



Things I Learned at the Vail LAREDO 3

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This summer I attended my first US Lacrosse Referee Development (LAREDO) clinic. The LAREDO program began in the late 1980s as a way to teach two and three-person mechanics to officials in areas new to lacrosse. Clinics are led by experienced clinicians, all of whom are elite officials with years of experience both on the field and in the classroom. The program has evolved to provide opportunities for officials at various points in their careers and now serves as a means of standardizing best practices throughout the country.

- LAREDO 1 – primarily aimed at rookie officials and reinforces basics two-person mechanics.
- LAREDO 2 – geared towards officials with three to four years of experience who have a solid grounding in two-person mechanics. These clinics introduce a more nuanced understanding of game management practices and principles.
- LAREDO 3 – for experienced high school officials looking to master three-person mechanics and are often seen as a stepping stone to the collegiate ranks.

LAREDOs are offered in developing areas as well as lacrosse hotbeds. Clinics take place at lacrosse tournaments and camps in the summer, fall and winter. Most last three to four days in the summer, while fall LAREDO's usually take place over a weekend. They are open to [US Lacrosse members](#), but do require the recommendation of your assignor or association board.

This is a learning opportunity and an audition

While this is a learning opportunity, it is also an audition. You need to know your stuff, be in shape, and look the part. As with all auditions, you have one opportunity to make a first impression. Most LAREDOs use NFHS rules, so if you attend a LAREDO that will use rules different than your local area, hit the rule book and brush up on the differences. Review and understand the mechanics so you can take advantage of the tips and critiques you will get! This is not the time to make basic mistakes of being out of position, or using the wrong signals.

You will work multiple games each day, so show up in shape. These games are usually worked in the summer and days can be long and hot. The Vail LAREDO offers its own particular challenge in that you are working games at 8,120 feet. To prepare for my LAREDO in Vail, I ran 12 miles a week and I thought I was going to pass out in the first six minutes of my first game.



As the old adage goes: “you should dress for the job you want, not the one you have.” Be sure to shower, shave, shine your shoes, wear a clean uniform, bring new flags, and make sure you have the correct patches.

Leave your ego at the door

These clinics are a great way for you to hone your craft, but to get the most out of the experience it is imperative that you be in the right mindset. If you think you’ve got it all figured out and can do no wrong, you are in serious trouble. You must be willing to listen and take feedback. These games are fantastic opportunities for you to hear what you need to work on from the best of the best. It can get intense as clinicians scrutinize and dissect every movement, signal, comment, and decision you will make. Your rules and mechanics knowledge, judgment and hustle will ALL be questioned. Clinician Jeff Thibodeau was fond of starting his comments with the phrase “I know I’m picking pepper out of fly \$h!#.” He wasn’t kidding. Few of us have ever experienced this level of scrutiny, so it is imperative that you be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. Embrace what you are being told and work to improve. No one wants to hear, “that’s not the way we do it where I come from?” or “No one told me that before.” The best advice is from Senior Clinician Rob Wyman. “Leave your ego at the door.”

I learned more in five days than in fourteen years

I was an unusual candidate for a LAREDO. I have been an official for 14 years and have been working three-man games for almost ten years. I have been a college official for the past seven years. Most of that time, I was in developing areas, mainly Florida and Georgia. As a trainer for the [Georgia Lacrosse Officials Association](#) (GLOA), I am usually the one giving feedback, not receiving it, so I really wanted to attend a LAREDO. I applied a number of times but was unable to attend for a variety of reasons; I took a new job, moved, and got married.

This past spring I was accepted to the 2014 Vail LAREDO 3. I was excited and somewhat terrified. I was finally going to see how I measure up. Now I will admit: I am a confident official. I believe I have worked hard to stay in shape. I’ve spent hours studying the rules and reviewing the latest mechanics. I watched film, read articles and posted questions to blogs. I have had great mentors over the years all of whom have helped me become a better official with their suggestions, comments and critiques, but without a doubt I can say that I learned more in five days than I had in fourteen years. Here are a few things I picked up.

Anticipate

“The lead runs and the trail hustles.” We’ve all heard it a million times, but it means different things to different people. To me, it meant I should use my speed and sprint as the new lead and come up slowly and deliberately as the trail. The clinicians all told me to do a better job as trail of anticipating the play heading back to my goal as the new Lead. Concentrating on what is happening in the game and anticipating where you need to be next help you stay focused and work more efficiently.



We know that on a shot or contested play on the end line, the trail's first step should always be backwards towards the trail's goal. But are you aware of what is going on in your game? What is each team trying to do offensively and defensively. Are they running a motion offense or setting picks from behind GLE? Who are the shooters on each team? Where does each team like to attack from? Is the defense zone or man? Where is the slide coming from? What are the offensive and defensive mismatches? If you are in the game mentally, you will be less likely to need to use your physical ability to keep pace with the play because you will be able to anticipate what is likely to happen. There are times when you will need to use your speed, but it should be the exception rather than the rule.

Move with a purpose

As the Trail I liked to deliberately work my way up the field. However, what I considered to be deliberate, crew chiefs and clinicians all considered to be walking. Everyone made it very clear that the **ONLY** time you walk is when you are the Trail and you are even with the goalie (or better yet – 5 to 10 yards behind) on a clear. To be honest at 8,000 feet after a few games, I was also trying to catch my breath. Clinician Mike Hyland's advice was "to move with a purpose."

Move quickly to a specific spot and stop. Move quickly to a spot on the field, the bottom of the wing line or the midline, and stop. This allows you to keep a wide triangle with the single and the lead.

From your spot, scan the box, look for offside, and catch your breath. These are also great places to check if either benches or the table have questions. If you need to pass along information, jog over to the cone. Never shout across the field. When you are ready, jog to the bottom of the wing line or to the traditional trail position (five yards in and five yards up from the box). Moving with purpose builds credibility with the coaches: you appear decisive, engaged and focused. And you can catch your breath!

Know where the threat is coming from

The reality is that when you officiate a game, you tend to pay more attention to some folks than to others. Rather than downplay this notion and try and pretend that we are simply neutral observers embrace it and use it to your advantage. Jeff Thibodeau would often ask us during a dead ball "Who is your problem child? Who is your troublemaker?" Do you know his number? Being able to identify a problem before it occurs is key. Which player has the most penalty minutes? Who has an USC? Who is the most aggressive defensive player? Is there a feisty attackman who likes to push and shove on the crease? Who was just talking trash under his breath? Who is angry he got beat? This is not to say that you should look to call anything on someone that they don't deserve, rather, be aware of what is likely to happen. Practice preventive officiating on a player who has demonstrated he is a problem and to call the foul when it occurs. But you can't see it if you don't know where to look and aren't in the correct position.



When the ball is dead, we become alive

The most important thing that we do as officials is watch the action. For the most part, we are exceptionally focused when the ball is live, but we often shift our focus away from the players once the ball is dead. We see a foul committed and we move on to what we “need” to do next. I “need” to throw my flag, blow the whistle, signal a foul, and find the ball. In fact, you do not need to do any of those things. As Jeff liked to say “When the ball is dead, we become alive.” What you need to do is watch the players. Make sure that there is no retaliation, no trash talking or other BS that happens after a foul or a goal.

Some situations can escalate more quickly than others. If there is a takeaway check or a hard body check, a late hit or a hard push from behind, you need to watch for the retaliation. A hard ride on a goalie demands your attention. In these cases, a player who has not given you any trouble might foul out of frustration. Keep your focus on the players until you are sure that a situation will not escalate. Once players have moved on, you can go about the business of administering the foul and restarting the game.

Keep your eyes on the inmates

One particular situation was mentioned repeatedly by the clinicians: signaling a goal. Mike Hyland pointed out most officials like to signal a goal as if we were NFL refs signaling a field goal. We run to the crease, turn and face up field, and raised our arms staring blankly 100 yards downfield. This looks great on TV, but you are completely focused on the wrong thing! You must remain focused on the players following a score. This is a situation that has the potential to get ugly. Run to the crease and focus on the defenders. If anyone is going to lash out it’s one of those guys. Watch the guy who scored. Is he taunting? No one is awaiting your stoic signal, instead, keep your focus on the players or as Jeff Thibodeau liked to say “keep your eyes on the inmates.”

Communication

Early in your game, there are a couple of close plays on the crease. Attackman steps on the line and you waive off the goal. You are in position and make a strong call. You give the ball to the defense and quickly restart the play. For the most part, I would come up the field as the Trail and quietly pass by the bench without a second thought. My thought was that the coach didn’t like my call and nothing I said to him was going to change his mind. I believed that stopping to discuss it would only make things worse. There probably was nothing that I could say that would convince the coach that my call was the correct one, but failing to engage with the coach left him feeling like he got screwed AND that he was now being ignored.

Coaches want and deserve information. If they feel like you are shutting them out, they may be inclined to try and get your attention in other, less polite, ways. By briefly stopping and passing along whatever information you can, you can diffuse some of the tension that builds up on the sidelines and hopefully avoid making the situation worse later on in the game.



Let the players know what you want

In his talk “Seeing The Foul Before It Occurs – Understanding Coaching Philosophies As An Official” at the 2014 US Lacrosse Convention Mike Hyland explained, that players and coaches will keep doing something until you tell them not to or flag them. So it is in everyone’s interest for you to communicate what it is you want and expect. This is particularly true when it comes to slashes. As officials we all know how subjective these calls are. Think about this typical scenario: defender is playing an attackman aggressively and gives a whack on the elbow. You say and do nothing. Defender gives a second whack on the elbow. You again say and do nothing. Defender gives a third whack on the elbow. Suddenly you yell “flag down” and launch your flag in the air. “Blue, #14, Slash, one-minute.”

You may have been completely justified in calling the foul (contact to the elbow is not legal), but, you did not give the player any clue as to what you wanted. Now the coach is now all over you, “That wasn’t a slash! Let ‘em play! How can you call that?” The first check was fine and so was the second. So why call it now? If you add some loud and clear preventative statements, “Ease up #14!” or “Get stick!” you can change the entire dynamic. Now, when you throw the flag for the slash and go to signal the penalty, #14 is still incredulous that he was called for a foul, but, the coach’s ire is now firmly focused on the player and not you. “Billy, he told you twice to ease up!” If the coach chooses to take issue with you, you can say, “Coach, I warned him. Twice.” Now this is not to say that you must pass on the first foul if it is deserving of a flag. But the reality is that we often do pass on that first slash. The lesson here is to make sure that even if you do not throw the flag, make sure that you communicate to the players what you say and what you want to see. What has not been communicated will not be understood.

The other area where this strategy works really well is on the faceoff. More often than not, there are only a few FOGOs who will battle each other throughout the contest. Before the game starts, right after the coin toss, ask the coaches to send their faceoff guys out to you so that you can set your expectations. This is a fantastic opportunity to explain to all of them EXACTLY what you want. Ask them to wait until you say down and to come down together. Show them how you want them to set up by borrowing one of their crosses. Explain to them what your cadence will be: down... [Pause]...set... [Pause]...whistle. Once they know what you want, you need to be sure that you keep your end of the bargain and consistently enforce violations and maintain the pause after set. In fact, during the game I started to remind them all. “Guys, there will be a pause after set” or “Wait for the whistle.” This was one of my favorite tips and over the course of four days as I had only a few violations once I implemented the practice. The key is to be true to your word. If you say there will be a pause, make sure you pause. Once you have their trust, they will do what you want them to do.



Constantly reassess

In addition to talking to the players, be sure that you are talking to your crew. At every opportunity you and your crew should reassess where you are in the game: what has happened, what you have called and what you passed on? If you are seeing a lot of violations on your faceoffs and not on your partners, you might be the problem. If there was a violation on the previous face, it is imperative that you know what it was and address it the next time. Did you or your partners all pass on a 50/50 push call or a borderline slash? You should all be aware of that the next time that situation comes up for the other team. How many penalties does each team have?

This is not to say that fouls should be even distributed, but the coaches and players are keeping track, you and your crew need to be aware of the breakdown. And don't be surprised by questions from the bench. Anticipate what the coach is thinking and be sure to have your answer ready. "Coach, your team is playing a very aggressive style of defense; your opponent is laying back." Discuss what each team is trying to do offensively and defensively. Who are the scorers? Who are the take away long poles? Have you identified the problem child? What is the next five minutes likely to bring? Will Blue look to use a TO? Will Red look to stall? Reassessing with your crew at each dead ball is essential to working a successful game.

Make attending a LAREDO a goal

I hope that you might find the lessons that I have shared with you here helpful and perhaps even try to incorporate into your own practice. I cannot understate how much I learned at the Vail LAREDO. It was a challenging and humbling experience, but one that I believe has made me a much better official. Most importantly it was a heck of a lot of fun. Talk to members of your association who have attended LAREDOs in the past. Find out where and when LAREDOs are scheduled in your area. Make it a goal to attend one, you will not be disappointed.