability to communicate effectively during a game. This communication has 4 parts to it:

- 1) Your crew
- 2) The table
- 3) Coaches
- 4) Players

The best officiated games usually start with three (or two) officials that are "on the same page." This starts with a solid pre-game, and continues throughout the game. Once the game starts, the communication among the crew becomes less verbal and done more through calls. Are we attempting to match calls at both ends when it's appropriate? If someone on the crew calls a 50-50 push at one end, we should get the same call at the other end. Are we quickly getting together when something strange happens to lean on each other for help? Remember, the only teammates we have during a game are each other!

Let's move on to the people at the table. The number and quality of your table personnel will vary from level to level. At youth games, we're often lucky we have anybody over there that's willing to keep score and penalty time. The entire crew needs to go over and meet the table crew. Find out who is keeping game time and penalty time. Is there a horn at the table? Does your game clock have an automatic horn or is someone needed at the table to use the hand-held horn at zeros on the clock? Who will release the players from penalties? A good "R" will quickly make the table personnel part of their crew. Most importantly, once the game begins, do not allow coaches or players from either team to give your table personnel a hard time. Protect them. Have zero tolerance for players and coaches verbally attacking table personnel.

Let's talk about communication with coaches. You only get one chance to make a first impression. Especially with a coach you've never met before! I always start it off with a firm handshake, eye contact and a smile. From there, let the coach steer the conversation a little bit. Some guys like to chat for a couple minutes, others like to get right down to business and go back to coaching quickly. Just know this: especially the higher up you go, trust that the other coach or someone on his staff is probably watching you communicate with the opposing coach.

Just like how we want to be consistent with calls at each end, we also want to be consistent with how we communicate with coaches. Once in a while, they make it difficult. Maybe one guy is a talker, likes to laugh and smile, while the other guy has a more serious approach with very little chatter. You need to be aware of this and try your best to balance your pre-game interaction as best you can. Don't spend 10 minutes with one coach and 30 seconds with the other. Usually, at least someone on the crew has an idea of what type of personality each coach has. Discuss that in your pre-game.

Once the game starts, I think communication with coaches should be at a minimum. Answer questions the best you can. Support your partners. If there is a strange play or rule situation in the game, get both coaches together in the middle of the box and explain what you have to them at the same time. Try to do it as quickly as possible without rushing. This should be done by the referee. Don't be sarcastic. Do the best you can to stay composed and do not raise your voice. ***Fair or not, we are held to higher standards than the players and coaches.*** Coaches do not like to be ignored, so do your best to address their concerns. Don't be afraid to say, "I missed it," "I didn't have a good look at the play," "I'll take a better look at xyz." Tell them what you saw on a given play. Don't lie; you'll instantly lose credibility.

Finally, none of us need to put up with being abused. Use the tools in your toolbox to address these situations. First we have our communication skills: "Coach, that's enough," "Coach, if this continues, it's going to hurt your team." The toolbox also includes conduct fouls and unsportsmanlike conduct fouls. Finally, and we hope it doesn't happen often, a coach will lose the privilege of having an open line of communication: "Coach, I'm no longer talking to you, it's not helping the game."

The last people you'll come in contact with on game day, but also spend the most time with, are the players. Having a good line of communication with the players in the game can really help the game go well. The older the players are, the more you'll probably talk with them to help the game along. Youth players probably don't have a whole lot to offer in the way of helping you. However, you should still be communicating with them, but most of the focus is on you helping them understand the rules. Talk them out of things. Do a little teaching. At the middle school level and below, most coaches will appreciate the help. If a coach gives you a hard time about teaching a kid during the game, to me, he simply doesn't "get it." As long as you do it at both ends, please, help the kids learn the game.

As you move up to higher levels, that's when you lean on the captains or leaders of a given team to help you with a teammate of theirs who is being difficult. The really good captains can even help you with a tough coach. Be approachable to players who want to communicate with you. If they're not coming to you for the right reasons, you can put an end to that communication quite easily: "Number 15, you and I are done talking." Give them the opportunity to have the privilege of an open line of communication. If they go on to lose that privilege through their actions, then let them know that.

Every person communicates a little differently. Figure out your strengths and use those strengths to help you and your crew have a positive experience!

Matt Palumb – Author Biography



- Began officiating lacrosse in 1992
- Started officiating college lacrosse in 1996
- First NCAA playoff game in 1999
- Officiated in every Final Four since 2001
- Played ('88, '89, '90) and officiated ('05, '10, '12) in 3 NCAA Division 1 title games
- MLL official since the league's inception in 2001
- Officiated 7 MLL Championship games
- Officiated the 2002 U19 World Games in Baltimore, MD.
- Officiated the 2006 Open World Games in London, ONT
- Division 1 basketball referee