

# MENTAL PREPARATION: A KEY TO SUCCESS IN OFFICIATING



by Paul Deshaies

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The basic training of basketball officials usually focuses on teaching playing rules and on explaining floor mechanics. Obviously, these constitute the two main ingredients needed in order: 1) to know what players can and cannot do on a basketball floor, and 2) where to position oneself in order to observe player actions and how to proceed when an infraction is detected. Acquiring a complete understanding of the spirit and intent of the rules and achieving automatic control of floor mechanics require reading, studying, listening, questioning, observing, discussing, watching, practising, getting feedback from colleagues and from supervisors, etc. This learning process requires time, but eventually, everyone who puts in the effort, reaches an acceptable level of knowledge and proficiency.

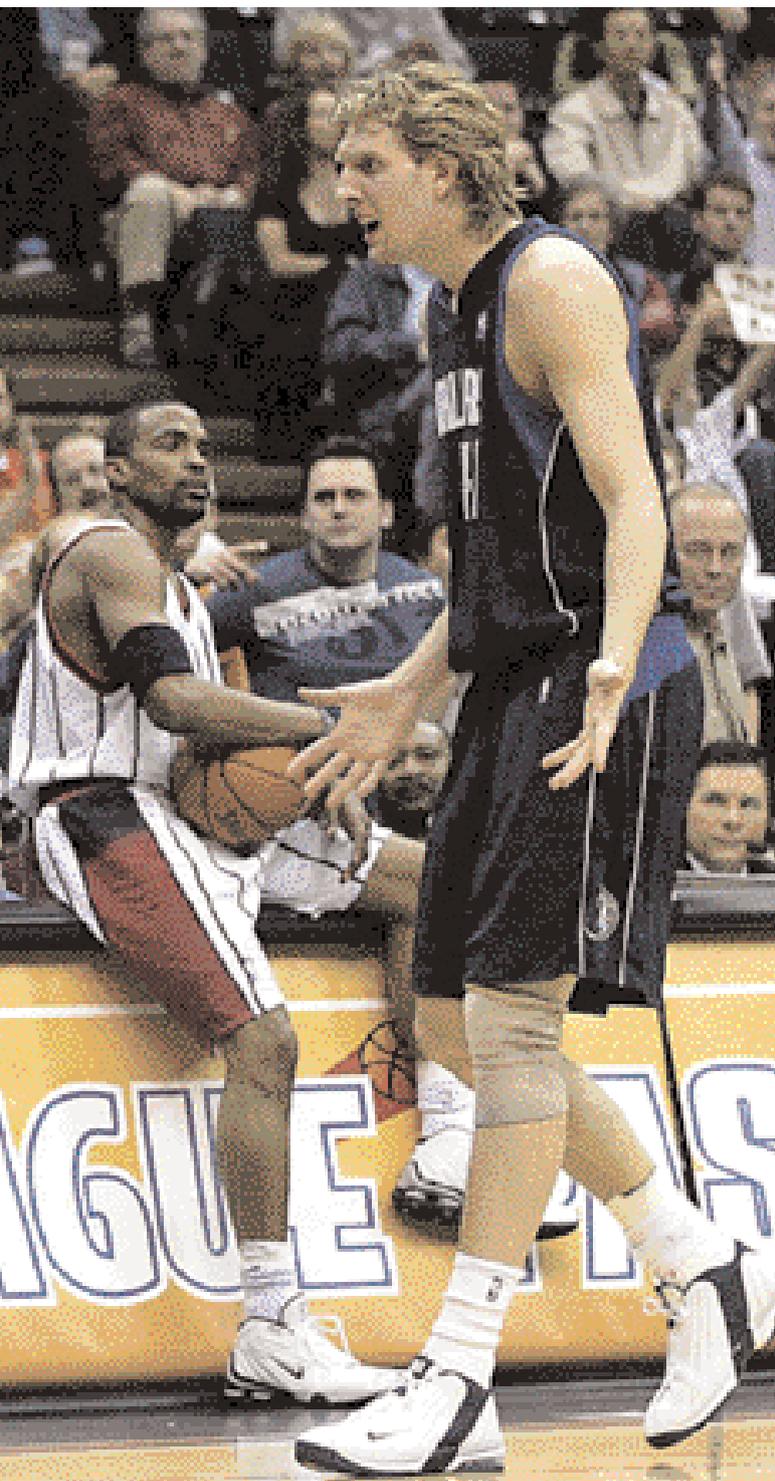
However, officials who limit their repertoire of skills to rules and mechanics, resemble players who would only learn to pass, dribble and shoot, and practice some pre-set play patterns. It has long been recognized that great athletes, not only demonstrate great physical and motor abilities, but also possess superior mental and emotional skills, which permits them to perform at a maximum level under any circumstances.

Likewise, in order to become successful, officials must develop mental skills which will enable them to make good decisions, to manage the game efficiently, to deal adequately with the participants, and to avoid mistakes that are likely to hurt the game and to quickly destroy their credibility. The formal preparation of officials in the area of mental training and preparation is often lacking. It's as if peo-



ple were expected to already possess those skills before deciding to become officials. Unfortunately, more often than not, it is not the case at all. Mental skills are not innate. They can be learned and must be rehearsed.

A book, entitled "Psychology of Officiating", written by Bob Weinberg and Peggy Richardson, both respected sport psychologists and experienced sport officials, offers, in my view, the most interesting and comprehensive approach to the various psychological aspects of sport officiating. Many of the comments and suggestions offered in this article were inspired by their outstanding work.



Concentration constitutes the fundamental basis for making proper decisions in a fast-moving game such as basketball. The official must observe the action, analyse the events, compare the results to the prescriptions set by the playing rules, determine if an infraction indeed occurred, and, as the case may be, decide to blow the whistle or not. All of that in the blink of an eye! Proper concentration also insures that the game is managed efficiently and that mistakes are avoided.

Concentration may be defined as "the ability to focus on relevant cues in the environment and to maintain that focus over the course of the contest.". Concentration is a skill and an ongoing process. In the game of basketball, cues are numerous and ever changing. The action determines what is relevant and what is not. When play is in progress, each official has primary responsibility for specific areas on the floor and for the players in those areas. They should pay attention to what players are doing and try to anticipate future actions. Irrelevant cues compete for that attention. They may include noise from an unfriendly crowd, a complaining athlete or coach, thoughts about the outcome of the game, a previously missed call, or the fear of making a mistake. It is important to keep one's mind free of irrelevant thoughts.

Concentration is related to motivation. Boredom is a potent enemy of concentration. It's hard to focus on something you really don't care about, such as, for instance, the first quarter of a U-12 exhibition game where the score is already 18-2. However, if you are a professional, which you should be since you are getting paid to do a job, you owe it to the players and to yourself to be at your best at all times when you officiate or you may just as well stay home. Whenever the contest itself is not very motivating, challenge yourself in order to increase your interest. Since you are there, try and make it as much fun as possible. Ignore the lack of quality of play and work extra hard to see everything and not to miss a single call. Try for a perfect game. It really doesn't matter for the outcome, but make it important to you personally.

At the other end of the spectrum in terms of the interest generated by the game itself, there is the championship game. That big game you've been hoping for. It's easy to get up for that one. No need here to look for extra motivation. However, your concentration may face another powerful foe in that situation: anxiety stemming from the fear of making mistakes, of ruining the game, and of looking bad. When officiating, you need an external mode of attention. You need to process various visual informations from the environment. A high level of anxiety narrows your attention and usually directs it inwardly. When you are too anxious, you are primarily paying attention to yourself and to your fears or worries. No one is immune to some degree of anxiety in important situations. In fact, a certain level of stress is healthy because it keeps you activated. The main thing is to recognise when anxiety is reaching an undesired level and when your concentration is affected. Be aware of your thoughts. If they are not focused on the action around you, there's something wrong and you need to make corrections. This requires practice. A certain degree of mastery of relaxation techniques is mandatory. Deep breathing, isolated muscular contraction followed by

total relaxation, changes from negative to positive thoughts are among means that can be used to decrease anxiety and enhance proper focus. It may also be helpful to use cue words such as "Relax" or "Calm down", "Breathe", or "Focus". Despite the fact that, to some people, a basketball game seems to be the end of the world, remember it's just a game. Keep that in perspective. Each individual must develop the techniques that work best for him/her in controlling anxiety.

As mentioned above, the ability

to concentrate can be improved as long as you are willing to work at it. The off-season is the best time to implement a program of mental training. The first step is to identify how well you concentrate and whether this is an area you can improve.

Weinberg and Richardson designed a self-help test on concentration skills. The test is presented at the end of this article. After you have identified your level of concentration skills, you may wish to work on exercises to improve them. Here are brief descriptions of a few things you can do in that area.

#### LEARNING HOW TO SHIFT ATTENTION

First, sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and relax. Now, pay attention to what you hear. Identify each separate sound. Now, listen to all the sounds at once without trying to label any of them.

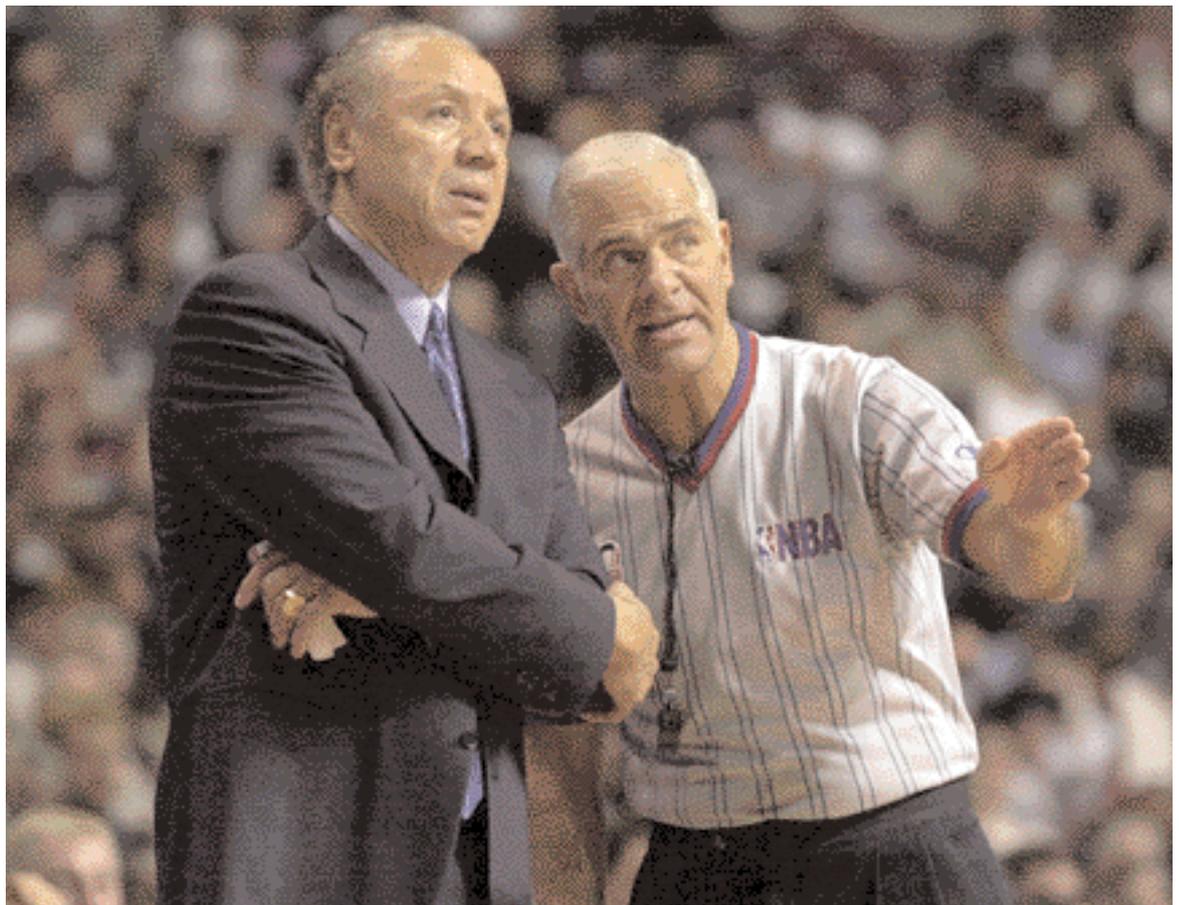
Now, pay attention to your bodily feelings. Think of the chair supporting your body, the rhythm of your breathing, the level of relaxation in each part of your body. Linger a little bit on each of these feelings.

Then, try to experience all of them at once without naming any one in particular.

Then, think of your thoughts and emotions. Let them just arise. Don't force yourself to think about anything in particular. Let the thoughts flow.

Now, try to experience each feeling or thought one at a time. Then let go all of these thoughts and relax.

Finally, place some object directly in front of you. While looking straight ahead, see as much of the room as your peripheral vision will allow, without fixating anything in particular.



Then, focus on the object in front of you until it is the only thing you see. Maintain your focus for a while and slowly expand it back to the entire room. Make it work as if your vision was a zooming lens. Zoom in and out slowly.

#### LEARNING HOW TO MAINTAIN FOCUS

Find a quiet place with no distraction. Choose an object to focus on. Hold the object in your hands. Examine it in great details, its texture, its colours, and its weight. If your thoughts move away from the object, bring them back to it. Record how long you can stay focused entirely on the object.

Once you are able to stay focused continuously for 5 minutes, try it again in the presence of some distraction (music, TV). See how completely and how long you can stay focused despite distractions.

#### PRACTICING GAME CONCENTRATION

Imagery or visualisation is a technique used by many athletes to improve their confidence and their performance. It can be extremely beneficial to officials as well. An imagery session should not last more than 10 to 15 minutes. First, relax and empty your head. Then create images in your mind: images of yourself getting onto the floor, covering a particular sequence of play, being in a great position and making a good call, dealing with crowd noise or with a complaining player or coach. When you create these images, get all your senses involved, vision, hearing, smell, and touch.

Make the vision as completely real as possible. See yourself handling everything perfectly in each of the situations you create.

## ON-SITE PREPARATION

There are also steps you can take to enhance your concentration immediately before your game.

Start with a good pre-game conference with your partner(s). While you may not discuss anything that you don't already know, the pre-game is a great opportunity to get your mind focused on the task to be accomplished.

Bring your level of activation to the proper level. You cannot go onto the floor apathetically or overly excited.

During the game, use cue words such as "Move", "Relax", "Spot the defence", and "Find the spaces".

When a foul is called, spot the shooter even if you know that there won't be free throws. Repeat his/her number five times in your head.

You won't be taken by surprise when the time comes to put the right shooter at the line.

At the beginning of a time out, as you are moving to your spot to wait for play to resume, rehearse what's coming next in your head: "Red ball on the sideline", or "2 free throws for 12 white".

Use the time out to take a couple of deep breaths, relax and check your focus. Deal with the present. If you make a bad call, accept it and go on.

Don't dwell on self-criticism. Don't worry about what may happen, be ready to handle everything calmly. Control your emotions.

Recognise that a coach, player or even a spectator is making you angry, and calm down. Don't remain in a state of mind, which may impair or bias your judgement. In order words, only concentrate on the information that will help you make the best possible decisions.

To be successful, an official has to control everything that can be controlled, especially him/herself.

Perfect knowledge of the rules and proper mechanics, especially in covering the floor and being in a position where all the action can be seen, should become so engrained that only minimal voluntary or conscious attention is required. They ought to be automatic.

They no longer require concentration. When perfectly learned, they become a source of self-confidence. Then the official can focus on evaluating the players' actions and decide to call or to let go.

Concentration is a great asset. It is not an innate skill.

It requires work. Investing a few minutes on a regular basis in developing your mental skills is a must, if you aspire at becoming a top official.

## SELF-HELP TEST - CONCENTRATION SKILLS

The following questions refer to your ability to concentrate while officiating.

There are no right or wrong answers. Just write the number that best describes you for each statement.

1 = Almost never      2 = Rarely      3 = Sometimes  
4 = Frequently      5 = Almost always

- ▼ 1. If I blow a call, I have difficulty putting it out of my mind.
- ▼ 2. When I officiate, I am good at quickly analyzing what's happening in the game.

- ▼ 3. It is easy for me to keep irrelevant thoughts from entering my mind when I am officiating.
- ▼ 4. I am good at blocking out the noise of spectators and focusing on the action.
- ▼ 5. While officiating, I get confused when many things happen quickly.
- ▼ 6. When I officiate, I find myself distracted by my own thoughts.
- ▼ 7. I am good at analysing what I need to focus on during an event.
- ▼ 8. When officiating, I focus on the moment and don't think about what has happened or might happen.
- ▼ 9. I can maintain my concentration, even during hassles with coaches and players.
- ▼ 10. I am good at analysing what I need to do before starting an officiating assignment.
- ▼ 11. When officiating, I can focus on my assignment and forget all my other problems.
- ▼ 12. When officiating, I can keep my concentration, even when I get anxious.
- ▼ 13. When officiating, I can keep my concentration even my fellow official is doing a poor job.
- ▼ 14. When officiating, I have no trouble staying focused on the action during the entire event.
- ▼ 15. After a break in the action, I have trouble regaining my concentration.

## SCORING GUIDELINES

For all items except 1, 5, 6, and 15, score 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 according to the number you wrote.

For items 1, 5, 6, and 15, reverse the score you wrote:

1 = 5      2 = 4      3 = 3      4 = 2      5 = 1

Add all scores.

The highest score is 75 and the lowest 15.

Rating chart:

75 - 70	Zeroed in
69 - 60	Need some target practice
59 - 50	Must find the target
49 - 40	In the twilight zone
40 - below	Hello!!!

Examine the items where you scored low.

They will give you indications about the areas where you need improvement.