



THE SEARCH FOR ETERNAL TRUTH ON THE COURT

by Laszlo Nemeth

Laszlo Nemeth has been coaching since 1975. He coached in Hungary, Kuwait, Iceland, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia at Division I level, winning four titles. He also coached the National Teams of Kuwait and Iceland, and then was head coach of the English national team for ten years. He was also selected Coach of the Year twice in Iceland.

A forced marriage for a limited period? Irreparable differences forever? Meaningless debate about the game that we passionately love? It was about 20 years ago during a tournament in Ipoh, Malaysia, that I attended an international referee clinic. Until that day I had no special interest about what the whistle masters thought of the game. When I left the lecture hall after the first day, I had mixed feelings. I was stunned by the fact that certain issues overlooked by coaches were vital to officials while others that coaches felt to be crucial were not even mentioned. Furthermore, approaches to many problems were entirely different when viewed by referees and coaches.

As the game progressed, officiating progressed too, despite the fact that some of my fellow coaches still believe that the officials lag behind. Well, some individuals may lag behind but overall a very organized collective effort is being taken to update the knowledge and educate the referees, and officials further.

Ever since that day, I've tried to attend a referee clinic at least every two years to learn more about the latest trends in officiating. I make it a point to consult and talk with international referees. It was 30 years ago when

I got my senior coaching diploma that I had to pass the basic referee exam to receive my coaching certificate. Looking back, I do not regret taking the time to study the rules and officiating principles.

Here is the first hand grenade that referees throw at the coaches when the argument becomes heated during a game. "Sit down. You do not know the written rules." To be honest and frank, we often do not know them word-by-word.

The quite straightforward answer from a coach is that knowing the rules does not necessarily mean knowledge and a feel for the game. Knowledge can be developed but feel is similar to "height" in coaching terms. You just can not teach height. And it is almost impossible to teach the feel of the game. The coaching community highly respects and likes officials who have a feel for the game rather than referees with a scholastic, almost perfect knowledge of the rule book.

I have almost 30 years of full time professional coaching behind me. At the same time, I have a lot of officiating practice as well. Don't forget that coaches must officiate during scrimmages almost on a daily basis, and often become a subject of abuse from their own players because of various calls. Many times, I cannot take the replies from the players after I make a call and I have told players to make their own calls during the scrimmage. While this works in a three-on-three half court game, the result is chaos and endless abuse when the game is played out on a full court.

The next step I took was assigning one of the players to officiate. The result was similar. However, this method helps build some



respect and understanding amongst the players towards the referees. Following several days of these "trials," the whistle always returned to the coach. This indicates that a professional coach officiates as many accumulated minutes, if not more, than a top referee. Let's acknowledge that a professional coach has the feeling for the game, but his knowledge of the written rulebook is surely inferior to an international FIBA referee.

The game has become more physical, players are more athletic, and basketball has become a much more aggressive sport than it ever was before. We coaches rate aggressive athletes, bangers, and extremely competitive players very highly. The game on and off the court is regulated by the rules, including current attempts to limit the use of drugs in sport. The coach is the person expected to prepare the team to win, to



overcome every obstacle at almost any costs. So what are the tactics really? Apart from the offensive and defensive strategy and game plan, it is pushing the team to act at the very edge of the rules written in the book and supervised by the referee on court during the game.

We follow you ref, we know your officiating philosophy, and it is best for us if you have one. Coaches even exchange points about the on-court performance of the referees. We note who calls three-second violations and who rarely does. We notice who doesn't like to make offensive charging calls, and who is physically fit and does not trail behind in the final quarter of the game. The outcome of the game is often decided in the last few seconds. Promotion and relegation can depend on one basket. A coach's job is always on the line. Therefore, it is important to know who is

going to officiate a game. Who it may be as important as scouting your future opponent. Here are the common areas where disagreements often arise between coach and referee.

FOUL

In a contact sport like basketball, we all want to avoid having our sport taking the route of handball, but at the same time we encourage and teach physical contact, regardless of our opponent having the ball or not. We often use contact throughout the game as a means of wearing down the other team or star players. We know that it is impossible to call all such contacts as violations, but at the same time-on the receiving end-we expect to get as many calls as possible. The call is in the hands of the referee, but even when we attack, a no call might help

the offensive team and the flow of the game, where the foul does not significantly affect play. The hottest topic is the offensive foul or charge. It is almost impossible to expect the defenders to stay motionless while the offensive player drives into the "wall." The decision is the referee's. It is crucial that he be consistent since we coaches spend a great deal of time teaching positioning in defense. To achieve an offensive foul is one of the most valuable defensive acts because the ball returns to us-a turnover for our opponent-and we register a personal foul, too.

TRAVELLING

A huge number of minor travel violations happen during a game that should not be called, except when a team gains a huge advantage as a result of the violations. If the player is far from the basket and there

is no defensive pressure at all, minor travel violations - and I emphasize minor-should not be called. If the player commits a travelling violation as a result of physical contact and the foul is a no call, the travelling should be a no call too, if he does not gain advantage.

ARGUMENTS WITH THE TABLE OVER TIMEKEEPING AND THE SCOREBOARD

This is an explosive situation and it happens very often. The errors of the table officials could hurt a team, and the coach feels very strongly that it is his duty to make this point. The coaches box limits movement, but if one coach goes to the table, the other feels he must be there as well to ensure a deal is not done "behind his back." Seconds could decide games and jobs. Who is the coach who has not heard, read about, or seen the Munich Olympic final in 1972? Very few, I guess. This is a classic case in basketball. It is still an ongoing debate and many more Munich-like fiascos at the end of a game have happened since. When an extra three seconds are awarded it can mean a lot for a team. Both coaches should be informed if the clock is adjusted- or if no-and what is the reason behind it. If the scoreboard is wrong, despite the fact that it is not the official source, the team may be misled. This may have disastrous consequences during the final moments.

TECHNICAL FOULS

The "T" always raises a few eyebrows. If it follows a clear warning, there is not much to contest. If it comes "out of the blue," the referee should give a brief and clear reason, especially if the call is against a player on the court or on the bench. The coach should know the reason so he can take appropriate action. The "T" against a coach is difficult to accept by a coach and usually both parties remember it for a long time. However, I talked to a colleague of mine who stated that he sometimes deliberately provokes a "T," hoping that this will shake up his team. Hmm... Quite an interesting approach.

WAYS OF COMMUNICATION, SUBSTITUTIONS, TIME OUTS

The coach often feels he has to communicate with the officials to clarify certain situations. Coaches are less knowledgeable of the rulebook and will often need clarification of a call. I feel strongly that a coach is entitled to an answer if the question is addressed in a proper manner. Many of my fellow coaches use the time outs to argue with officials rather than talk to their team. I assure all referees that this is not taught in coaching courses. The simple reason for

this is that many of us feel that this is the only moment when he/she can address the refs.

CALLS AND NO-CALL SITUATIONS

I mentioned this earlier and it is related to the "feel" of the game. Many coaches accuse the referees that because they've never played the game themselves at a high level, they have no feeling for the game and merely learned how to apply the rules from the book. I must admit that this statement is partially true, although largely incorrect. If a referee wants to be a top FIBA official, he has to start to climb the ladder very early on. It means regular weekends and travelling for many years to officiate in low level games. The current system does not really support former star players to become top officials. On the other hand, they are not keen at all to be referees and we may look at this fact as an acknowledgement of how hard it is to officiate. The commercial interest of the game is that it should flow and be exciting. Our international governing body regularly modifies the rules to serve this purpose. The officiating philosophy should accommodate this desire because there is huge competition for audiences, real and digital alike. Properly distinguishing between call and no-call situations could make a difference between an excellent and an exceptional referee. The commercial interest has increased the number of games that are played and some of these matches do not always reach the desired standards. Due to a variety of reasons, huge score differences might appear at the early stage of the game. It is not the referee's duty to make these games exciting. If he does, his rating will drop.

NEUTRALITY

"Is this referee neutral?". This is often put up as a question, and I dare to say-whether my fellow coaches like it or not-in 95 percent of the cases this is an unfair accusation, one that is often motivated by emotions, particularly from the losing side. Since we are all human, emotions often play a part in our judgements. If two people have a history with each other, then a tough final together will mean a lot of prejudice before the tip off.

The International and National Governing Bodies put a great deal of time and effort into controlling and reporting on the performances of its officials. Weaker performances are often related to factors other than simply neutrality. But one poor referee performance could put him in a box, where the "He hates us" sentences appear. So what can we do to make this relationship better and more workable?

A. JOINT PRE-SEASON COACH AND REFEREE CONFERENCES

I have witnessed some of these attempts and the results were mixed. Unfortunately, on many occasions, my fellow coaches were using this as "moaning sessions" to complain about calls against their team the previous season. This is not right. A pre-season conference should present and inform attendees about the actual changes in the rules, and evaluate the past season from the referees' point of view. Discussion should focus on the season ahead, and clear guidelines not defined in the rulebook should be reviewed. These should be the matter of debate.

B. CONTEST OR CHALLENGE REFEREE'S CONDUCT

Doing this on the court during a game is counterproductive and I think the majority of coaches agree with this. However, we coaches strongly believe that we must broadcast a signal that we follow and watch the referee's acts during the game.

The digital age, with CDs, e-mail, and short video files, allows us a chance to contest or challenge the work of a referee. We should ask for clarifications. Objective approaches should have a proper positive well-thought out response. It is important that the response comes within a limited period and the "steam" should not be allowed to build up between coach and referee.

I must assure the officials that we coaches know that they talk and rate us based on our on-court conduct and personal conversations (if any). We coaches do the same and pass information to each other about individual refs. Furthermore, we instruct players to focus on the game rather than the referee. We strongly believe that if a player pays too much attention to officiating, his on court performance declines. I always tell the player this short tale: The ref calls an offensive foul against you. Your response is to ask if his parents ever got married. During my 30 years of coaching I have not met a ref, who said, "My parents never got married. You are right. The call is withdrawn, the ball is yours, and your opponent gets a "T."

C. EDUCATION AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

I strongly feel that referees should attend a coaching clinic or a coach education course. This will help improve their performance on the court. On the other hand, coaches should attend a referee clinic. This could improve their on-court game conduct. As a final word to everybody: There is no game without a basketball and no game without a referee.