



COMMUNICATION

by Paul Loube

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Have you ever heard of the 4-Minute Rule? The 4-Minute Rule says that when you meet someone for the first time, you have about 4 minutes to be accepted or rejected by him or her. That means when you meet a coach, fellow referee, technical commissioner or simply a social friend, you have about 4 minutes to make a favorable impression on that person. In some games where an early controversial call is made, you may have even less time, perhaps only seconds. It's amazing how quickly we make a first judgment about people and in the same fashion they also judge us.

Therefore referees had better know what they are doing when they walk onto the court during those first few minutes. They might not get a second chance to make a first impression. Barbara Braunstein, a nationally acclaimed motivational speaker and trainer in the United States, is convinced there are critical communication skills which can determine your success or failure in your goal of becoming the most successful basketball official possible. Here are some things to watch out for.

Eye contact - In the business of officiating, direct and relaxed eye contact is essential. We must continually establish positive eye contact with our partner(s), the scorer's table, players and coaches. Look all of them in the eye, occasionally looking away to break the intensity. Positive eye contact enhances one's image and floor presence, but don't stare. We may give off the wrong signals and create unnecessary confrontations.

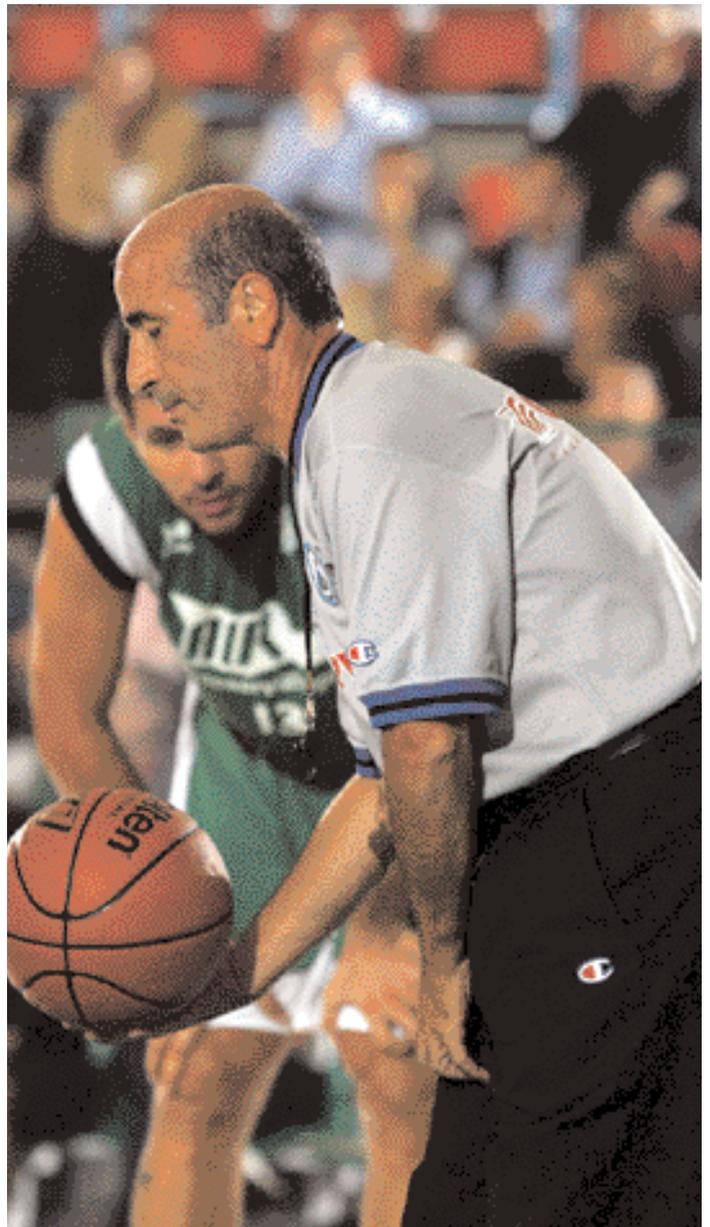
Posture - Stand tall, shoulders back, with your weight evenly distributed on both feet. Don't slouch to one side or get locked into the habit of standing with arms folded or putting your hands in your pockets, or leaning against a wall during a time-out. These can easily be interpreted as unprofessional or even arrogant.

Facial expressions - In general, a facial expression needs to be pleasant, neutral and relaxed. Coaches always complain about officials' facial expressions with comments like "I don't care to have that official because he/she always referees angry", or "That official is unapproachable". We have all experienced game situations where our facial expressions have led others to think we were irritated or unhappy when in fact we were not.

Obscure gestures/ unauthorized mechanics - Avoid sharp, jerky movements, unapproved mechanics, or lack of mechanics such as flinging hands into the air, failing to stop the clock or going down on one knee. The new wave of successful officials will be mechanically strong and will either

adhere to the mechanics manual or have tremendous difficulty advancing.

Voice - Your normal voice tones are usually pleasant, neutral and relaxed; your "game voice, however, has to be more absolute, confident and in control. A referee must be a goof "finisher" when delivering a call to the scorer's table. An outstanding decision is a great start but the job is not completed until that decision is reported to the scorer. No matter how stressed, hurried or nervous you are, the voice that will keep coaches and players open to what you are saying is the calm, self-assured, undoubted game voice of a finisher.



Listening - An official must be a good listener. Listening, an indispensable tool for efficient game management, is the most unemphasized communication power we possess. Has a coach ever said to you, "You're not listening to me"? If so, that coach was probably correct. You were probably not listening, at least by his or her definition of "listening". Lack of eye contact, inappropriate facial expressions or gestures all signal "not listening". Be approachable!

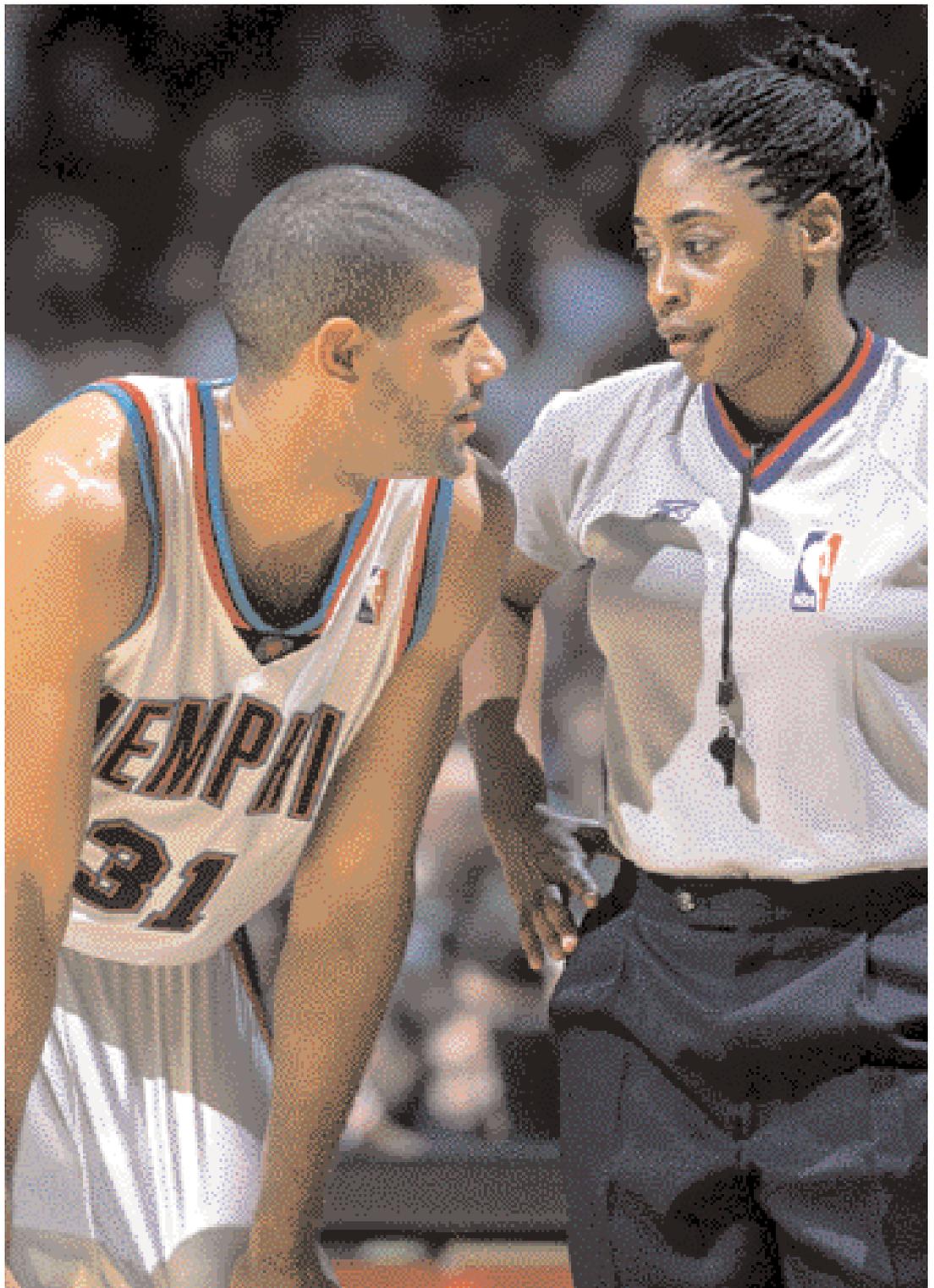
Content - Be clear, concise and direct. This does not mean being blunt or rude. Don't quote rulebook sections because it is frequently counterproductive, creating a wall when your intent really is to construct a bridge. Pause to collect your thoughts before responding to a coach's questions. Choose your words carefully, using short, simple words and sentences. Make no more than one or two points, and then get the game going again as soon as possible.

Timing - To exhibit confidence and control, the speed of your speaking should be moderate, neither too fast nor too slow. Officials who speak too quickly or too slowly will lose their listener and create unwanted and unnecessary problems because the listener becomes bored, exhausted or just angry. An official's composure and style when reporting to the scorer or confronting a coach is crucial to effective game management.

Distance and comfort - When you introduce yourself to a coach or to the table officials, give a full, firm handshake. Have dry palms and look the person(s) directly in the eye. This helps to establish your role as monitor of the game.

How can you find out whether you need to sharpen these skills? How can you improve? There are two ways to change.

The first is to become more self-aware. Consciously think



about these nine things. Get more information. Bring them to your attention and make some changes. This way is the most difficult as most officials have healthy egos and resist any technique modification.

Second, ask several fellow officials and observers, people you trust, for assistance. These must be people who know your "irritating" communication habits. Ask them for honest feedback. Discuss these nine skills with them. You could be surprised at what you find out but it is better to hear it from your friends and fellow officials than to always question why you didn't progress or why you don't ever get the opportunity to referee the "big" games.