

Referee has collected some of the best basketball officiating tips & techniques they could find and has created Basketball Officiating A-Z email series to share with officials. Officials who are interested can visit <https://www.referee.com/free-guides/> for more officiating resources. Tips will be added weekly once new ones are released.



## A

### **AVOID CONTACT WITH INJURED PLAYERS**

When an injury occurs and the coach or medical personnel are beckoned onto the court, move away from the area immediately. For liability reasons, you don't want to get involved in injury situations. You must avoid the urge to help. Plus, if you're nearby, it's easier for someone to fire an emotional cheap shot at you. For example, if you're nearby the angry coach on the way out to attend to the injured player may say, "This is your fault! The game's too rough!" There's even more of a chance for an emotional response if a parent is summoned from the stands onto the court. Avoid it all by moving well away from the injured player.

## B

### **BE A STUDENT OF THE GAME**

Part of your preparation is studying the game itself. Just what are the teams trying to do on the court? The novice or unprepared referee doesn't think beyond, "This team is trying to score more points than the other team." The great referees think about offensive styles, defensive schemes, tempo and tendencies. For example, they'll know or recognize that team A likes to push the ball up the right side of the floor and establish a fast-paced tempo. They run multiple off-ball, low-post screens to free up post players on the low block. They like to dump the ball into the post then pass it back out to the perimeter for three-point shots. They will crash the boards, then apply pressure defensive traps all over the court. They play an

aggressive, trapping, man-to-man defense and front the post. They will switch to a 2-3 zone defense only for a throw-in on the frontcourt end line. The different approaches are obvious: The more you know about the game and a team's tendencies, the better prepared you are. Recognizing and knowing what coaches and players are trying to do elevates your game. When you have that knowledge, you can adjust your court coverage accordingly. How do you get better at anticipating plays? You study the game and the specific plays. As the game of basketball becomes more complex, officials must be more aware of specific basketball plays. When officials recognize offensive plays and defensive strategies, they make better calls.



## COACH COMMUNICATION

Officials who properly communicate with coaches are aware of their body language, the gestures used and the tone in which the words are spoken. With a database of rules knowledge, your conversations with coaches will display self-assurance as you definitively recite the correct ruling behind your last call or situation. Stand with the coach in a very non-confrontational and relaxed manner. Showing respect will earn respect. Listen very carefully. Think about the coach's position. Be empathetic to what they are saying. They just may have a valid point. Your conversation should be brief, largely rules based and delivered in a positive context. Be cognizant of your pitch, inflection and tenor. A quick approach, filled with high and low inflections may cause the coach to shift his or her focus to your presentation and misconstrue your explanation. Hence, how you deliver your words can be as important as the words you deliver. The coach will observe your confident demeanor to conclude that you know and understand the rules of the game and correctly administer them on the court.



## DOUBLE WHISTLES

Double whistles are going to occur and they are certainly better than no whistles in most cases. Remember to go over the topic in your pregame. How will you handle them? If you both have a stop-clock signal of a clenched fist (foul), or if you both have a stop-clock signal of an open hand (violation), what do you do? If one has a closed fist (foul) and one has an open hand (violation), one happened before the other. What do you do?

When you have double whistles, and the stop-clock signals are the same (fist or open hand), do not give a preliminary signal. Slow down. Make eye contact and wait for the official who has the primary coverage.

Technically, you should never have double whistles out of your primary area. But, if you do, the official who has primary coverage must always take charge. If you give it up to the official in their secondary coverage area, you will both lose credibility. You will lose credibility for not having confidence in your decision and your partner will lose it for not officiating his or her own primary area.



## **EXPERIENCE**

Whatever level you are working, experience can only be increased by working as many games as possible. Work with different people, young and old, veteran or novice. Ask questions and welcome constructive criticism. Use it as a learning tool. Also, seek out the local assigners. Let them know some of your goals and ask for advice or guidance. Perhaps an assigner or mentor can come out to one of your games to observe and evaluate your performance. Keep working hard at your craft, game after game. Find video of your games. Watch the videos to see that how you think you look is different from how you actually look. Now perfect those mechanics in each game you work so that it becomes a natural movement rooted from muscle memory when administering a traveling violation or assessing a player-control foul. Initiate a postgame discussion on any unusual plays. Be sure you understand what happened and evaluate if it was managed properly.



## **FEEL FOR THE GAME**

Good point guards or students of the game usually make good referees. Why? They have learned as players to recognize defenses and they instinctually know what to do to beat those defenses. Good officials do the same thing. Once you've learned to recognize defenses and understand defensive tendencies, you must think about what the offense is likely to do and adjust accordingly. That allows you to anticipate correctly and move to get proper angles and spacing. The more you know about the game,

the less chance you have of getting surprised. Studying the rules and mechanics isn't enough. A complete official knows what's going on from the players', coaches' and officials' perspectives.



## GET GAMES PROPERLY

Before even getting on the court, you've obviously got to get assigned games. Assigning methods vary from state to state, level to level and association to association.

Learn what the process is from other local officials and association leaders. Then, follow the system. Do not compromise your principles to get games. In some areas, it's wrong to contact coaches directly for games. If that's the case, don't do it. You'd be sacrificing your integrity just for an assignment. It's not worth it.

In other areas, officials must get games from coaches or athletic directors. While that practice often gives the appearance of favoritism and impropriety, follow the procedures that are accepted and don't deviate. Be careful.

Once you've figured out the procedure and accepted an assignment, keep it. Few things upset assignors more than turned back games. Obviously, emergencies do happen, but they should be few in number. Officials who continually have problems making assignments eventually don't get assigned.

It's tempting to turn back a game when a better one comes along. Some assignors allow turn-backs if the official has a chance to move up a level, for example from a JV game to varsity. Others frown upon it no matter what. If you know you can't turn a game back without upsetting someone, don't do it.

If you've got a better opportunity that moves you up a level and your assignor is open-minded, be upfront about it. Don't commit to the new game until you've talked to the assignor for the game you've already got.



## HUSTLE

Hustle really doesn't take all that much extra effort. It's simply a matter of being dedicated to being in position and looking interested and athletic during your games. If you know where to be, it is usually easy to get there. Just remember the basic hustle rules: Get as close to the ideal position as possible while ensuring that you are not running when the play actually happens. You don't interfere with the play and

you don't leave a potential secondary play uncovered. Move with authority and try to be ahead of the action.



## IMPACT OF CALLS (OR NO-CALLS)

Some might argue that the mantra of “calling ‘em as you see ‘em” is a copout. To them, any official who simply calls the block/charge or the jostling in the paint solely on fact and observation, regardless of game situation, doesn't have a feel for the game. You start hearing about whether a call was “necessary” or not. They would be worried, as the contest winds down to the short strokes, that there'd be a risk of said official affecting the outcome of the game rather than letting the teams decide it. Where they're wrong is that the teams ARE deciding it when officials make the calls strictly on merit. That's just basketball. When the officials have spent most of the game establishing a pattern of what's going to be called and what's going to be let go, their only real option is to stick with the plan down the stretch. Often, the contention that the referees somehow decided the outcome by finishing the job they started is a testament. They wish that the officials hadn't finished what they started, rather than being angry that they had. Certainly, though, when you “think” you saw something, YOU DIDN'T. There are times you will be focused on action in your coverage area but something on the farthest edge of your peripheral vision will draw your attention.

Missing a call is never a positive thing. But most assigners, coordinators and observers will tell you that failing to call something that did occur is more acceptable than calling something you aren't absolutely positive happened. Gut feeling is a valuable officiating tool. Many times, your instincts will guide you in the right direction. But your eyes trump all. See what you call and call only what you see. Period.



## JUMP BALL

The jump ball sets the tone for the rest of the game. It's the first action directly related to the game, and that first impression can be a lasting one. With a good toss, you've started the game properly. Remember these points during jump ball administration:

- Before administering the jump ball, check with both team captains to ensure both teams are ready.
- Check with the umpire to make sure the umpire and table personnel are ready.
- Blow the whistle outside the jump ball circle before entering and then take the whistle out of your mouth for safety.
- For a one-handed toss, make sure your elbow is directly below the ball and perpendicular to the floor to ensure a straight toss.
- Place your foot between the jumpers' pivot feet to create space.
- Keep the ball at your side.
- Bend your knees slightly; using your leg strength will help toss the ball high.
- For a one-handed toss, keep your palm open to the sky to ensure a wrist spin doesn't create a bad toss.
- The toss should be straight and slightly higher than the players can jump so the players tap the ball on the way down.

If you practice the jump ball toss often, read your partner's movements to ensure proper court coverage and communicate effectively with table personnel and your partner, your games will get off to a good start.



## **KEEP THE CAPTAINS' MEETING BRIEF**

The captains' meeting should never last more than one minute. There's no need to explain common rules or obvious things — like telling them the boundary line is the blue line all the way around the court when there's only that blue line on the court! The players are more interested in warming up than listening to you talk. Use the time with the captains to clear up any confusion, but don't hold a rules clinic. Explain to the captains that they are leaders and that you may come to them for some help in dealing with players. By giving them that responsibility, it shows them that you're willing to work with them to avoid potential problems. Ask the captains if they've got any questions (most of the time they don't) and ask your partner if your partner has anything to add. Let the captains shake hands and it's over.



## LEARN ABOUT THE TEAMS DURING THE PREGAME

Though there's usually not a lot of pressure on the officials during the pregame warmup, it's not the time to mentally relax. Watch for player and team tendencies while they warmup. For example, if a post player is practicing a move to the basket, take note of which way the player likes to spin toward the basket. If the team is setting many off-ball screens while running their half-court offense, remember that during the game. Look for the best shooter; determine if the best ballhandler likes going right or left. Identify the leapers. Those clues and others will help you anticipate plays and get proper angles during the game.



## MEET WITH GAME MANAGEMENT

Upon arrival at the game site, inform someone from game management that you have arrived. At the youth level, the game manager is likely a league supervisor. In high school and small college, it's probably the host athletic director or representative. Letting them know you're there immediately means they don't have to wonder and worry if the officials have arrived. The game manager likely will show you to your locker room. With the game manager:

- Confirm tipoff time.
- Ask if there's going to be an extended halftime for parent's night, special presentations, etc. If there is, make sure the game manager informs both teams before the game.
- Find out where the game manager will be located during the game. You may need to find the game manager quickly during the game to take care of crowd control or other administrative duties.
- Find out who is going to escort you and your partner to your locker-room at halftime and immediately after the game.

Make sure your locker room is locked after you leave and someone is there to open it when needed. It's very upsetting when you want to get into your locker-room at halftime or after the game and no one is there to open the door.

By taking care of duties with game management before the game, you won't have to worry about those details during the game.



## NOTICE THE CLOCK

Each time a whistle blows to stop the clock, quickly glance at the clock to see the time. Before glancing, however, make sure players' actions are under control; you don't want to look away from the players if there's a potential problem among them. Both officials should glance. In fact, the off-ball official may have a better chance to glance more quickly since that official is not involved with action around the ball. Officials should also check the shot clock (if applicable). In addition, glance at the clock just before allowing the ball to become live. Obviously, the time that was on the clock when the ball became dead should be the same as the time when the ball next becomes live. By gathering clock information, you are fully prepared if the clock malfunctions or if time is run off the clock — accidentally or intentionally. It takes some discipline to develop this good habit, but once accomplished, glancing at the clock becomes second-nature. Your efforts will pay off the first time you confidently — and correctly — handle a clock problem.



## OPEN LOOKS

Many times, it can't be helped. The ball squirts loose, players react accordingly and suddenly you're staring through the backs of players trying to figure out what to call. Even if you've got a closed look on the play, you are still responsible to rule on several items.

As the lead official, you have primary responsibility for the end line. Even if play gives you a closed angle, you'll need to determine if the player involved is touching the ball while touching the line. If you can't tell, ask for help. Your center (three-person) or trail (two-person) might be able to offer you some help. A step or two toward the lane and back might also give you a better position.

Has the defender "forced out" the offensive player? The lead must set in a good spot to judge any contact and its material impact on the play. Your partner(s) might need to provide help in the secondary area of coverage.

If a timeout is requested, you've got to determine if player control exists. If you're looking through a closed angle and can't determine, don't assume and grant the timeout.



## **PUT THE BALL IN PLAY QUICKLY**

One of the great aspects of basketball is that the action is nearly non-stop. You can take advantage of that and help the game move along smoothly by getting the ball in play quickly after a stoppage. When the ball is dead and little is happening on the court, it's prime-time for trouble. Players stop worrying about offensive plays and defensive schemes and start focusing on other players or the officials. The same is true for coaches. When the ball is dead they've got little to worry about and they often begin unnecessary conversations with opponents and officials. When the ball is dead, get the ball back in play as quickly as possible without rushing or sacrificing duties. The faster the ball gets back in play, the more quickly players and coaches return their focus to the game.



## **QUICKLY SEND REPORTS**

If conduct or game reports are necessary, they should be sent promptly to the proper authorities. Send all reports within 24 hours of the game. If there was a problem during the game that warrants a report to your supervisor, consider calling the supervisor as soon as possible before sending the report. Supervisors usually like to hear about problems from the officials first. That way they are not surprised when the angry coach or administrator calls. Report all items that are supposed to be reported. Most governing bodies require all ejections to be reported. If you don't report yours, the governing body can't discipline the offender. You may think the ejection was "minor" and doesn't warrant suspension, etc. That's not your call! Report all ejections (if required) and let the governing bodies make their decisions. Follow the guidelines set forth by the conference or your state association.



## **REFEREE THE DEFENSE**

When officiating a game, you must recognize, understand and react to what the defense is doing. Defensive coverages often dictate offensive plays; they also greatly impact your court coverage. Watch where defenders are positioned on the court and what they're doing from those positions. Referee the defense also means primarily watching the defender movements. You must watch the defense before judging whether the offensive player or defensive player committed a foul. The best example is the legal guarding rule. Say a player dribbles into a defender and significant contact occurs. If you watched the dribbler, you don't know if the defender established legal guarding position. Who committed the foul? If you correctly watched the defender, you know if the defender established legal guarding position and you can call the play correctly. The simple philosophy is a crucial part of good judgment. Obviously, referee the defense doesn't mean you can watch only the defender. You must also watch the offensive player for violations and fouls. By maintaining good angles and establishing proper spacing, you can watch both players. Refereeing the defense is more of an attitude than a visual command.



## **STAY AWAY FROM COACHES DURING PREGAME**

Do not go directly to the scorer's table when you enter the court before the game. Why? You want to avoid the coaches (unless dictated by your state association), who are usually near their team benches. If you stand near the scorer's table, many coaches view that as an invitation to chit-chat or ask questions. Don't give the coaches the chance to "shmooze" you by telling you how great it is to see you, etc. Don't give a coach the chance to ask questions that the coach can later use against you. For example, if a coach before the game asks you about hand checking, then doesn't like your hand-checking call in the game, the coach could bring up the pregame conversation by saying something like, "That's not how you said you were going to call it." Don't give them the opportunity or satisfaction.



## TRAIL OFFICIAL

To get to be a “Super-T,” acquire these good habits.

1. **Focus on your primary coverage area** - The ball is a magnet for the eyes. Know when to focus off the ball and trust your partner.
2. **Work the arc** - The segment of the arc between the free-throw line extended and the top of the key provides guidance for the trail's movements. Follow the arc forward on every shot to monitor rebounding play and goaltending. To cover a three-point try from the other side of the lane, follow the arc to the top of the key.

There is one time when the trail must abandon the arc. To referee a trap on the far side of the court near the division line, go back toward the center circle, even into the backcourt, to get an angle on the play.

3. **Get on the same page with your partner** - Some lead officials are sensitive when the trail calls something under the hoop. The good ones just say, “Thanks for picking me up.” Reach an understanding with your partner that you will only make the calls you are 110 percent sure of. Always remember you can't look good unless your partner does too.
4. **Don't be afraid to get beat on the fast break** - You will get beat occasionally. Practice refereeing fast breaks from behind in some scrimmages. Slip toward the lane at about the free-throw line to see between the dribbler and the defender and clear out quickly.
5. **Be aware of the clock(s)** - Referees get blamed for timing mistakes, so make it a point to see whether the clock stops and starts exactly as it should. Judge whether the horn is loud enough. See whether you see both the play and clock as the last seconds of a period tick down. On a last-second call, look at the clock immediately after the whistle. It should be stopped by then. Before administering foul shots with little time remaining, check the clock so you can correct the time if the clock starts erroneously.
6. **Be prepared to listen to the benches** - The trail is usually the one the coach will talk to. Listening is especially important in the closing seconds of a period, when timeout requests may be frequent and critically timed. Identify the head coach's voice during the game so timeouts can be granted promptly at a key point. Anticipate the game situations when a timeout might be wanted.  
  
Of course, other things get said to you as you go by the bench. Know the difference between complaint and abuse. Never tolerate abuse.

7. **Be alert for problems at the table** - Know whether the arrow is correct, manages substitutions efficiently and handle any questions from the table. Know when the bonus is imminent, where the timeouts stand and remind the timer of last-second shot duties.
8. **Keep an eye on the play in transition** - In your anxiety to avoid getting beat down do not put your head down and sprint from trail to lead. Look over your shoulder as you run. Resist the temptation to run backward. Collisions are painful for everyone.
9. **Stay in good position as the play comes up the court** - As the new trail after a score or rebound, don't get ahead of the ball. Stay a step or two behind the ball and to one side. That will enable you to see between the ball handler and any defender. You will also be able to look ahead of the ball to see any screens that might be set and referee any block/charge situations. You'll see the crash coming and stay with it to make the right judgment.
10. **Head off three-point questions with clear signals** - The trail must give the signal on every three-point goal, even if the lead makes the call in the far corner. On shots where the shooter's foot just touched the arc, it pays to signal two points about waist high so the table (and the coach) know you saw the play. In the rare situations in which your partner erroneously signals three, blow the whistle and correct the call immediately.
11. **See the foot movements of the three-point shooter** - Two things are common: a player gets the ball with a foot on the arc and moves both to get behind it; or the player catches the ball with one or both feet on the floor and moves both feet to gather for the shot. Both moves are traveling violations. Call them.



## USE YOUR POCKETS AND YOUR PARTNER TO AVOID MISTAKES

Keeping track of the alternating possession arrow in your mind can be a difficult task.

Occasionally the arrow ends up pointing in the wrong direction — sometimes intentionally.

There's an easy way to keep track of the arrow while on the floor. Carry a spare whistle or air needle (used to take air out of the game ball, if necessary) in your pocket. Keep the whistle or needle in the pocket that points the correct direction of the alternating-possession arrow when you are standing facing the scorer's table. When you face the table and the whistle or needle is in your right pocket, you know the team going to your right gets the ball, and vice versa. When the arrow correctly changes, simply switch the whistle or needle to the other pocket. You'll always know who is supposed to get the throw-in even if there's a "mistake" at the scorer's table.

Meet with your partner after technical fouls. Technical foul situations can sometimes get

emotional. If you're the calling official, you can occasionally get confused about which team shoots at which basket. It's embarrassing when you begin walking to one end of the court, then halfway there figure out you're about to shoot at the wrong end. Beyond embarrassing, you look like you don't know what you're doing. Alleviate that problem by meeting briefly with your partner near midcourt before walking in either direction. That meeting should take place after the technical foul is reported to the scorer. The non-calling official, after making sure all players are calm and there is no continuing action after the technical foul, walks up to the calling official and tells the calling official which basket to walk toward. Why meet? The non-calling official is less emotional and can think about which direction to move while the calling official handles the problem and reports. The brief meeting ensures you're moving in the right direction.



## **VALUE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM**

One of the ways to improve is to get opinions and advice from others. Your partner is a great source. Always ask if there's anything you could have done differently or better. After asking, accept the constructive criticism. Don't be one of those referees that asks, "How'd I do?" expecting a shower of praise. If you don't want to know the truth, don't ask. Take the criticism offered, analyze the comments and make changes if you feel it's appropriate. Be ready to offer a critique when asked. It's frustrating for an official who wants to learn to invite criticism only to hear, "You did a good job." There must be something that needs improving! You ought to be able to give your partner at least three things to think about after every game.



## **WRITE A JOURNAL**

Consider keeping a journal during your season. Write down strange plays, your feelings about your performance, notes about your partner, things you did well and things you can improve on. The journal is a great way to look back during and after the season to see if there are patterns. If the same things keep appearing in your journal, you know those things need to be addressed. Reviewing the journal is also a great way to start thinking about officiating before next season.



## EXIT THE COURT QUICKLY

There's an easy way to sum up postgame exits: When the final horn sounds, get out of there! Do not worry about where the basketball goes; it's not your responsibility. Jog to your locker room and avoid confrontations. A game management representative should meet you near the exit from the court to ensure you get to your locker room safely. Stay away from the scorer's table; it's too easy to be a target of emotional coaches, players or fans. If you've done everything correctly and there's not a controversial ending, there's no need to be over there. If the score is close, there are usually timeouts toward the end of the game. That's the time for the referee to go over and make sure all the information in the scorebook is correct. If not, settle it then, not after the final horn. Handling that during a timeout means you don't have to go over after the final horn. The majority of games don't end with controversy and close scores. When things are normal, as soon as the horn sounds jog toward the locker room. There's no need to go back to the table to get your jacket because you carried it in at halftime. There's no need to sign the book because you signed before the game and, by rule, the game is over when you leave the floor. There's no need to watch the postgame handshake; it's not your responsibility. The quicker you're off the floor, the safer you will be.



## YESTERDAY

As the old saying goes, you're only as good as your last game. Many referees work multiple games each week. The last game you worked — yesterday's game, if you will — is gone. If you experienced problems in that previous game, you can't carry the problems over to your next game. The same with your last call. If you kick one, forget about it for the moment. If you let it eat at you, you won't be thinking about the next call and you'll kick that one, too.

The time to dwell on your mistakes and examine your performance is after the game. Solicit advice from crewmates, mentors or veteran officials whose opinions you trust. Fix the problem, then get on with your life.



## ZEBRA

There may be places where “zebra” is still used as a derogatory term to describe officials. But some officials use it to describe themselves. They view it as a badge of honor. Some officials have personal stationary emblazoned with zebras or email addresses with zebra in them. They’ve chosen to turn a negative image into a positive one.

Regardless of how you feel about “zebra”, officials should take pride in their avocation. That means being a professional always, not just when you’re in uniform. Be a role model.