

5 WAYS TO ESTABLISH RAPOIRE WITH OFFICIALS

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What's your relationship with game officials? Cordial, Business Like, No relationship at all? After all they're just part of the game, why make any effort to establish a professional relationship with someone that you may argue with throughout your game. They have a job, you have a job, why bother?

As a coach, you've already established a reputation in the officiating community. Why should you care? Most coaches would say, "I'm who I am and I'm not changing for anyone, especially since I've been very successful." We would never advocate you change for officials, but what if you could do something that might impact how others look at your team on game night.

Let's agree that officials have great games, and games that are not their best. Can we help them have a better game? I believe we can. Our reputation sets the tone for them to feel comfortable coming into our stadium or arena, or if they show up at one of our road games. That positive tone impacts our game more than we realize.

Here are five ways to build a long lasting positive relationship.

- **Greet them before every game-** Make a point to shake their hand, look them in the eye and say, "I really appreciate you being here tonight, and thanks for your dedication to all the players. Have a great game." You can vary the statement, but be sincere in what you say. Without officials, even on a bad night, our game wouldn't exist.
- **Expect your players to be respectful-** Show your players exactly what you expect when they meet and deal with officials. "I understand, Thank you, I see, are all phrases that show respect when players communicate with officials. Remind your players that becoming upset with a call and yelling at

the official will never help your team. Be firmly in control of your team with respect to and respect of officials. Never tolerate anything less.

- **Keep coaching, not officiating-** I've witnessed coaches become so upset with an official that they quit coaching while the game went on, only to continue yelling and screaming. Their job is to coach. Pick a time during halftime, timeout or stoppage to plead your case, then let it go. Rarely would the call be changed. They will miss calls just as we will make mistakes coaching. Take a deep breath and stay focused.
- **Recognize them and their achievements-** If you're fortunate to live in the same area, greet them every chance you get. It's when you see them with their family that you realize there's more than just the shirt they wear during a game. Become involved in recognizing great officials and their dedication to the profession. Sell their ability just as you do your players. Call, email or message the head of officials in your area with a compliment. It may be one of only a few he or she receives.
- **Champion a Cause-** We often associate with fellow coaches, but have you ever thought that officials have the same passion to make a difference in a player's life as you do. Who better to team up with and lead the fight for a cause than officials. Getting to know each other better is certainly a benefit, but seeing the difference you both can make is very rewarding. It can even be played up in the press, such as "Who would have thought that Coach Wilson and Mark Press, lead official in the XYZ conference would see eye to eye on anything?" Makes a great headline and promotes your cause.

The one person who's under as much pressure as you is the officials. You think having that a parent(s) after you during or after a game is bad, just think about the officials. They have just about every fan on both sides at least once during a game, and usually a lot more, after them.

I've been blessed to have outstanding officials over my career. Getting to know most of them was a joy. They have families, challenges, hopes and dreams, just like you.

We were in a tight game as two players scrambled for the ball on our sideline. Both went sliding out of bounds and I clearly saw the opponent touch the ball last. In the scramble the referee got hit and went sprawling on the floor. Being a true professional he got up quickly and pointed in the direction of the other team giving them the ball. Trouble was, he had to hand their player the ball in front of me. I was livid, and in his ear, letting him know it should have been our ball. I leaned toward him and said, "Did you even see who hit the ball last?" He turned and said, "Not really, did I get it right?" At that moment I knew it was okay. He had admitted he did the best he could, and after all isn't that all any of us can do?

Take the time today to genuinely meet and greet every official at your games. Getting to know someone who cares as much as you do about making a difference in our young players lives is a memory you won't soon forget.

I wish you and your team the best!