



The Mental Game of Refereeing

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“And all the time, we talk to our athletes about 'move on to the next play,' 'make sure you envision this,' 'be in a zone,' all those different things. We always talk about it, but nobody teaches it. Nobody teaches the athlete how to move on to the next play, nobody teaches the athlete how to get in a zone, and there's a whole new field based on mental training...”

The above quote by former NFL Coach Eric Mangini was of course referring to athletes. But anyone who has done any refereeing is nodding their heads in agreement reading it. Referees are just as likely as athletes to have a poor performance due to self-doubt, being unfocused, and having trouble with dealing with the emotional ups and downs that can happen in competition. And therefore, the same mental training techniques that athletes used can be used for referees to improve confidence and consistency in performance.

The field of sport psychology has [grown in popularity recently](#). When working with athletes, I use sport psychology techniques such as visualization, goal setting, pre-performance routines, positive self-talk and more. One of the most important aspects of the mental game is focus. I ask athletes (and it's no different for referees) to “control the controllables,” those factors that are 100% in your control:

- 1 – Effort – how hard you try
- 2 – Attitude – your mindset and how you react to things
- 3 – Preparation – how you get ready mentally for performance
- 4 – The present moment – ability to focus on what's happening now

By focusing more intently on the controllables, you have more confidence. Things that are not in your control, like the opponents, fans, coaches, weather, past and future, should be taken into account, but not spent a whole lot of mental energy on. Those out-of-controllables can quickly become distractions, and often lead to more mistakes. It is the referee's job to have clearly defined strategies to help them re-focus when they get distracted.

For referees specifically, this is a common question I hear: “how do I move on from a mistake? How do I keep it from snowballing out of control and into a poor performance?” Just like with athletes, the key to recovering from a mistake is the ability to re-focus. The correct line of thinking once this happens is “What can I do about it now?” This question brings you back into the present moment, and gives control of what to do next back to you.



Another way to look at it is to change your mindset from 'perfection' to 'consistency.' Mistakes are bound to happen whether you are an athlete or a referee or a waiter at a restaurant. You almost have to expect and accept them. In the short term, mistakes hurt and are hard to swallow, but in the long term one mistake doesn't seem so bad if you can recover, re-focus, and stay consistent.

To compound the problem of making a mistake, sometimes it's done during an evaluation. That mistake may seem bigger because you are being watched from yet another angle, and the stakes are higher. But again, the fact is, making a mistake is expected, it's how you move on from it and handle it that matters the most. Mental preparation around how you are going to handle the inevitable mistake is crucial for refereeing.

Like the highest level athlete, the highest level referees spend hours and hours perfecting their craft. They are constantly working to improve their skills, their physical fitness, and their knowledge of the game. But do they spend time deliberately training in confidence, decision-making, focus, and self-talk? Most don't, but the best of the best undoubtedly do.



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