The 25 Most Important Things to Know About Basketball Officiating

1. Rule # 1: The Officials’ Role is to Control the Game.
The official must make sure that the integrity of the game is always upheld, that the game is kept under control according the rules of the game, sportsmanship and personal enrichment (allowing players and coaches to learn and grow with the game). If you lose control and do not conduct yourself in a proper and professional manner, then the integrity of the game will disintegrate.

2. Officiating Is About Making Sure No Player or Team Gets an Unfair Advantage.
This is at the heart of officiating. Calls are largely based on making sure no player or no team gets an unfair advantage or is placed at an unfair disadvantage. You absolutely must, in all cases, ensure that you uphold the integrity of the game, but rules can be reasonably applied to ensure this principle is upheld.

Know how to deal with people. Remember that listening is an important skill (two ears, one mouth, listen twice as much as you speak). If you’re asked a question, answer it. Treat everyone at the game with the same respect you want from him or her. Show and earn respect.

4. Keep Safety Number One
The rules not only empower but also require officials to penalize rough play. Even if a potentially dangerous situation is not specifically covered in the rules, an official is obligated to make whatever correction is necessary to ensure player safety. In this overly litigious age, erring on the side of safety is not only the morally correct course but the one that will help keep the official out of court as well.

5. Don’t Make Excuses – Be Accountable
Even if you have the best possible excuse for making a mistake, the error won't be corrected because you have an alibi. Instead of wasting time and mental energy coming up with an excuse, your first course should be doing whatever the rules allow you to do to rectify the situation. If you try and fail, it’s a mistake. If you repeat the mistake, it’s a decision.

6. You Have an Obligation to Hold Yourself to a Higher-Than-Normal Ethical Standard
How you conduct yourself (character and integrity) away from the court is as important as how you act on the court. Poor decisions or bad behavior in everyday life can eradicate all of the good will and good impressions you earn when you’re officiating. Integrity is defined by how you act when you think nobody is watching. Be a legacy minded leader.

7. Expect Criticism and Learn How to Handle It
Most comments from spectators, players and coaches should go in one ear and out the other. Granted, that’s easier said than done. But turning a deaf ear to such criticism is crucial to maintaining focus and keeping an appositive attitude. Constructive criticism from chief officials, assignors and veteran officials should be sought. If you solicit comments after working with a respected veteran, be prepared for what you might get. Never stop growing and learning.

8. Officiating Builds Skills for a Lifetime – Be the Best You
The qualities that make a great official are also the qualities that make a person a good employee, spouse, parent and friend. Teamwork, loyalty, sacrifice, knowledge, competiveness, decision-making, accountability, integrity and honesty are just a few of the positive skills and qualities that can be learned, developed and implemented through officiating.
9. Never Let Your Signals Convey Your Emotions
Too many officials view fouls or rules infractions as personal affronts. Instead of acting dispassionately, they allow their body language or voice to convey that displeasure. Your facial expression and voice should not suggest you’re happy or unhappy to be enforcing a penalty.

10. Understand the Intent and Spirit of The Rule - Not Just The Rule
Knowing why a rule is needed will help you enforce it. In some cases, the intent is obvious (e.g. safety). In other instances, a rule is intended to ensure that neither team nor athlete is placed at an unfair disadvantage.

11. If You’re Going to Blow the Whistle, Blow It Hard
In almost every situation in virtually every sport, the rules dictate that an official's whistle causes play to cease. Since that is the case, you might as well blow it hard. A strong blast of the whistle conveys the message that play should be stopped. A weak whistle casts doubt about your confidence and judgment.

12. Understand That You Will Make Mistakes - Don't Make Excuses
Officials make mistakes, and sometimes they are dreadful mistakes; however, we must accept them as part of the challenge that calls for us to make a multitude of split-second decisions under very stressful conditions. To expect perfection is too heavy a burden for any person to carry and ultimately will take the joy out of officiating for even the best official. F.A.I.L. (First Attempt In Learning)

13. Don't Criticize Other Officials
Under no circumstances should an official point out a his or her partner’s inadequacies or offer a negative opinion about another official to a coach or player. Let your work and the work of others speak for itself. If an official you've worked with or observed seeks a critique, be honest but supportive. If your opinion is not sought, don't offer it.

14. Be Professional (90% of Reality)
No matter the level, dress the part; act the part. Soiled, aged, discolored, ill-fitting and wrinkled uniforms cast a negative impression before a game even starts. Your appearance before and after the event is important. You may not receive credit for looking professional, but you will receive criticism for looking unprofessional.

15. Know Your Role
You are part of a bigger picture - don't showboat. When you need to sell a call, it's OK to give an emphatic signal. But actions designed to draw attention away from participants and onto officials are unprofessional and unacceptable. Use only the NFHS/NCHSAA/EBOA mechanics and signals.

16. Be Prepared
Plan for the unexpected. Don’t anticipate the call; anticipate the play. That sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. If you can "feel" what's coming and adjust your position or your visual focus to the right area, you'll see what's happening better and you'll have improved your opportunity to make the correct call if needed. Top basketball referees recognize the times teams are going to apply full-court pressure or change defense.

17. Be a Student of the Game (Leaders are Readers)
How many times have you had to correct a partner who applies an outdated rule? Or been corrected yourself? Good officials read the rulebook often. The more often you read it, the more ingrained the rules will be in your mind. Attending clinics allows you to keep up with changes in philosophies and mechanics.
18. Body Language Will Do You In Quicker Than a Lack of Knowledge (93% Rule)
Sometimes it's less a matter of what you say than how you say it. In officiating as in life, body language often speaks louder than words. Even a correct call will cast doubt in the minds of participants if you don't appear decisive. Don't stand with your arms folded or shoulder slumped, which gives the impression you're bored or would rather be anywhere else.

19. Be the Solution - Do Not Contribute to the Problem
Always expect coaches, players and fans to share their opinions during the contest. Your ability, to understand which comments or questions merit a response is a key to success in officiating. Yelling in kind can turn a small brush fire into a four-alarm conflagration. More often than not, the "right" response will be non-verbal. You might nod your head slightly, smile momentarily, glance at whoever said something, hold eye contact for a moment or two, shake your head, or hold up a stop sign. Each alternative communication has a particular meaning; learn to use them wisely.

20. You Don't Care Who Wins
One of the many sports myths accepted as fact is that the officials are predisposed to favor the locals. But an official should never use calls to favor any player or team for any reason. Impartiality (Integrity) is the foundation on which the officiating house is built. Officials must be blind to factors that have nothing to do with the game, including who wins or loses.

21. Be FUNdamentally Sound
Before you can understand the spirit behind the rules you must have an appreciation for them. That doesn't necessarily mean knowing them verbatim. More important is understanding how vital it is to properly apply the rules. The profession suffers when officials ignore or misapply the rules.

22. Always Have a Pre-Game, In-Game and Post-Game
Just as athletes must warm up before competing, officials must prepare themselves for the job ahead. Even if you work with the same partner or crew day after day, pre-game preparation provides valuable reminders about how certain situations will be handled. Make adjustments/corrections at halftime and honestly assess the performance of the crew in your post game.

23. Don't Bring Anything into the Game
It is crucial to treat each game as a new experience. If you work a game involving a player or coach you've had to penalize or eject, your demeanor and actions must convey the feeling that you've forgotten about it. Always remember the “why” you do what you do.

24. Be Who You Are
Your officiating personality is driven by your everyday personality. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But remember that extremes are often detrimental in officiating. Take your gifts and talents, development them to the best of your ability and exceed expectations every time out. Be the best you and your life will to.

25. Trust and Support Your Partner.
Officiating is as much about team work as the game itself is for the players who play it and the coaches who coach the teams. Trust your partner to call what is in his or her area of the court so you can better observe your area of the court. And keep a close watch on the 'grey' area as well so that you may see something your partner might miss. Never confront your fellow official in public, and discuss any interpretation of calls in a private conference on the court and away from players, coaches and other observers.

( Parts are excerpted from Atlanta Area Basketball Officials Association.)