

Zebras in the Basketball Serengeti: Perceptions of High School Basketball Officiating

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Abstract

Sport participation has changed from a participatory activity to a vehicle for the attainment of prestige and tangible rewards. Consequently, the duties of officials have broadened considerably. As a result of this shift, the visibility and scrutiny of officials has increased. Therefore, the present study sought to gain a deep understanding of experiences of high school basketball officials with the goal of deriving practical implications for officials and society as a whole. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine memorable experiences of officials (n=10), training/mentoring an official receives to adequately complete their job, how to handle emotionally charged situations, and the role of organizations in promoting a positive sport experience for all. Findings from the present study suggest that negativity, enhanced media coverage, proactive officiating, and the need to develop officials most often impacted their experiences. Results and implications for researchers, athletic administrators, and current/prospective officials are discussed.

Keywords: high school athletics, officiating, basketball, referee

1. Introduction

During the past two generations, sport participation has morphed from a participatory activity to a vehicle for the attainment of prestige and tangible rewards (e.g., trophies, college scholarships). As a result of these structural changes two notable outcomes occurred. First, players have spent more time to further refine their skills in the effort to become physically faster and more powerful during competition (Morrison, 2002); and second, athletes experienced a shift in orientation toward the “professionalism” of sport – where the objective to win supersedes all other outcomes (Sage & Eitzen, 2015). While a growing body of literature has been focused on the physiological, psychological, and ethical principles of sport competition for athletes (and coaches), officials remain comparatively underexplored.

Along with the players, the only other individuals who occupy the same space during competition are officials. Originally charged with settling rule disputes and maintaining the order of the game, Mellick, Fleming, Bull, and Laugharne (2005) note that since the early 1990s the role of officials has become professionalized. In particular, the duties of officials have broadened considerably, in so much as they are now responsible for ensuring that all participants – including players, coaches, and spectators – uphold the broad principle of “the spirit of the game.” This has meant that in addition to acting as witness, judge, and jury to sport specific infractions, officials must also be, “...mindful of the health, safety and wellness of participants” (Mellick et al., 2005, p. 43) as well as be decisive when executing authority when it comes to matters such as time and score. As a result of this paradigm shift, the visibility of officials during competition has increased to a point where the level of scrutiny they receive can now be viewed on par with the actual competitors.

When examining why the current roles and responsibilities of officials has transformed over the years, it is important to view officials from the lens of societal expectations. It has long been assumed that individuals who are directly involved in competition are best equipped to promote positive behavior (Arthur-Banning, Paisley, &

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Wells, 2007). This is accomplished by officials through both overt communication with team captains and coaches, as well as by modeling (and acknowledging players who engage in) prosocial behavior. However, the frequency by which the media employ a trial by video for officials after a competition concludes has become increasingly prevalent (Mascarenhas, Collins, & Mortimer, 2005; Mellick et al., 2005), especially in high profile contests. Thus, officials find themselves in a somewhat precarious situation; they must be able to quickly and accurately process what is happening on the court/field, react to the current state of affairs, calmly convey their decisions to participants, all while anticipating what might happen next. In other words, a competent official must, “act as a hand of steel in a velvet glove” (Lazarov, 2006, p. 34), using the whistle as a tool and not as a weapon to further enflame behaviors.

Complicating matters further for officials are the potential stressors they may experience. Early work examining officials noted that they usually experienced, at most, moderate levels of stress (Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Winterich, 1995); however, as more recent work has discovered, stress levels cannot be universally applied to all officials. For instance, in addition to the ever-constant stress of managing players and coaches during competition, an increase in spectator involvement in sport has been cited as an area of concern in sport, as in one study 79% of spectators displayed aggressive behavior when they perceived an official made a poor call (Heydarinejad & Gholami, 2012). For those charged with maintaining the integrity of the contest, these fan reactions can manifest themselves as anxiety and difficulty concentrating – especially for younger officials who may lack experience working in such hostile conditions (Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, & Norlander, 2002). Furthermore, and undoubtedly a purpose of fans in attendance at sporting events, spectators can pressure officials when crucial decisions need to be made.

The pressure to make a correct decision is perhaps the greatest stressor that an official can experience (Taylor, 1990) and this stress can manifest itself differently based on whether competition is impending or concluded. In particular, officials may experience nervousness before play begins, difficulty concentrating during halftime – because of internal self-criticism related to performance – and anxiousness about controversial calls after competition concludes (Burke, Joyner, Pim, & Czech, 2000). Through these heightened emotions, officials may rely on developed tendencies or react to critical moments outside the normal range of accepted behavior (Neil, Bayston, Hanton, & Wilson, 2013). As an example, one bad call could lead to an immediate reaction of guilt or remorse on the part of the official, which left unchecked, may result in an official looking to call a foul on the opposing team as a “make-up call.” This very notion was found with officials that could not prevent disruptive thoughts; as specifically, those officials who internalized every aspect of decisions they made increased the probability of subsequent poor judgment calls. In contrast, if an official could remain in a present state of mind, committing an error did not affect their performance going forward. (Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, & Brunel, 2009). Thus, the ability of officials to intake a steady stream of information, while also being able to discard contentious events immediately after they are resolved, is a vital skill related to one’s overall effectiveness.

In sport, the desire to be victorious has sometimes resulted in aggression and violence being thrust into the forefront at sporting events. It has been argued that when a “win at all costs” attitude is predominant, cheating and brutality on the part of players, coaches, parents, and spectators becomes acceptable and further integrated into the culture of sport. Moreover, the very nature of aggressive actions in sport not only leads to more aggression, but also higher levels of hostile aggression, where individuals are subjected to verbal and/or physical abuse (Bach, 2006; Wann, Schrader, & Carlson, 2000). These trends have been found throughout sport history, as violent attacks against referees have been noted for well over 100 years. Using the lens of a spectator, such violence against referees is a result of fans forming close allegiances to the team or social group they support. Therefore, when referees “threaten” the impending success of said group – to which individuals have identified – spectators may feel a responsibility to defend players from unjust treatment (Dolan & Connolly, 2014).

While contemporary research examining violence against referees is sparse, findings do portray a problem. Recently, Ackery, Tator, and Snider (2012) noted that in a survey of 632 hockey referees across Canada, 92% of officials reported the perception of verbal abuse and 46% believed that physical abuse occurs against referees. Furthermore, in a 12-month qualitative inquiry of one rugby referee, difficulties were noted in maintaining a healthy balance between competition and a violence-free league for participants (Baldwin, 2013). Beyond research, the media has also noted examples of violence against referees.

Whether it be a referee who was killed by a player during an amateur soccer league contest in Salt Lake City, UT or a community college football player who punched and subsequently knocked out a referee during a football game in California, examples such as these appear to be occurring more frequently in recent years. To help understand the phenomenon of refereeing sporting contests an in-depth analysis of referee experiences is warranted.

While the work of Baldwin (2013) is a rich analysis of one referee's experience, the scope of this work is still limited to a sport not common to North America; thus, work focused on more commonly practiced sport would be beneficial. Therefore, the present study sought to attain detailed experiences of high school basketball referees with the goal of deriving implications for officials and society as a whole.

2. Data and Methodology

2.1. Participants

A total of 10 high school and college level officials participated in the present study (all participants were certified by their respective organizations). While homogeneity was noted with participants – as every official was male and self-identified as White/Caucasian – other demographic variables revealed a wide array of experiences. In particular, ages of officials in this study ranged from 32 – 71 years ($M_{age} = 55.6$ years, $SD = 13.7$ years); and in terms of experience, one official had less than one year, while the most seasoned had over 50 years of experience. Finally, when asked about the highest level of high school competition they had officiated, six indicated they had never worked a state tournament game, two had officiated in the state tournament at the regional level, and two more had experience being a referee at sectional level contests in the state tournament.

2.2. Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants in an identical fashion – though officials were allowed to elaborate upon any topic they wished. The main foci of the interview questions included: memorable experiences of officials, training and mentoring an official receives to adequately complete their job, how to handle emotionally-charged situations during competition, and the role of organizations/institutions in promoting a positive sport experience for all. Finally, when necessary, the researchers utilized probes during the interviews to acquire more information regarding a specific topic or achieve greater clarification regarding participants' answer(s) (Berg, 2004; Patton, 2002).

2.3. Procedure

Upon receiving IRB approval, officials' contact information was gathered through pre-established connection with a basketball official organization in the Midwest. Specifically, 335 certified individuals who officiated high school and/or collegiate level competitions were contacted via e-mail. During the initial contact officials were informed about the nature of the study, provided with a description of the study protocol (i.e., a 30-45 minute interview), and asked to complete a survey link if they were interested in participating. The survey link took participants to an informed consent and demographic questionnaire, complete with questions for the officials to supply their contact phone number and indicate if the interview could be digitally recorded. If a potential participant did not respond within one week of the initial e-mail, a short follow-up e-mail was sent. Finally, if no response was received from an official – after both contact attempts – it was assumed the individual had no interest in participation, he/she was removed from the participant database, and no further contact was initiated.

Once a participant completed the informed consent and demographic questionnaire a convenient date and time was established for the interview. The researcher, to protect the confidentiality of responses during the interview process, employed a private setting and the officials were encouraged to do the same. Finally, at the outset of each interview the participant was reminded of his/her rights as a part of the study and the researcher again confirmed that participant was amenable to having the interview recorded – if applicable.

Of the 335 officials that populated the initial database, 19 indicated an interest in participating and completed the online survey questionnaires. However, during further contact another nine participants self-selected out, as they stopped responding to communication efforts attempting to schedule an interview. Thus, a total of 10 officials completed in-depth interviews with researchers, for a final completion rate of 2.9% – with all agreeing to have the interview digitally recorded.

2.4. Data Analysis

Upon completion of each interview, researchers transcribed each official's audio file verbatim prior to continuing the data analysis process (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2011). Next, two authors evaluated the transcribed file to develop raw themes, using an inductive method of analysis (Patton, 2002). When all raw themes had been identified and categorized, the entire research team worked together to achieve a consensus for each interview response. This method was then repeated, as all raw data themes were aggregated into higher order themes. From these processes a total of two higher order themes and 10 raw themes were identified.

3. Results

From these ten semi-structured interviews, two higher-order themes emerged: (1) challenges in officiating and (2) suggested courses of action. Ten raw themes subsequently emerged from the two higher-order themes. From the "challenges in officiating" theme, negativity (n = 7) and enhanced media coverage (n = 6) were most often seen; while from the "suggested courses of action" theme, proactive officiating (n = 10) and the need to develop officials (n = 7) were most prominent (see Table 1 for full listing of themes). Results are detailed according to themes and subthemes. Representative quotes are presented verbatim to illustrate the themes and subthemes.

Challenges in officiating	Suggested courses of action
Negative attitude / atmosphere (n = 7)	Proactive officiating (n = 10)
Enhanced media coverage (n = 6)	Professional development (n = 7)
How / when to stop violence (n = 5)	Remain composed (n = 5)
Consistency (n = 4)	Do your job...then move on (n = 3)
Teaching positive values through sport (n = 2)	Pass legislation (n = 2)

3.1. Challenges in Officiating

When asked an array of questions related, broadly, to their own officiating experiences and, more specifically, to challenges faced while officiating, interviewees detailed a variety of obstacles in their officiating endeavors. The interviewed officials often spoke of the negative attitude and perceptions toward officials and the generally emotionally-charged nature of the sporting contests in which they worked. Aidan (all names used are pseudonyms) representatively captured such instances by detailing,

It was a 2 man crew and the player on one team shot the ball and my partner was totally screened out. I saw it happen and [the shooter] got clipped on the elbow. I made the call, probably a longer distance than normal, but I was the only one who saw it. Then the game ended, a fan took exception of my call and came onto the floor and grabbed my arm as I was turning to leave the floor. It was a full force grab and I spin to protect myself and of course my partner was right there and he grabbed my arm so I didn't throw a punch at the guy. I mean my adrenaline was pumped!

Moreover, because of enhanced media coverage of players, coaches, officials, and the games themselves, interviewees detailed that while any poor call or emotionally-charged setting involving an official had the potential to "go viral," there was an opportunity to publicize some of these very same challenges associated with officiating. Further, because of the professionalization of high school sports (e.g., the emphasis on earning a college scholarship, being seen by scouts, etc.), there was even more media coverage in the increasingly competitive environment of high school athletics. Perhaps related to the more emotionally-charged atmosphere of athletics and the enhanced media coverage, several interviewees also discussed the challenges associated with knowing when to stop particularly aggressive behavior or violence that does occur during games. Arguably contributing more to this challenge is the idea of enforcement inconsistencies between officials. Aaron spoke to some of these challenges by saying,

Every referee is a little different and your personality is going to dictate what is going to happen. So my personality is I'm going to get in and separate the players, first and foremost, as best I can. Some people don't believe in putting their safety on the line, and they would rather stand back and take notes.

Additionally, although the official is responsible for documenting what occurs with coaches and the players on each team, there is the increasingly gray area of addressing violence from fans in the stands and whether it is the role of the officials to notify the appropriate personnel (e.g., administrative staff, on-site security) of the need to "manage" fan behavior if the official deems it to be particularly egregious. Finally, in relation to challenges in officiating, although discussed by interviewees to a lesser extent, it still relevant to briefly detail the notion that there are issues with consistency within and across officiating crews, state officiating associations, and state and national rules governing bodies in relation to managing player, fan, and coach behavior and the seemingly dichotomic relationship between the lack of consistent enforcement guidelines and the importance of teaching and modeling positive behaviors through sport.

3.2. Courses of Action

In addition to addressing questions directly related to officiating challenges and rehashing such challenges in questions that were not directly related to challenges, interviewees also discussed specific courses of action to address continued – and arguably increased – issues related to officiating challenges, aggression, violence, and enhanced scrutiny. The most prominent subthemes related to suggested courses of action to address such concerns were (1) the importance of proactive officiating, (2) the need for a greater focus on mentoring and developing officials, and (3) remaining composed amidst an increasingly emotionally-charged sporting environment. When officials spoke of the need for proactive officiating, they detailed the importance of being proactive when officiating to quell issues related to unwieldy player, coach, and fan behavior. Part of the issue with being proactive, however, is knowing when to step in and when to acknowledge unruly behavior. There was a general consensus that proactive behavior – and training to further encourage proactive officiating – should be consistent. Dan detailed,

No matter what's going on – trash talking or any type of trying to show up an opponent, even from a fan, [has to be] nipped in the bud. You have to get on it early and make sure they know you're serious. Whether it's with a technical or whether it's with telling the coach you better get this kid out of here for a little bit and let him know what's going on. It's got to be something that you handle immediately and up front before it escalates to anything more serious... I try to be patient, but I also make sure the player and coach know I'm serious.

Interestingly, this relationship between knowing when to step in and when to acknowledge unruly behavior in a quest for proactive officiating is very much related to another emergent subtheme: the importance of developing and mentoring officials. That is, interviewees spoke of the importance of mentorship and developmental programs to train younger, more inexperienced officials about the nuances related to managing player, coach, and fan behavior. Perhaps most interestingly, Kane (who had been a high school basketball official for more than 50 years), highlighted the disconnect in mentoring younger officials when he first entered the profession; and moreover, the proactive step he is individually taking to make an impact:

I've [had] 52 years as a basketball official, doing some college, mainly varsity ball at the high school level. And now I'm kind of mentoring and breaking in new officials. I didn't have any mentor as I started out. I was just out there kind of on my own. I [had to get] to know other officials.

Since sport is an environment where emotions can run high, it can be argued that part of the mentorship process would inherently involve maintaining composure and focus on game management and making correct calls – a process, many interviewees intimated, that only comes with experience and is accelerated by good mentorship and developmental opportunities. Seth, who had detailed the importance of mentorship and the wisdom he has gained over the years, spoke of the importance of remaining composed – a concept he had learned through experience and valued mentorship. Specifically, he emphasized,

We have to stay calm, we have to stay sane. If a coach has a question for me or a coach wants me over there, I'm going to try my best to listen to him or her. There's an old saying in officiating that 'you answer their questions, ignore their comments, and penalize insanity.'

4. Discussion

Findings from conducting semi-structured interviews with high school basketball officials indicated distinct challenges in officiating and specific recommended best practices to address such challenges. Officials detailed challenges associated with enhanced aggression toward officials tied to the increasingly emotionally-

charged nature of high school sport and some inherent drawbacks of growing media coverage and scrutiny of sporting events.

Further, knowing when and how to stop player, coach, and fan violence was closely associated with the challenge of consistency of enforcement. Finally, in relation to challenges, some interviewees alluded to the notion that when taking into consideration the aforementioned challenges, it has become increasingly difficult to teach positive values through sport when officiating has become seemingly more about managing emotions of players, coaches, and fans. While officials acknowledged the many challenges tied to officiating, there were specific courses of action recommended to face such challenges. Specifically, the interviewees called for more proactive officiating – a measure that would be tied closely to more opportunities for mentorship and development of officials. These findings have implications for several primary constituency groups: officials and, more broadly, for sport and society.

4.1. Implications for Officials

The notion that many of the interviewed officials experienced emotionally-charged situations while officiating is relevant, particularly in line with the notion that aggressive actions oftentimes further perpetuate intensified levels of aggression (Bach, 2006; Wann et al., 2000). This finding has an important implication as it relates to officials needing to be more proactive in the space which they operate. Relatedly, there seemingly needs to be markedly more legislative education and mentorship guidance provided to enhance proactive officiating in order to limit player, coach, and fan violence. Relatedly, because there continues to be confusion about the “grey area” of addressing aggressive behavior – whether that be from coaches, players, or fans – a discussion amongst rule policymakers and athletics administrators alike should happen regarding what exactly the roles and responsibilities of officials encompasses. Arthur-Banning, Paisley, and Wells (2007) advocated that the individuals who are directly involved in the gameplay necessarily should be the ones that also promote positive gameplay. If there is a tendency for coaches and players, because of the increasingly professionalized nature of sport (Mellick et al., 2005), to engage in behaviors contrary to positive gameplay, does that inherently mean more pressure falls on officials to do so? If that is indeed the case, there does appear to be a tipping point of sorts for officials to manage all of their responsibilities. Such a call for change does not vary from Mellick and colleagues’ (2005) detailing on the increased responsibilities of officials. However, in the fifteen years since, if there are still similar issues, with even more scrutiny and media coverage of contests and officials, the tipping point for having officials model positive behavior (and limit negatives such as officiating shortages) seems to have arrived.

Further, because officiating seems to be a higher stress position due to the increased array of responsibilities, there is more mental effort required. In a position that requires more mental effort, there would seemingly be less mental capacity to make correct calls, further compounding the issue of officials facing increased scrutiny because of greater media coverage of the more professionalized nature of sport (Lazarov, 2006; Mascarenhas et al., 2005; Mellick et al., 2005). Taken altogether, these challenges necessitate specific strategies for change, including, but not limited to, more direction, mentorship, and development opportunities from both within (e.g., other officials, officials associations, rule changes) the officiating community and within the sport governance structure (e.g., athletics directors and administrators, state activities associations) more broadly.

4.2. Implications for Sport and Society

Many of the current challenges facing officials create an environment where it is markedly more difficulty to convey positive life lessons through sport. Because of the continued increased nature of aggression toward officials in an emotionally-charged environment, there is simultaneously a devaluation of positive life lessons through sport and a continued increase in pressure to succeed from sport socializers (Arthur-Banning et al., 2007; Bach, 2006). Without further levels of mentorship and developmental opportunities for younger officials, emotionally-charged behavior from players, coaches, and fans can be particularly harming to officials (Folkesson et al., 2002). Such harm can certainly contribute to officiating turnover and dropout rates as well as general obstacles in recruiting officials to begin officiating. While officials understandably so are not seen as the primary stakeholders or participants in a sporting contest – like players and, to a somewhat lesser extent, coaches – there are broad-based implications for the long-term health of sport if officiating shortages become so extreme as to impact the ability to schedule and conduct sporting events. Such an issue would be self-perpetuating in nature if an already-mentally taxed group of officials are tasked with further compensating for a challenge such as extreme officiating shortages.

4.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. Specifically, data collection was not cross-sectional. Rather, officials were interviewed only at one point in time. Further, because of the nature of the qualitative research and the number of officials interviewed, findings are not generalizable. Moreover, this study focused on one sport and only males were interviewed. A wider array of sports and sex could lead to different findings.

Finally, understanding the perceptions of officials-in-training and those who have just retired or exited the profession would also aid in a more complete understanding of the dynamics these individuals confront. Such limitations do provide an opportunity for further directions for research. There could be a broadened participant population based on sex, sport, and level of competition. Moreover, findings from this study and further studies could be used to develop and refine developmental and mentorship programs for officials – programs that could be further tested with longitudinal methods.

5. Conclusions

Findings from the present study suggest that negativity, enhanced media coverage, proactive officiating, and the need to develop officials most often impacted the experiences of high school basketball officials. Clarifying expectations and providing additional training to support sport officials may help to alleviate some of the pressures and stressors associated with athletic officiating. Practically speaking, this may also lead to increased referee satisfaction and assist in referee recruitment and retention efforts.

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