

How Are You Going to Call the Game Today?

Author: Gordon Corsetti

April 2, 2015

The single most aggravating question I get asked on a regular basis by coaches at every level is: “how are you going to call the game today?” This is where the game-within-a-game begins between the officiating crew and the coach. Key point number one is that the Referee, or crew chief, does all the answering.

One crew, one voice.

When I am the Referee I tend to give variations of the same answer - “We’re going to call whatever the players give us today coach.” I learned the hard way not to paint myself into a corner with statements like:

- “We’re gonna let them play today.”
 - As soon as the first flag is thrown (and it doesn’t matter how egregious the foul is) the coach will yell, “I thought you said you were going to let them play!”
- “We’re gonna call it tight.”
 - As soon as the coach’s attackman is contacted by the opposing defender he will shout, “Where is the flag? You said you were going to call it tight, if you don’t get the flag out then this game will get out of hand!”

This question most often comes from youth coaches or coaches coming in from out of state, and they’re trying to get a read on what will be called and what won’t be called. We might as well ask the coach whether or not his players can pick up ground balls, or how good their settled offense is, but you don’t want to be flippant in how you respond. Remember that humor can be useful if you know the coach and think he will get the joke. If you don’t know the coach then it’s best to stick with the language of the rules.

The other aggravating question is: “I had this called in my last game and I want to know what you think.” Now I love answering rule questions and having debates on what the right call is, but I hate being asked to render judgment on a judgment call about a situation that I did not see from a game I did not watch. There’s throwing an official under the bus, but saying an official got a judgment call wrong in an earlier game based off the coach’s view is throwing the official under the bus, then getting into the driver’s seat, putting the bus in reverse and rolling back over the official.

The only time I contradict an official from an earlier game is if there is a clear misapplication of a rule such as:

- **Coach:** “This ref called a slash and put the player in for thirty seconds. I thought slashes were a minute.”
- **Me:** “Coach you are absolutely correct, slashes are either one, two, or three minutes depending on how the official judges the severity of the slash.”



Now what about questions in the game? I regularly tell head coaches that I have no problem answering questions from them or their assistants if they're asked respectfully so long as I have the time to do so.

Phrases like:

- "Coach if you or any of your assistants have a question please let the crew know. We'll try to answer you on an extended dead ball like a timeout or a quarter break, but if we're running up field let us officiate the play and then ask us at the next dead ball."
- "Coach, I was watching your shooter on the shot and didn't see what my partner called on the end line. When I get a chance I'll find out what he saw and let you know."
- "Coach you asked me about a judgment call, I told you what I saw and why I [did or did not] make the call. Now we've got to move on."
- "Coach, out of respect for you I only want to hear from you for today (or the rest of the game)."
 - Use this phrase in the pre-game if you know there are issues with the assistant coaches being too chirpy, or if they're getting over-the-top during the game.

Remember, coaches at every level do not get to question your judgment. They're going to try and if they continue past your threshold for the game then make them stop. There is no questioning judgment calls. You judged a call or no call and that is the end of it. The coach may disagree, but it's your judgment and while you are wearing stripes that is unassailable. However, if you completely kick a rule application and the coach questions it then you've got some explaining to do and you shouldn't shirk that.

I'll end this post with a few phrases I used to say and have replaced at the urging of more experienced officials, and ones that I've heard from a few officials while observing games:

- **Bad Phrase:** "Don't slash" or "Stop slashing"
- **Replace With:** "Easy" or "Control"
 - **Why:** Saying "don't [insert foul]" while a player is whacking away at the elbows or shoulders of another player tells the coach that you are ignoring fouls! Use general phrases that are more open to interpretation.
- **Bad Phrase:** "Don't move, don't move"
- **Replace With:** "Stay still" or "Freeze!"
 - **Why:** Telling a player not to do something almost guarantees that he will do it. Try using positive phrases repeated multiple times to get what you want. If an offensive player in an NFHS game is going to get the ball on a quick restart following a loose ball technical foul and it's my restart I'm yelling: "Pick it up and freeze, pick it up and freeze!" That way the player is stationary and I can give him his expected quick restart.



- **Bad Phrase:** “Calm down!”
- **Replace With:** “What’s your question?”
 - **Why:** Has anyone ever told you to calm down? Did it work? No, it didn’t. You got angrier and probably said something along the lines of “Calm down? Calm down?! I was calm before now I’ll show you angry!” Keep your tone of voice calm and ask the coach a question when he takes a breath from criticizing your call. That shows the coach that you are listening and it forces the coach to think about a question, which tends to calm him down more effectively than demanding he calm down.