



by Alberto Garcia

COMMENTS ON UNSPORTSMANLIKE FOUL

Alberto Garcia is a former FIBA international referee and FIBA Referee Instructor. He is now Sub-Secretary General of FIBA Americas.

For a number of years, the game of basketball has recognized various problems regarding the tactics of coaches, the actions of players, and the different guidelines used by the referees in the application of the concept of the unsportsmanlike foul. For this reason, the World Technical Commission has seen the need to make changes to this rule and to the interpretational guidelines that underline the spirit of fair play. Through FIBA's International Instructors, these changes were communicated to National Instructors and to the referees of the world.

An example of this philosophy of play is the limiting of the number of unsportsmanlike fouls that players may commit in a game. In doing so, the Technical Commission was attempting to develop a rule that would eliminate violent actions and rough play and to distinguish between a normal personal foul and an unsportsmanlike foul. This was also based on the principle that basketball is a non-contact sport and that the game requires the least number of interruptions possible to maintain its beauty, intensity, and fundamentals without any type of physical violence.

The topic of these comments, however, is not the specific wording of Article 36. The wording leaves one with little doubt as to its real objectives. Instead, it is about the need for the rule to be properly communicated by the instructors and interpreted by referees. Even more important is that it be uniformly applied in game situations. Because it is a concept where the guidelines used by the referees are of fundamental importance if the rule is to be applied properly and consistently, FIBA attempted, through the instructors of the world, to make clear what is the differ-



ence between a normal personal foul and an unsportsmanlike foul. Despite this, the situation remains unresolved and problems of unsportsmanlike tactics during the last few minutes of a game continue. In special moments of the game with a close score and a situation of high tension felt by the players, the referees might feel pressured in some way to call fouls that could influence the final result of the game. However, the main problem is not so much what is happening at the end of a game, but rather what has happened during the game up to that point. Many referees do not apply the unsportsmanlike foul correctly when situations arise in the first half, and this is primarily where the problem lies.

Previously, when what is now an "unsportsmanlike" foul was called an "intentional" foul, by its own name it brought different interpretations and consequently different criteria to apply, creating confusion for everybody, including spectators. It should be understood that many fouls are committed intentionally by using different tactics or in strategic situations with the intention of trying to win the game, causing with it the stopping of the game clock, and the sending of a player to the free-throw line instead of permitting possible shots for two- or three-point field goals. Such fouls can be intentional, but not necessarily unsportsmanlike.

What this comparison really shows is that the simple commission of a foul is not the problem; the problem is with the tactics used by coaches and players, tactics not interpreted in the proper context by the referees based on the spirit of the game as applied to the official rules.

Article 36.1.4 clearly states the principal considerations for judging an unsportsmanlike foul. These are:

1. If a player makes **NO** effort to **PLAY THE BALL** and contact occurs, it is an unsportsmanlike foul.
2. If a player, in an effort to play the ball, causes **EXCESSIVE CONTACT** (hard foul), then the contact shall be judged to be unsportsmanlike.
3. If a play that is not normal to basketball causes a player to establish contact with an opponent, it is an unsportsmanlike foul.

Based on what is written in the rule and its respective interpretation, it should be perfectly clear when what could have been a normal foul ceases to be "normal"





and becomes "unsportsmanlike" and must be sanctioned as such.

There are common examples that the referee instructors use in relation to the above-mentioned principles and which can be used to clarify the three statements made above.

1. Each time a player is not trying to play the ball and makes contact with an opponent, this must be considered an unsportsmanlike foul and be sanctioned immediately, especially in the last seconds of a game and when the foul is NOT a normal foul.
2. Players know that an attempt to block a shot or prevent a move to the basket must not involve contact with an opponent; if contact does occur, a normal personal foul will result. If, however, the player uses excessively rough contact, this must be taken into consideration and an unsportsmanlike foul be charged immediately.
3. When we talk about "normal play" in basketball, we have to know the rules and, in addition, the spirit of the rules. Moreover, we also have to understand the game itself. We must understand that grasping a player's shirt can be a normal personal foul or can be unsportsmanlike when, for example, there is a large space between the two opponents. There are other examples as well: during a throw-in, an in-bounds player pushes an opponent in order to make a space to receive the ball; during post play, the defensive or offensive player uses his knee to prevent the opponent from maintaining his position or from moving to another place on the floor.

These comments will hopefully serve to help all involved in basketball—especially referees—understand the importance they have in the dynamics and purity of the game. It is the responsibility of the referees and, through them, the players to understand and accept the criteria for the unsportsmanlike foul and apply the rule correctly and consistently. Good referees "never fear to sanction an unsportsmanlike foul; evaluate the action and do not think about the penalty."

A final personal thought: It is preferable to be mistaken in sanctioning a normal personal foul as an unsportsmanlike foul rather than mistaken by sanctioning an unsportsmanlike foul as a normal personal foul.