

As ref sees it . . .

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Practice makes near perfect

I was a little nervous before I went in about half-way through the first half. I tried to remember everything we had been told about the rules and hand signals. Relax, call the obvious, be aggressive, I told myself.

I took my position under the basket, then the game was going and I was trailing the action. My thoughts were on the late Mendy Rudolph, the great NBA official, when a foul was committed right in front of me. I blew my whistle but the only sound that came out was a weak "Phweeett." Forgetting to raise my hand to signal a foul, I pointed at the guilty player and ran to the scorer's table to report the violation. I did my best imitation of "over the back" and ran back onto the court to put the ball in play. Then, for a brief instant, I forgot whose ball it was. Luckily, the player who had been fouled came over to the spot where I was pointing and waited for the ball. I made a mental note not to let that happen again.

The rest of my 10-minute shift went smoothly except that I continued to forget to raise my hand and blow my whistle simultaneously when I made a call. My whistle was still a little weak and I was still unsure of myself. I was sweating when I came out because it had been a fast-paced game, but I felt like I had hustled well and done a pretty fair job my first time out. Ready or not, I volunteered for the 6 p.m. shift for Thursday's regular season games.

Each shift lasts about 2½ hours and includes three games. I had only planned on reffing one game but at \$3.35 an hour, I figured I could handle three games. While officiating won't make a person rich, it does offer a student some pocket money and a chance to gain experience. Scheele said the program is designed to provide experience to students interested in future officiating jobs, particularly on the high school level. The rules for intramural games are those used in high school games and sanctioned by the Nebraska School Activities Association.

I studied those rules on Wednesday, my final preparation day. At home, I practiced my hand signals and drove my wife crazy blowing my whistle all over the house. I also watched some basketball on television, paying close attention to the referee's positioning and movement. And Wednesday night, I played in a city-rec game and called all of the fouls committed by the other team whether I was in the game or not.

I arrived at the Coliseum Thursday about 45 minutes before game time. After a final look at the rules, I helped supervisor Paul Dudley carry the scorers' tables onto the floor. The supervisor's job includes collection of score sheets for each game, keeping track of officials and teams scheduled to play during his shift, and evaluating new officials to help them improve their technique.

The first time

Twenty minutes before game time, I grabbed a ball and shot some baskets to warm up. Then two women's teams took the court and started to shoot baskets with me. Wait a minute, I thought. Nobody said anything about officiating a women's game. The thought had never crossed my mind. Please understand that I have nothing against women's basketball. I always watch the girls' state basketball tournament games. But I was geared to ref a men's game and these new developments took me by surprise.

My apprehension disappeared as I watched the teams warm up. Most of the players were good and I realized this wasn't going to be much different than a men's game.

My partners on the first shift were Morris Hadenfeldt and Barry Newman. Both had officiated before and I figured I was lucky to be with experienced people who could bail me out of any tough spots.

We decided that two of us would ref and the third person would be the scorer and timekeeper. Morris and I decided to ref the first game.

When the game started, I ran up and down the court, concentrating on the dribbling, shooting and colliding players. My attention became focused on jersey colors, player numbers and the movement of the ball. Features were lost in the blur of bodies; I paid no attention to the score. My only concern became keeping the game under control and being as fair as possible.

When I made a call, I felt like everyone in the place had their eyes on me. My confidence increased when a player would say, "Good call, ref." But comments like, "That call was a little quick" or "How was that a foul?" made me think twice about what I had seen and what I had called. I stuck with the original call in every instance.

At halftime of the first game, Dudley gave me an evaluation card. I got a "good" rating on hustle and enthusiasm. But I still needed improvement in whistle-blowing and fist-raising. I also was forgetting to count when players brought the ball up the floor and I was out of position several times, which resulted in a lot of extra running.

I worked the second game as score-timekeeper and had few problems with that job. When I reffed the third game of the evening (a men's game), I felt that I did better and concentrated more on not making the mistakes I made in the first game.

All three of the games I officiated seemed to go fast. In UNL intramural games, teams play two 20-minute halves. The clock runs continuously, except for timeouts, and only stops for fouls and out-of-bounds balls in the last two minutes of the second half. Most teams rely on getting down the floor fast and most of the players are quick and fast. This element of the game posed its own problems because I am slow and not very quick. Some of my biggest challenges came when I tried to keep up with a fast break and found myself being passed by the fast breakers. After that happened once or twice, I adjusted my position on the floor so I could keep ahead of the play.

They're only human

Even though I made a lot of mistakes and missed some calls, everything went smoothly. No fights broke out, nobody got hurt; the games were always under control and I only called one technical because a guy went up for a rebound and hung on the rim. Some of the women said thank you when I handed them the ball on an in-bounds play. Most of the men were good sports when they were hit with a foul.

I expected more comments from the players but there was only the usual grumbling that accompanies any close foul. And there were the questioning looks that I'm sure I've given referees once or twice as a player.

But my image of the much-maligned official, suffering verbal abuse from the fans and the players, was quickly dispelled. For one thing, there were hardly any fans. Most of the coaches were players so that factor was eliminated. And the players were usually aware of their violations and cooperated with me and the other officials.

I guess I expected too much criticism. After all, these were intramural games and were played for fun and exercise. Every team will qualify for the playoffs so a loss during the regular season won't

hurt any teams' chances.

As for my own performance, I followed the pattern of the beginning referee. Scheele told me later that the most common problem of new officials is timidity. She said new refs usually aren't forceful enough and may be somewhat intimidated in their first few games.

I will admit that I fit the description. I didn't feel intimidated but my apprehension may have softened the sound of my whistle and curtailed my aggression when I slapped a player with a personal foul.

Scheele said it usually takes a beginner about a dozen games before he or she feels comfortable and confident on the court. Because of school and work, I won't continue in the program long enough to reach that point.

But my experience as a referee gave me a new perspective on the game. Officials are human and they do make mistakes. They can't see everything but they do their best. Having had the chance to see the game from their point of view, I have a better understanding of the game and the responsibility that they must assume.

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