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Title: LET'S TALK ABOUT REFEREES

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Let's talk about the referees, a great topic. All fans, coaches, players, managers, journalists etc; they all love to talk about the referees. Why? Because they all want to blame them for everything: lost games, tournaments, technical fouls, coaches losing their jobs, players under performing, clubs going under.

What is the actual meaning of the word "referee" in sporting sense? According to the Oxford dictionary this is "an official who supervises a game or match to ensure that the rules are adhered to". Pretty clear I think. Then why do we have so many different 'types' of refereeing in basketball?

Okay, the difference in the rules between FIBA, NBA, and the NCAA is one excuse. But I do not wish to focus on that. I prefer instead to look at the actual referee behavior on and off the court, his or her influence on the actual game, including the final result.

I have four different viewpoints on this subject, all put into one – as a player, as a coach, as a team manager and organiser and as a referee myself (not professional of course, just at amateur level).

As a player I have always believed that if the refereeing is good, I wouldn't even notice who is actually refereeing the game. I was one of the players who didn't know the referees by name, just those who have "lost us a game" or "picked on me". What I really hated as a player was the picking on players for a brief comment or expression and then calling the rest of the game against that player.

When you are on court and in the heat of the game you put an enormous effort to defend your opponent, you block a shot and fill up with pride...just to be called for a foul a second later, and from the ref who is not even in the closest position to you but somewhere around the centre line. How do you feel at this moment? Absolutely furious!! You want to run to that referee, scream in his face and punch him!! Why? Because he is wrong and you know it, because you work so hard to stop that player by the book, because you feel totally cheated! But you can't do this of course, so you get your negative emotions out by moaning under your nose, giving him that look, talking loudly to a teammate or your coach stating clearly that the referee is

wrong.

Ok, so the ref WAS WRONG, I moaned a little and moved on. What happens next – he picks on me and calls every situation the other way. Why? Because I actually questioned his authority (even though he knows he got it wrong anyway) and he has to demonstrate to me and the rest of the world that HE IS THE BOSS! What is even worse than this response? He or his colleague is trying to make up for this mistake. By doing this, they lose control of the game, the coaches are shouting at them, the players are moaning and the crowd is frustrated.

What would I, the player, want as a response? Not much, a minute later I have forgotten about this call. I just want to play my game and not to have to think about who and how is refereeing. I have enough pressures put on me from the coach, the fans, the management, the teammates, and let's not forget the opponents, to perform. I need to make sure that the player I am marking doesn't score, remember all the offensive and defensive plays, listen to instructions, score points, and not make any turnovers. Do I really want to also think about the refs? Of course not!!

Now I am looking at this situation as a coach. I have planned and prepared for this game for a long time. I have watched videos of the opposition, spent endless hours phoning and talking to fellow coaches, read score sheets and statistics. In addition to all that, my team and I have spent even more hours trying to find the best tactical solution to beat this team. We practiced all options, set plays, defensive strategies etc, etc. I have decided to put Radmila to defend the small forward from the opposition because she has a height advantage, can move quickly and has long arms. Basically, she can stop their shooter by creating a difficult environment for her and blocking her shots.

The game day arrives, we are ready and focused, and everything is going according to plan. Then, a clear block by Radmila is called a foul. She and the rest of us are furious. I ask the referee politely to explain to me the call; he ignores me and walks away in the opposite direction. This is her second personal foul and sixth for our team. She turns towards us and tells me "Coach, this was not a foul, I blocked the ball and he called me a foul! I respond "Of course, we all saw it, it was not a foul". What is the referee's response? He already had awarded two free throws for no reason and put one of our key players on 2 personal fouls. He now decides to call two technicals – one on Radmila and one on me!

We are now in team fouls, our key defender is on 3 personal fouls, I have one technical and we end up in a situation with endless free throws, nervous players and crowd, our key players on the bench. What is happening to my great game plan carefully prepared over a period of a few weeks? Gone in the bin, finished, and destroyed. All created by one silly call and, even worse, by the referee's response to his own mistake.

I am now the Team Manager of this team. We have worked with the coach and his-her staff for a long time to get to this game. We had planned and discussed tactics, players, their on and off the court behavior and

concentration, the players from the opposition. We have reached an agreement how are we going to beat them, who we are going to start in this game, how are we going to stop their top scorer. I spent a lot of time and energy communicating with our key players, running around and making sure that they have everything necessary to be in good shape for this game. Then the famous call arrives! In a matter of a few short minutes the whole situation is turned up side down. The coach is angry, the players are out of control, the crowd is screaming, our game plan is finished!

What do I do? Firstly, I have to calm down the coach, immediately. I also have to ensure that our players on and off the court are behaving properly. I have to keep eye on the table and the score to ensure that there is no mistake (with all technical fouls and free throws you never know!), and I also have to start planning very quickly what advise to give to the coach at half time to ensure that we are still with a chance to win it. Tough job!!

What would I have done if I was the referee who made that call? In my opinion I have two options: first, to admit my mistake and cancel the call (I have seen some of the top referees doing that and they deserve a lot of credit for it!) or second option, I will carry on with the game and cool down the coach and the players. I would respond to the coaches' question by saying that in my opinion it was a contact and therefore I called what I saw. I will tell the coach to calm down her player, rather than do it by punishing her twice with a technical foul too.

As I already stated at the beginning, according to the Oxford dictionary, the referee is there to supervise that all rules are followed, not to decide the outcome of the games or to have personal vendettas against players and coaches. A good referee is the invisible referee. If he or she calls everything well, let the game flow and the players play, let the players to decide the outcome of the game, then, nobody will have to really notice them. Not in a negative way anyway.

The mutual respect between players, coaches, and referees is extremely important. How a referee wins that respect? By being honest and straight, consistent and knowledgeable. By being able to admit personal mistakes and respecting everyone else involved. By communicating with all parties when necessary and keeping control.

The refereeing has changed over the years; my personal observations are in the past 25 years. The refs back in the 80's were volunteers; they had "proper" jobs and did their International refereeing for very little too. They made a lot of personal sacrifices to achieve the ultimate dream – to be appointed to European or World Championships or the Olympic games. Many of them had to take their full annual holidays to attend some of those events and, as accompanying referees to their teams, were not paid at all. Everything back then was aimed at the pride and the privilege to be appointed to those high class events.

These days the refereeing is a lot more professional. This is positive in many ways. The referees have the opportunity to focus on their development, their fitness, and their inter-personal skills. They can observe their colleagues in

action and, using all modern technology, communicate with each other, get the appropriate feedback immediately and improve with the support provided by their national organisations, FIBA Europe, etc.

The refereeing these days is a carrier for many people. It is competitive and pretty serious business. The clubs in many countries are multi-million euro enterprises and therefore, desperately want to win every title. The pressure is enormous, this is clear. The same pressure of course falls on the coaches, players, team managers. Therefore, the refereeing now in many cases is not just about following the rules but also knowing how to handle the pressure environment. This is valid not only on the court but also off the court. The media is a lot more aggressive then it used to be, the fans are not easy to handle at best of times and, if this is your full time job, there is also the additional pressure to perform.

But, why would this change the way the referees approach the individual games? Are they calling a junior game in exactly the same way as the top level senior men's game?

Do they still value the "proper" values in sport – to be appointed to a world class international event more then to be paid a lot of money for a regular league game in their own country?

Many questions, obviously. Firstly, I believe that to become a good referee is similar to becoming a top player; you need to have some level of talent. Talent in the sense of having a feeling for the game. Why it is not good to call a junior and a senior game in exactly the same way? Because at the junior level the referee, same as the coaches, is a teacher, an educator. The young players are still learning how to perform skills and have to be thought properly.

At senior level the teaching part is over, the players should know 100% what is right and what is wrong. Basically, this is very much like in coaching. Firstly we teach a player how to perform each skill, and then we teach them when to do it. How to dribble for example, cross over, behind the back, speed dribble etc, but the mature player needs to know not just all those techniques, but also to read the game well and make the correct decision – no dribble, triple treat position, dribble for a lay-up, cross over to beat a defender.

In refereeing it is practically the same situation – they all have to learn the rules first. Then, according to the level of the game, to call it well. We all get really annoyed with the silly calls on 3 seconds, travel, and carried ball at the top level. Surely players make mistakes, but we all feel when a referee is overcalling. The same is valid regarding contact, probably the toughest topic for all referees. In a non-contact sport, there is an awful lot of physical play, especially in the past 10 years. How much should be called? Is the women's game very different from the men's? Are the coaches on the same page as the referees?

Not really. At different events, there are different ways of interpretation of the contact and what is legal and illegal. I will not even go into subjects such as

charge or illegal screen. All I do with my players as a coach is to advise them to pay attention on the way the game is called in the first 3-4 minutes. Then, we will work out how much contact will be allowed and adjust accordingly.

This is why the feeling for the game is, in my opinion, even more important for a referee, then their knowledge of the rules or personal physical condition. The decision making is crucial and the way the decision is communicated too.

The referee should not aim to be the star of the show or the game – this is reserved for the players. This is their game and we all, coaches, referees, table officials, team mangers, are here to support them and help them play the wonderful game of basketball. We all are in a supportive role. We all have our place in the basketball structure and are much needed; however, this is a game for the players. We all have to remember that.

What is the ideal referee?

I think that the ideal referee in the new century is a person who loves sport, fit and healthy, has a great feeling for the game, knows the rules of basketball perfectly, has good personality and is an excellent communicator, speaks languages (at least one in addition their native), knows well the history of basketball refereeing (FIBA) and its development over the years, communicates regularly with ex-referees who can observe and give an opinion and advice. A good referee will also know all the coaches and key officials, many players too. He or she will also have a good knowledge of other team sports.

Not all that much, but how many people have all those qualities? I am sure that there are many. Nobody is born perfect, but we all can and should aim high and work towards our ideal.

Can you imagine how great the game of basketball will then become!

Radmila Turner (nee Vassileva) is a former player and coach  
 Player with Levski-Spartak Sofia  
 7 National Titles between 1980-89  
 European Cup Winners '84 & '87 ,  
 Player with Bulgarian NT 1982-89  
 2nd in Europe 1983,  
 6th & 7th in the world 1983 and 1986  
 Coach of London Towers Women and Great Britain Universities Women  
 2005  
 Radmila has been a Coach of a number of youth teams and programmes  
 and was Performance Manager of England Basketball from 2004-2006

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