



In The Driver's Seat

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New officials are terrible. This is not news, and I am not writing this to discourage new officials currently working games or any individuals just starting off in stripes. I can tell you that new officials aren't good because I was a terrible official starting off. I made mistake after mistake in every area of officiating: mechanics, positioning, rules knowledge, judgment, game management, and consistency. I made up for this with a willingness to learn and add to my meager officiating skill set.

Brand-new officials are very similar to brand-new drivers. They either go way too slow or way too fast, and they're not focused on the right things. The slowpokes are caught up in the sensory overload. Even at younger age levels the play still moves faster than they can process and the "deer in the headlights" look comes up after each whistle. They cannot get into the flow of the game so they slow restarts or penalty relays down or they review what they just saw multiple times before deciding to throw a very late flag. The speed demons are either so nervous that they want the game to be over so they rush when they should slow down, or they get caught up in how quickly the game is moving and never get settled. This lead to restarts being too fast and disadvantaging one team, or reporting a penalty so quickly that no one, including their partner, has a clue what the penalty was.

These inexperienced officials also don't pay attention to the right things. Not because they aren't paying attention, but because they're so focused on doing something that is relatively insignificant as correctly as possible. Using the driving analogy further, I remember driving down a side road on the way to a major highway shortly after getting my learner's permit. My mother was in the passenger seat and I was focused on maintaining the speed limit and checking my mirrors. I failed to notice that the road ahead of me split to the right and had a short merge onto a larger road. I also failed to notice the bright yellow yield sign.

"Yield sign. That's a yield Gordon, slow down. YIELD!!!"

I didn't even hear my mom's voice until she was shouting, clutching the door handle and bracing her foot on the dash. This is the same kind of error a new official makes as the Trial when keeping his focus on whether or not a team is offside during a fast break instead of watching the shooter on the imminent shot. The offside is much less significant to catch than the shooter getting hit late, but the new official doesn't have that down yet.

There is a saying formerly attributed to computer scientist Jim Horning but he attributes it to Nasreddin, a folk character from Middle Eastern and Central Asian stories. It goes: "good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment."



Looking back on my early driving and officiating days I see a lot of similarities. I took a class, passed a test, had a period where I had an experienced person teaching me the ropes, and then all of a sudden I'm on my own and expected to navigate a huge world of possibilities where one mistake could lead to horrible consequences. It is both exhilarating and terrifying, and it is a complete sensory overload until we gain a little experience.

More experienced officials reading this should endeavor to have a simpler pre-game prepared for any games worked with a brand-new official. When I work with someone who has never officiated a lacrosse game before I only want three things out of them:

1. Cover the goal and end line as the Lead
2. Blow your whistle on your goal and your side line and end line
3. Worry about flagging the safety violations (emphasis on Trail watches shooter)

I make it clear that I will be watching their back to help out as much as I can during the game, but I need them to focus on when to blow the whistle and to catch the big safety violations. If they get the technical fouls and loose ball penalties correct then that is icing on the cake, but covering 1-3 narrows the focus down to the absolute essentials and builds their confidence that they can handle a lacrosse game.

For the new officials out there come to the pre-game with at least three questions for your partner. The questions should be anything you are having trouble understanding or something that you aren't quite certain about from an earlier game. Bring a notepad and write the answers down. By the end of the season you'll have a bunch of notes and you'll be able to see how far you've progressed in understanding the rules and the game.

With the explosive growth of lacrosse we need to support the new officials coming into the game. The more games they get with experienced officials their earlier experiences will be and they will be more likely to keep officiating after their first season.