



Keep Your Eyes Off the Ball

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I vividly remember one particular clear during a LAREDO 3 clinic at the 2012 Vail Lacrosse Shootout. I had reached the far cone as the single side official and my feet were ready to take me down the other half of the field at a moment's notice. All of a sudden, the goalkeeper heaved a pass to his wide-open teammate near the midline. I tracked the ball with my eyes as it flew through the air and right before it reached the apex of its flight I heard:

"You're ball watching!"

I instantly snapped my head down to the players near where the ball would fall, and mentally kicked myself for ball watching right in front of the clinician. I was reminded for the 100th time that the ball has never committed a penalty, which happens to be one of the most repeated officiating maxims. Not getting sucked into watching the ball was high on my long list of things to practice after coming back from that LAREDO. I used a few tricks to help me focus on the players and not the ball.

1. Notice when you ball watch

This is the hardest trick to learn, but it's the most critical. You can't break the habit of ball watching if you don't notice when you do it. None of us are observed frequently enough by those who can point out to us when we ball-watch during a game. So it is up to us to do the noticing. I got much better at noticing when I ball watched by making it one of my pregame focuses. Before every game, I told myself that I didn't want to ball watch. Just putting that in the front of my mind made it that much easier to notice when my attention zeroed in on that white piece of rubber.

If you've never been observed before, here's a helpful tip: Observers watch the brim of your hat. If it's zeroed in on one player or one area of the field when you are supposed to be watching a different area, you'll probably get marked down.

2. Create your own mantra

I'm a huge fan of mantras for improving focus, and I would repeat the phrase "eyes on bodies" each time I realized I was ball-watching. Saying those three words brought my eyes back to the players, and not the ball.



The other two phrases I repeat in almost every game are "wide view" and "shooter, shooter, shooter." I say "wide view" whenever my partner and I are stretched across the field as a reminder that I need to focus on a bigger area of the field until my partner and I get closer together. Even though I learned to say "shooter, shooter, shooter" in my very first officiating class several years ago, I have used it in every game and on almost every shot as the trail official. Nothing feels worse than watching the ball on a shot, hearing a loud crunch, and then bringing your eyes back to a prone player squirming on the ground after a hit. With your eyes on the shot instead of the shooter, there's no way to determine whether the hit was in time or not.

3. Where is the ball going?

This trick makes you feel a little psychic, and former players definitely pick this one up faster. Whenever I am the new lead official, after the goalie saves the ball I do two things:

1. Immediately start backing up.
2. Quickly scan the field towards the opposite restraining line and then snap my head right back to the goalie.

This gives me a snapshot of the rest of the field where I can see if I'm about to run into a player and who the most open player on the field is. Be on the lookout for any attackman or midfielder cutting free while their defender is standing still. In my experience, the goalie will usually outlet the ball to that player, and you'll already know where to center your vision because you anticipated the pass before the goalkeeper saw the open player.

4. The ball isn't important

To players, coaches, and fans, the ball is a very important part of the game. It decides where their focus must be, but it's a giant red herring to lacrosse officials. You want to know where the ball is without actually focusing on the ball. For new officials, especially recent players, focusing on the area around the ball and not the ball itself is very difficult. An easy way to practice this type of focus is to watch a lacrosse game in person or on TV. As the play develops let your eyes move to where you expect the ball will go. You might notice that the game moves just a little bit slower than when you watch the ball.

Ball watching is the hardest habit to break for new officials. If you're diligent about looking at the players and allowing the location of the ball to enter your awareness without dominating your focus, then you'll really start seeing the game from an official's perspective.

Don't forget, if you and your partner are watching the ball and the ball carrier, who is watching all the other players?