

Sideline Q&A – Eliminated

After a review of the “Sideline Q&A” article published last year the US Lacrosse Officials Education Program does not recommend conducting Sideline Q&As in any game and strongly advises against any official answering questions or engaging in conversations with spectators before, during or after a game assignment.

The following risks of Sideline Q&A discussions were outlined by Alan Goldberger, an attorney who advises officials and officials’ associations,

Officials have real responsibilities. Discussions with onlookers are not one of them. It is at best a distraction; at worst, an invitation to serious legal consequences. Officials are engaged to call and control a game or match with the safety of the student athletes as our first and primary responsibility. It’s a difficult job in what is often an emotionally charged atmosphere. So, officials can’t permit anyone to interfere with or distract them from the task at hand.

Officials need to remember that fans are not our peers or colleagues and we do ourselves and our fellow officials a disservice if we elevate a fan to our level by answering questions or giving rule interpretations in a setting where our only job is officiating the game safely and fairly.

In addition to devoting time and attention to a stranger at a time when our attention needs to be focused on the players, we create a dangerous situation for ourselves and our partners when we talk with spectators.

Offhand remarks are often taken as indicating bias or personal baggage against a player, coach or team. Worse yet, many an official has made himself an assault victim by engaging in a conversation, or responding to fan heckling in kind. Truth be told, these actions of officials only serve to acknowledge the heckler as an equal.

Any time you open your mouth to answer questions you open yourself up to being misquoted. An example of this is an official explaining why a slash call wasn’t made to the sideline and then a player getting injured later in the game. A spectator’s misinterpretation of what was explained as a no-call slash could resurface in a lawsuit as evidence that the official doesn’t enforce safety rules properly.

Often, verbal disputes ripen into assault situations or false accusations against officials.

If approached by a fan before, during or after an assignment, you should use as few words as possible to disengage from the person and then move away. While there is a danger in having your words misconstrued and a potential for a physical altercation there is also an indirect danger of how other people perceive your conversation. For example, one fan may see you speaking to another fan while you are wearing your uniform between games at a summer tournament. That can very easily be misperceived as *“that official is friends with that person and therefore lacks impartiality.”* While such a misperception will be without merit, that is the danger of misperception and you open yourself up to that danger when you stop and have a conversation after a game with fans while wearing your uniform.

Think of it this way. If you as a fan and current official attended a lacrosse game would you distract the official before, during, or after the game with rules questions or concerns from an earlier game? Absolutely not. We all know how difficult it is to officiate and we wouldn't dream of making our colleague's life more difficult than it already is on the field by our actions on the sideline. That is the difference between officials and fans.

Once again, the USL Officials Education Program does not recommend conducting Sideline Q&As in any game and strongly advises against any official answering questions or engaging in conversations with spectators before, during or after a game assignment. Questions may be sent to officials@uslacrosse.org.

Men's Officials Education Program

Article reviewed and approved by the Men's Officials Training Group.