

Responding to Coaches Queries and Comments

Written by: Eric Evans

As an official, responding to coaches during a game is one specific aspect of overall communication with coaches. Yes, there are rules and procedures in place in the rulebook, but responding to a coach is often more art than science, more dealing with human behavior under stress than applying lacrosse knowledge.

In general, officials need to recognize that coaches have invested much time and effort in preparing for a game and that an athletic contest can generate strong emotions. Officials will best serve the game that afternoon by defusing, managing and helping a coach through a tough moment rather than by assuming an immediate adversarial role. Officials must strive to be engaged at all times: aloofness, indifference, boredom, and disdain are inexcusable.

Compliance through cooperation is preferable to compliance through coercion.

Most often when a coach addresses a referee he is either seeking information or is simply venting. We always need to answer questions, but we don't always need to address venting. At some point, though, *"Coach, it is my job to inform you, not convince you."* But the referee who can do both simultaneously will be well served.

Power of personality. What are the strong aspects of your personality that you can bring to the situation?

A good rule of thumb is to never touch a coach, however well-meaning the touch may be (hand on a shoulder or forearm, etc.)

Even if we are treated unprofessionally or rudely, we MUST respond professionally. Yes, there will be times when you will have to "bite your tongue." Responding to, *"that's a terrible call"* with, *"that's a terrible man-up play you just ran, Coach"* is unacceptable. Stay calm and kill them with kindness.

Penalize calmly, without anger or annoyance. A calm voice in announcing a penalty to the table goes a long way in *"turning down the heat."*

Humor can work at certain times, but it often backfires.

Quick restarts can divert attention away from a call that has been made back to the action at hand.

Strong, clear signals and confident body language will get an official through that 50-50 call.

A "deer in the headlights" demeanor is just as bad as the "gunslinger wanting to show who is boss."

If possible, let the Referee on the game take the lead in addressing coaches, particularly during dead ball situations or coming out of timeouts.

"Shut up" should never be used by an official towards anyone before, during, or after a game.

Training your table personnel in the pre-game is vital. Unfair or not, their screwups will become your screwups and, thus, your fault.

COACHES' COMMENTS OR QUERIES

WHAT IS SAID?

1. Question or statement? Questions require answers. Not all statements require a response. If you can't answer immediately or need to get more info come back later to the coach and have an answer. They will appreciate it.
2. Complaint disguised as a question. *"Are you guys going to call ANYTHING today?" "Are you going to let them ward all day long?" "Why is that not a hold?"*
3. Your call versus you personally. *"That was a weak hold call,"* vs: *"You are a weak official."* The latter would warrant a penalty.
4. Profanity. That would warrant a penalty.
5. Threat. *"You will never work here again,"* or, *"I am calling your assignor after this game."* These warrant a penalty.
6. Questioning an official's integrity. *"You've always screwed us,"* or, *"Every time you come here...this is what we get!"* Penalty warranted.

WHO IS SAYING IT?

1. Head coach or assistant? *"Coach, glad to answer your questions, but assistants need to coach."*

TO WHOM IT IS SAID?

1. To you nearside? Or partner farside (Yelling across the field so that players, teams, and spectators can hear). *"Coach, my partner is my team out here today. Where would we be if we didn't work as a team?"*
2. To spectators, table, or other team? (Inciting?)
3. Indirect: to a player or team, but really directed at you. *"Perfectly legal hit, Johnnie. Nothing wrong with that!" "We're playing against 12 today, Johnnie!"*
4. Indirect. Coach criticizes your partner in an attempt to drive a wedge between the crew. *"He's having a bad day over there, you need to step up and help him out."*
 - *"Coach, he was right there in great position." "Coach, that's hard to tell from here 50 yards away."*

HOW IT IS SAID.

1. Volume.
2. Gestures. Running down sideline, hat throw, etc.
3. Pleasant versus sarcastic/demeaning/surlly. *"Coach, your volume, actions, or comments need to be professional and under control." "Coach I heard your concern, and I disagree. We can talk later if you feel the need."*

HOW MANY TIMES IT IS SAID.

1. In a row. A loud, *"that's a slash"* said once can probably be ignored. But 3-4 times in a row warrants a response.
2. Steadily and continuously during a game. Continual dissent needs to be addressed.
3. Getting in the final world after an explanation or an acknowledgment. Often officials are best served ignoring this venting.

WHERE IT IS SAID.

1. In coaches area?
2. Outside the coaches area?
3. On the field of play. Coaches who inadvertently wander onto the field during live play need to be nudged back to their coaching area. *"Coach, help me out here, I may run into you or if I allow you to coach from here I have to allow him, too."*
4. Remember that halftime discussions necessitate inviting the opposing coach to the discussion.

WHEN IT IS SAID.

1. First comment of the game? Address it or at least start thinking about addressing it.
2. Last two minutes and you've ignored his comments all game to that point? Both parties are to blame here. Why wasn't this addressed in the first 46 minutes?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES FROM THE OFFICIAL (a hierarchy or ladder)

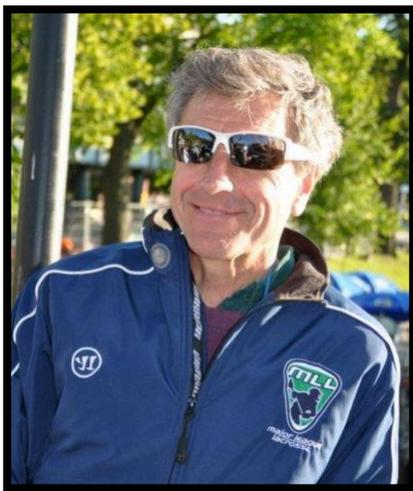
1. Ignore. *"We haven't gotten a call all day." "You guys are killing us today." "All I am asking for is consistency!" "This is VARSITY boys' lacrosse!" "Let 'em Play!"*
 - Do not reply with dumb statements. **Cannot misquote silence.**
2. Acknowledge. Nod/eye contact. Verbally. *"Hear you." "We will look for it at both ends of the field." "Doing our best to call it both ways, Coach." "Coach, I don't know, but I will get back to you with an answer as soon as I can." "Coach, remember we called it at that end earlier so we need to call at it this end, too." "That may be true; Coach, but we didn't see it that way." "Coach, it's our job to call the fouls that are there, not call an equal number of fouls on each team." "Coach, I'd be glad to discuss it at the next dead ball or between quarters because your concern is important to me." "Coach, at the right time we can address your concern because it is important we are on the same page."*

3. Ask. *“Coach, you need to help us here.” “Coach, you need to let us do our job.” “Glad to talk to you but it needs to be in a conversational manner.” “I will listen to you, Coach, but you need to get back.”* Sentences that start with, *“You need to...”* are less confrontational than, *“You must...”*
4. Tell/Warn. *“Coach, that’s enough.” “Coach, don’t hurt your team at this point.” “Coach, we are not perfect but we are not missing EVERY play.”* Officials should avoid the threat: *“I will do X unless you do...”* i.e. *“One more word, Coach, and you will be man down.”*
5. Penalize. Try to go “up the ladder” of consequences when possible.
 - a) Conduct foul. Take ball away.
 - b) Conduct foul. 30 seconds penalty.
 - c) Unsportsmanlike Conduct personal foul. Non-releasable. 1 minute locked in.
 - d) Second NR USC penalty on same coach = immediate ejection. 3 minutes locked in. (NFHS rules)

REMINDERS

- Treat both coaches the same.
- *“Coach”* is always preferable to *“First Name.”*
- If you err, or rather, when you err. Own it. Explain it to both coaches (point the wrong way, inadvertent flag, etc.) Be sure all teams are set before restarting play. Worse thing you can do is compound an error by a quick restart when teams are confused.
- Officials need to beware the carryover comments: *“You didn’t call that last game.” “No one has called that all year.” “Coach, I can’t speak about previous games. This is what we are doing today.”*
- NFHS Coaches Challenge has a set procedure. Follow it.

Author: Eric Evans



Evans earned First Team All-New England as a defenseman for Hotchkiss in 1968, but it was not until the 1990s that he started officiating. He is one of a handful of referees who have worked a NCAA Division 1 Final and a World Games Final. During a 9-year career officiating in Major League Lacrosse, Evans served as Secretary of the Collegiate Officials Committee and Chair of the International Officials Committee for US Lacrosse. He was on the NFHS Rules Committee for four years. A camper in the early days of LAREDO (Vail), he has led many LAREDO camps and is often a presenter at the US Lacrosse Convention. Evans enjoys teaching officiating as much as he does blowing a whistle on the field.