

9 Inside Tips for Officiating Faceoffs

Author: Charlie Obermayer

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Many of you will recognize the photo of former Delaware All-American Alex Smith grabbing the ball on a faceoff as the picture that stoked the proverbial fire when it comes to cheating during faceoffs. In reality, this debate has been going on for decades.

Faceoffs are one of the most critical—and at times, hotly-contested—aspects of today’s game. It seems like every rules cycle, a proposal surfaces to outright remove faceoffs from the game and multiple proposals are brought forth on how to prevent players from gaining an advantage.

Last year, at the NCAA level, the rules committee made headlines by [outlawing the “motorcycle” grip](#) and then [reversing that decision later in the fall](#). The photo was one of the strongest pieces of evidence when the sport’s governing bodies (US Lacrosse, NFHS and NCAA) ruled this type of action by a faceoff player an unsportsmanlike penalty. This year, the NFHS followed the NCAA’s lead and put in a rule stating that faceoff players may not have any tape going from the shaft to the head of the players stick.

These changes have been enacted because that faceoff men are constantly trying to gain an advantage over their counterparts. The purpose of a faceoff specialist is to gain possession for their team. Possession is everything in this sport. If you don’t agree, ask Syracuse about the impact [Duke’s Brendan Fowler had on last year’s NCAA Championship](#).

Officials have a difficult job as it is, and managing faceoffs is becoming more and more difficult. Here are some tips for officials on how to better handle this aspect of the game.

1. **Set expectations**

A couple years ago, we as collegiate officials started meeting with faceoff players before the game. We went over what we would be looking for, what we expected out of them and—most importantly—we allowed them to ask us questions. This simple practice, which has since trickled down to the high school and youth levels, has had a huge impact on officials’ ability to keep faceoffs as fair as possible.

2. **Communicate**

Communication is important in all aspects of managing the game. However, I am a firm believer in preventative officiating. If you notice a trend or you think a player is doing something that is giving him an advantage:

- Let your partner know before he conducts the next faceoff
- Talk to the players before you set them up for the next faceoff

Keep setting those expectations throughout the game.

3. **Get comfortable**

Get used to officiating faceoffs from different angles of the players. The best faceoff players have multiple moves. They will adapt to where you are standing. No spot is perfect, and you give up something different depending on your position. So, get comfortable in as many spots as possible and change it up from time to time throughout the game.

4. **Don't take forever**

It shouldn't take more than a couple of seconds between the time the field is ready and you blow your whistle to start play.

5. **Stand still**

Take the whistle off your hand and put it in your mouth before you even begin to conduct the faceoff. When you get ready to put the players down, you should be in the spot you will be when you blow the whistle. The players will react to any movement by you before the whistle. Don't compound the issue by moving around, especially between the time you say "set" and blow your whistle.

6. **"Down," "set," "whistle"**

You don't need to announce to the world that you are putting the players down or saying, "set." Keep the communication between the three of you. After you put them down, pause before you say, "set" and make sure the players are lined up legally. This shouldn't take more than a second or two before you say, "set" and blow your whistle. This will prevent players from rolling into the faceoff and should minimize the amount of pre-whistle violations you have in a game.

7. **Stay home**

Once you get the players going, stay in tight. This is where the "Alex Smith" rule will come into play and you won't want to miss it. You can shift left or right if the players swing that way, but keep your movement to a minimum. Don't worry about the wing players coming in either. The more you move, the more likely they are to run into you and vice versa.

8. **Hold them accountable**

Remember that you have already set expectations with faceoff men before the game and throughout the game. If players don't meet those expectations, hold them accountable and penalize them for violations. If you continue to allow violations, they will only try to get away with more.

9. **Clearly signal and verbalize**

If a violation occurs, do your best to say what it was for. Only use "illegal procedure" if you really have to. Turn toward the benches when signaling and communicating a violation. This will let the coaches know what you called, so they can work with their player before the next faceoff. If there is possession, clearly signal and verbalize it to release the players. But make sure there is true possession first. It's better to have 6 players battling for a loose ball than all 20.



Practice makes perfect, and I constantly work with officials to strengthen their craft of managing the faceoff. Hopefully, these tips will help you do just that in the upcoming season, because I can guarantee you that there will be players attempting new tricks to gain an advantage for their teams.