



The Emotional Side of Officiating Calming Techniques to Keep You at Your Best

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“Serenity is not freedom from the storm; it is calm within the storm.” - Anonymous

The adrenaline, the anxiety, the pressure, the excitement are all a big part of sports. From the pre-game jitters, to the intense emotions experienced during competition, to the time it takes to unwind from a game, referees frequently experience the same emotional roller coaster that athletes and coaches do.

In the [last article](#), I wrote about recovering from mistakes by focusing on the controllables – attitude, effort, preparation and present moment. You are more likely to perform consistently at your best when you focus on the things you can control, and block out the things you can't. And while the mental game is normally viewed of in terms of thinking the feeling or emotional side of it is equally as important.

Here are some before, during and after the game situations that you may face and some calming techniques to help you ride out the storm. Keep an eye out for “the controllables.”

Pre-game. Well, there is really no such thing as a professional, full time referee. Even the NFL officials are lawyers and businessmen first. So let's say you have a game to ref at 4pm, but a meeting at work has run late, and to make matters worse traffic is heavier than normal. So now it's obvious that you are going to be late. Frustrations run high and you start to panic and tense up.

Mental game tips:

1 – Prepare. Always have contact info handy. Let the coaches/other refs know ASAP. For the most part, with a little advanced notice, people are very understanding and forgiving when things like this happen. Show up late, flustered and making excuses and people are typically less understanding.

2 – Circle breathing. This is a technique where you simply take deep, slow, controlled breaths. Slowing down your breathing allows you to relax, be in the present moment, and re-focus to what's really in your control.

3 – Positive self-talk. Accept the situation you are in and do the best you can. Getting increasingly madder and having negative thoughts will not make traffic move any faster. Look at the positives and re-frame your situation from a more positive perspective.



During the Game. Probably the most frustrating part of officiating is dealing with irate coaches and fans. They can be disruptive and distracting. They are also rarely logical, and communicate based on extreme emotional levels. This can get you off track not only mentally, but emotionally too.

Mental Game tips:

1 – Circle Breathing. As mentioned in the pre-game portion, taking deep breaths is a good way to release and not let negative emotions build up. Circle breathing is one of the simplest, yet most effective sports psychology techniques. Many athletes I work with tell me they use it a lot.

2 – Don't take it personally. These coaches and fans are yelling at the striped shirt, not the human being inside it. If you can hear them through that lens, it can help take the emotional sting out of it.

3 – Follow the rules objectively and logically, not emotionally. Using tips 1 and 2 above frequently will help this in the long run. Communicate calmly and logically whenever possible.

Post-game. Sometimes after an intense game it can be hard to unwind, especially those games that are later in the evening. The adrenaline is flowing and you go over the game in your head – the good calls, the mistakes, the “what-could-I-have-done-better” questions. This can make it hard to relax and sometimes even difficult to go to sleep.

Mental Game Tips

1 – Journaling. We need time to process information. Taking a few minutes to write about your experiences is a good way to get it out of your head. A typical format that I use for athletes can be perfect for referees as well. Simply start with: 1 positive thing I did well, 1 negative thing I didn't do well, and 1 thing I can do to improve.

2 – Breathing/Relaxation/Meditation – It might be the first instinct to get home and turn on some SportsCenter. Try taking 5-10 minutes to sit quietly and just take a few circle breaths. Consciously let go of the game, relaxing both body and mind. I suggest using a stopwatch so that you know when to get up.

3 – Don't add more stress. Sometimes thinking that you won't get enough sleep for the next day can cause stress which compounds on the problem. Be okay that you are resting your body and mind, and ironically you will get to sleep faster.



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The ability to control your emotions before, during and after games is crucial to confidence and performance. In fact, confidence is an emotion! You don't think confident, you feel confident. Put the mental game techniques into practice to control the inevitable flurry of emotions you will experience as a referee.



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