
NO Harm, NO FOUL?

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We Are Basketball

No harm, no foul?

Hated by some, loved by others, the no-call in officiating often evokes a passionate response from officials. Some officials follow the premise of “to keep sharp one must enforce the rules without passion or prejudice at all times”. Many officials avoid the “grey” areas and work a game with the straightforward philosophy of “a foul is a foul”; others attempt to identify acts not permitted by rule, then decide whether to penalise the infraction or not.

An intelligent discussion requires that we define first and foremost, what a no-call is and the purpose it serves. A no-call is invariably a conscious decision on the part of an official to ignore an infraction, which if called, would place the offended player or team at an even greater disadvantage.

This philosophy can pose problems for the official who knows the rulebook inside and out, backwards and forwards. It also creates problems for the inexperienced official who has not mastered the art of the no-call. Quality officiating does not entail blowing the whistle every time an incidental infraction affords the opportunity to do so. It is, on the other hand, the ability of an official to apply the rules with the same prudence and equity at all times whilst ensuring that neither team exploits the rules to gain an unfair advantage.

Such officiating is accomplished with a minimum of disruption to play. A lack of understanding relative to the concept of a no-call, gives rise to whistle blowing officiating that takes the contest out of the hands of the athletes and transforms it into a symposium of rules trivia. What makes the no-call such an anomaly is that in spite of its prominent role in top officiating, it is not mentioned officially in any rules related publications.

A clear concept may take years of officiating to master and although it may seem to be a contradiction, no-calls are basic to journeyman level performances. Only veterans have earned the right to make no-calls? The veteran officials know very well the potential consequences and how to explain themselves about their no-calls. Despite the fact that most rulebooks and officials manuals do not refer to no-calls, recognition of the need for the application of the concept is not new. In the FIBA rulebook we have the principle of advantage-disadvantage, which although not using the phrase no-call, refers indirectly to its application.

This principle was established as early as 1914 by Oswald Tower in the USA, whose famous “Tower philosophy” stated “it is the purpose of the rules to penalise a player who by reason of an illegal act, placed the opponent at a disadvantage”. The key phrase is “placed the opponent at a disadvantage”. If the opponent is not placed at a disadvantage, then one has to question the merits of interrupting play, when this can only be justified by the most literal interpretation of the rules. Tower’s work was complimented by John Bunn, who was more emphatic in arguing for the official’s prerogative in applying the rules. He never used the phrase no-call, but the essence of his philosophy is the forerunner of its application. “it is not the intent that the rules shall be interpreted literally, rather they should be applied in relation to the effect which the action of players has upon their opponents. If they are unfairly affected as a result of a violation of the rules, the transgressor should be penalised. If there has been no appreciable effect upon the progress of the game, then the game should not be interrupted. The act should be ignored, it is incidental and not vital. Realistically and practically, no violation has occurred.”

The idea of “no harm, no foul” has withstood the test of time and remains one of the most viable, unofficial working philosophies amongst top sports officials today. Anyone making a serious attempt to master the technology of sports officiating is well advised to study

carefully the “comments or interpretations section” of the rulebook. Under the title of “basic principles” is the guide for successful sports officiating. Since most no-calls are to do primarily with contact situations, it is well to study how the rulebook treats the issue of interpreting legal or illegal contact.

There are some basic principles for making no-calls.

1. The mere fact that contact occurs does not constitute an infraction of the rules.
2. Even though it may be hard; contact that is entirely incidental when an opponent tries to reach a loose ball or that which may result when opponents are in equally favourable positions to perform normal defensive or offensive movements, should not be considered illegal.
3. Contact that does not prevent an opponent from participating in normal defensive or offensive movements should be treated as incidental.

In applying these basic principles we can now look at examples of situations where infractions could be ignored and play allowed to continue without unnecessary interruption of the game.

- An infraction can be ignored without objection or without placing either team at a disadvantage.
- A call would have the effect of penalising the team that was subjected to the incidental infraction.
- A call would serve no valid purpose other than to note that an infraction had occurred.
- A call would contravene a long standing tradition and understanding by players, coaches and officials as to how the game is played.
- A non-correctable error has occurred.
- A correctable error has occurred, but the game has progressed beyond the point where a legal correction can be made.
- A late call where neither team has gained an advantage and a new play situation has already started.
- Both teams commit incidental infractions simultaneously but neither team gains an advantage.
- An apparent infraction has occurred but the official does not know what, if any, penalty to award.

It should be clearly understood that the intent of this article is not to impose an explanation of what is and what is not a no-call. Rather it is to acquaint the reader with this important but undocumented aspect of successful officiating. A clear concept of the no-call may take years of officiating to master and its mastery is the mark of a top official.

Much more than simply missing a call for example in a blow-out game, effective use of the no-call requires an official to focus on the larger picture, preserving the flow of the game without placing either team at an advantage or disadvantage and encouraging the exciting spectacle that so many fans love to see.

Alan Richardson
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