


FIBA

We Are Basketball



by Pat Resenow

THREE-PERSON OFFICIATING

Pat Resenow has refereed high school and college in the United States for more than 25 years. He has also been a FIBA referee for 20 years.

In the United States we have a saying that "Two is company-three is a crowd." Even though that saying is about romance and couples, there are some people who feel the same way about basketball referees. However, now that FIBA requires three referees in the highest level games (and allows three in others) more and more basketball referees around the world will need to get used to working with not one, but two partners.

Of course, in the United States we have been using three referees in many games for years. We use three referees for all of our high level competitions. Almost all Junior games have three referees. The same is true of many Cadet games. We are lucky to have enough qualified men and women to fill three referee positions for each game and enough fan support to pay them.

I have been a FIBA official since 1984. I recently refereed an international tournament with partners from around the world. It involved high level men's play and our officials were either Division I national or FIBA referees. However, since the tournament was not technically an "official FIBA" competition, the organizers had the option of using three referees on some games. Only three of us had any experience in three-referee



games. Most of the others were reluctant to try adding a referee, and expressed some reservations about what it would do to the games.

The organizers decided that we would use two referees for the pool play and then switch to three referees for second round and medal play. We had a few meetings to review the FIBA three-referee mechanics and floor coverage. Then we plunged into the second round games with three referees on each. I am sure an experienced FIBA referee, who is familiar with FIBA three-referee mechanics, would have noticed an occasional error in rotation or switching. However, I thought the results were remarkable. The organizers were delighted with the quality of the officiating and we had no major problems.

By the end of the tournament, even the most reluctant referees were believers and fully converted to the positive aspects of having three officials. They found out that some of the things they thought about the three-referee system were not true. For example:

1. Good physical condition is not as important in a three-referee crew. Obviously, the total distance a referee may have to run during a game might be a bit less with three referees. However, referees still have to be quick enough to get to the right spot. With a three-referee crew, there is almost no excuse for the lead referee to be beaten on a fast break by any player. Finally, an out of shape or overweight referee loses respect whether he or she is on a three or two man crew. So yes, it's just as important to be in shape in a three-referee system.

2. Having a third referee will result in more fouls and violations. Actually, our history here in the United States is that three-referee crews don't really call more fouls. In fact, in the international tournament when we switched from two to three referees, we had no increase in the number of fouls or violations. What happens is that after one or two whistles, the players learn very quickly that there is a third set of eyes watching them. They stop the rough off-ball play and we have a cleaner, better game. So, three referees call about the same number of fouls as

two, but there is less contact.

3. The three-referee mechanics are complicated. That is simply not the case. I admit that in our "experiment" we did not do everything perfectly according to the FIBA book. We did take a very few shortcuts to save time and keep it simple. Nevertheless, all of our officials had essentially learned the basic FIBA three-ref-



eree mechanics by their second or third game. By the end of the tournament it was automatic for most of them. We did have a very experienced group of referees and that helped. But the important point is that good two-man referees can easily master the three-referee mechanics.

The single biggest problem I've seen in referees going from two-man to three-referee crews is that they worry more about mechanics and coverage than calling the game! We've had young officials miss obvious calls because they were worried

about going to the "right" spot. There is nothing worse than having three whistles remain silent after a violent foul in the lane, because the referees were afraid that they might be out of their area. Again, we didn't have that problem in our tournament, because even though they were new to the three-referee system, we had excellent and experienced referees.

4. It's harder/easier to work in a three-referee system. Well, that's both true and false. In some ways, it is easier. To begin with, each referee has 17% less floor to watch. In a three-referee crew, for instance, we are a lot less likely to miss the original foul and only see the retaliation. In a two-man crew, there may be some sometimes when both referees are straight-lined and neither is able to referee the defense. With a third referee that should almost never happen, since the mechanics are designed to give at least one referee a perpendicular view of each play. That means less guessing and an easier game to call.

On the other hand, instead of having two people who must work as a team and find a consistent approach to the game, you have three. That makes it harder. That third personality must be able to fit in. However, having a third personality can be a plus. It can give the referee team one more way to deal with coaches and players. So yes, it is both harder and easier to work in a three-referee game.

In many parts of the world it may take a while for basketball to develop to a level that will support the use of three referees in most, or even many, games. However, if our experience in the United States is any example, that time will come sooner than you may think! We have another saying in the United States: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." That's not true, either. I know the outstanding international referees from our tournament overcame their doubts and enjoyed working in the three-referee system.

Good referees, who become part of a three-referee crew, will do a fine job just as they have done in two-man crews, and the game will be better for it.