

# ArbiterSports

## FOCUS! How did I miss that call?

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### **FOCUS!**

**FOCUS!** How did I miss that call? Did the clock start/stop? How did we miss 6 players on the court? We all have asked those internal questions. And if we are honest with ourselves, we were not laser focused for the entire contest. In our feeble attempt to figure out the answer to our internal questions, we run through a litany of excuses:

Coach/player/bench/fan/tilt of the earth distracted me, my partner should have got that, can't see everything, man this is a boring game, and you fill in your favorite excuse here.

As a basketball official we are proud of being able to keep up with the speed of the game while keeping an eye on the shot clock, knowing the position of each players foot, arms, hips, knees, keeping an eye on our positioning and partners, lending an ear to the coach, and of course making and instantaneous decision on a foul or violation putting air in the whistle at just the right time being patient but not having a late whistle, using perfect mechanics that will sell the call but not oversell and completely ignoring that this is the fourth game of the week and you really shouldn't have had that super giant BIG soda prior to the game.

As officials we need to learn to train our brain to focus. Now I will grant you that unless you are an officiating savant of sorts you will not be able to have 100% focus for the entire contest. As officials we pride ourselves to be able to "multitask". However, multitasking can lead to mistakes and miss important information and cues that will lead to us to be less likely to retain information in working memory, which impairs problem solving and creativity. Recent advances in neuroimaging have revealed how easily the brain is distracted. The good news is that the brain can learn to ignore distractions making you more focused, creative and productive.

Try a few of these simple techniques in your next game I would bet that you'll be asking fewer and fewer of those negative internal questions.

### **Tame your frenzy**

Frenzy is an emotional state, a feeling of being a little (or a lot) out of control. It is often underpinned by anxiety, sadness, anger, and related emotions. Emotions are processed by the amygdala, a small, almond-shaped brain structure. It responds powerfully to negative emotions, which are regarded as signals of threat. Functional brain imaging has shown that activation of the amygdala by negative emotions interferes with the brain's ability to solve problems or do other cognitive work. Positive emotions and thoughts do the opposite — they improve the brain's executive function, and so help open the door to creative and strategic thinking.

*What can you do?* Try to improve the balance of positive and negative emotions and thoughts throughout the game. Next time the small point guard drives to the middle where the 7 foot center

waits and you think – here comes a foul! Change your internal voice to the positive – this is going to be a good block and then let the player change your mind.

Follow the adage religiously – proper positioning leads to open looks, which leads to a higher percentage of correct calls. So instead of saying – I missed it! Get in a better position to see the whole play and at the end say – I really had a good look there.

In big games where the crowd is very loud and player's emotions along with the crowd run high, many times as officials we let those emotions speed us up and get us into a frenzied state. One technique I learned to use crowd noise positively as a trigger. I say to myself - when the crowd is loud – SLOW DOWN!

*What can your crew do?* Have you ever started off the pre-game or post game meeting with some humor? Okay, we probably have too much humor in those meetings. However, if you have a critical game to do or the crew is beating themselves up on how the game ended, a little humor can create positive emotions that will help everyone focus, leading to better teamwork and problem solving.

### **Apply the brakes**

Your brain continuously scans your internal and external environment, even when you are focused on a particular task. Distractions are always lurking: wayward thoughts, emotions, sounds, or interruptions. Fortunately, the brain is designed to instantly stop a random thought, an unnecessary action, and even an instinctive emotion from derailing you and getting you off track.

*What can you do?* To prevent distractions from hijacking your focus, use the ABC method as your brain's brake pedal. Become **Aware** of your options: you can stop what you are doing and address the distraction, or you can let it go. **Breathe** deeply and consider your options. Then **Choose** thoughtfully: Stop? or Go? You have a coach that annoys you? Who doesn't? Instead of letting that minor habit or quirk cause a downward spiral in you recognize the trigger, take a few breaths, and just LET IT GO! Don't sweat the small stuff! An official told me once when a coach says, "call it both ways" it really ticks him off. If you recognize that is your trigger, take a breath, focus on your fundamentals (proper positioning leads to...) you'll be back on track. Once you have done that a time or two you will be smiling on the inside because you didn't let the coach distract your focus.

*What can your team do?* Try setting up a distraction-free pre/post game meeting. Everyone is expected to contribute and offer thoughtful and creative input, and no distractions (like smart cell phones) are allowed. Instead of having a pre-game while everyone is getting dressed and stretched, set the clock where everyone is completely dressed and focused on the meeting. Have an assignment for each official. One who will report on the teams and coaches. One who will review positioning and one who will lead DVD review. Finally leave enough time for everyone to stretch together after the meeting. This is a great time to introduce humor as I referred to before. However, if you are like me this comes naturally and probably at all the wrong times.

### **Shift Sets**

While it's great to be focused, sometimes you need to turn your attention to a new problem. Set-shifting refers to shifting all of your focus to a new task, and not leaving any behind on the last one. Sometimes it's helpful to do this in order to give the brain a break and allow it to take on a new task. Fortunately and unfortunately the natural flow of the game doesn't allow us as officials to focus too

long on the last play. The next play is – well now!

*What can you do?* Before you turn your attention to a new play, shift your focus from your mind to your body. Get your body in the right position, are you picking up your feet when you run, am I upright or leaning? A quick body position check a couple of quick deep breaths will help your focus in the long run. In basketball you can do this at timeouts and non-contested no pressure in the backcourt walk or jog ups to the front court. Even if you aren't aware of it, when you are doing this your brain continues working on your past plays. Sometimes new ideas emerge on how best to handle your focus on the next play coming up.

*What can your team do?* Fortunately most games have scheduled and unscheduled timeout situations. Once the teams have successfully transitioned to their bench areas, this allows officials to get together and have a quick meeting to establish or reestablish focus. Remember the basics: Everyone contributes, keep it positive, if appropriate a little humor will go a long way to reestablishing focus.

Organizing your mind and your team member's minds will yield a solid payoff of a well officiated game. Being focused is a great place to start. Start it with the pre-game conference and see what happens when everyone gives their undivided attention. Focus on the fundamental – proper positioning leads to open looks which lead to higher percentages of correct calls. In other words, religiously follow the fundamentals to maintain **FOCUS!**

Adapted from the article, Train Your Brain to Focus by Paul Hammerness, MD, and Margaret Moore as published in the online Harvard Business Review January 18, 2012. Paul Hammerness, MD, and Margaret Moore are the authors of Organize Your Life, Organize Your Mind (Harlequin).

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