



by Valentin Lazarov

PSYCHOLOGY OF OFFICIATING

FIBA referee from 1958 to 1982 and an Honorary FIBA referee in 1976, Valentin Lazarov became FIBA Commissioner in 1983. A member of the FIBA Technical Committee since 1976, Lazarov received the prestigious Radomir Shaper Award, which is given for outstanding contribution to basketball rules and the game of basketball.

A. INTRODUCTION

The necessity for peaceful coexistence The basis of the spectacular and attractive game called basketball is the quadrangle, which is comprised of players-coaches-fans-officials. The relationships between these four basic factors are of a vital importance for the smooth running of the game. This relationship should be based on tolerance and reciprocal respect, with each adhering to the universal slogan: "Nothing is more important than the basketball game!" It is almost impossible to successfully officiate without a minimum of collaboration with coaches and players, even for top game officials.

B. REASONS FOR DIFFICULTIES IN THE RELATIONSHIP

▼ The game basketball that is now played at the highest levels has become more dynamic, more athletic, and more virile than ever before. The pressing defenses, the traps, and the screens have become much more aggressive. Players and coaches are constantly in a state of physiological and psychological stress, sometimes in a state of dis-stress.

▼ The influence of the financial factor has also increased tremendously. The

sponsors which invests a great amount of money, and the clubs, which are paying enormous salaries to coaches and players, expect and request positive results. It's mainly for this reason that the players give their best on the court, pushing themselves in an effort to reach their physical limits. Along with the coaches, they are overexcited and hyper-strained, similar in many ways to mobile dynamite loads. Any supposedly wrong decision on the part of an official can lead to an explosion and provoke a serious conflict situation.

▼ On the other hand, the easiest way for coaches and managers to present plausible excuses for the poor play of their teams is to simulate activity in front of their sponsors and fans, attacking referee's calls at any possible occasion.

C. THE NECESSITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ERUDITION

From all above-mentioned points stems the necessity of sound psychological knowledge by the model referee. In a field where only endowed-by-nature officials

can succeed, the study of general behavior, the humane approach, the voice, movements, posture, and gaze are all part of the psychological erudition.

The referees must try to "walk in the shoes" of players and coaches in order to better understand their psychological status and the right way to influence it.

The referee is, above all, an educator and pedagogue, as supposed to a merciless combination of judge, jury, and executioner. He shall act as a "hand of steel in a velvet glove" and his whistle shall be a tool, not a weapon.

You must never forget that almost without exception, tired and nervous players and coaches need to be calmed down or warned, rather than severely penalized.



A friendly smile, a soft gesture applied at the right moment often proves much more effective than technical and disqualifying fouls.

A warm, calm, and friendly attitude is disarming and relaxing. A belligerent and overly intense attitude automatically triggers animosity.

It is a patent fact that some referees are more sought after and respected than others and this surely is a crucial psychological victory for an official. Once you are accepted and trusted by players and coaches, they easily forgive some dubious calls.

Such officials have the talent to remain "dry under the rain." Even during closely contested, nerve-wracking games, they are able to successfully avoid or solve all the problems in a way that keeps everyone happy. They are never blamed.

D. POINTS OF EMPHASIS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR YOUNG OFFICIALS

- ▼ In almost every game you will have some situations that may lead to conflicts. You must try either to avoid them or approach and solve them. Solving problems is nothing but dealing with people.
- ▼ Always remain humane and approachable. You can manifest this in the way you:
 - Signalize a foul
 - Request from a player to tuck his shirt in his shorts
 - Warn a player
- ▼ Use preventative officiating whenever possible. Thus, you give a chance to the player or coach. If they do not want to use it, all the consequences are at their risk. Examples:
 - Two opponents pushing each other
 - Post player with his rear foot on the line of the restricted area
 - Opponent with hands over the sideline hindering a throw-in
- ▼ Never look for a confrontation with a player or a coach only to prove that you are the "King" of the court. A plausible explanation of such attitude is that such referees are most likely suppressed at home by their wives and in their office by their bosses and the only place for a demonstration of power remains the basketball court.
- ▼ Do not try to attract the attention of all the spectators at the game because of your own personality. You are not a movie star and people are not coming

to the arena to admire your calls and your performance. The good official is a strong and silent person who dominates the play, yet is very little noticed out on the court. The best compliment for an official can receive comes after a tough, tight game, when people are talking: "What a spectacular and interesting game we have just witnessed. But my God, who were the referees?"

- ▼ Never charge or follow a player or a coach immediately after some nervous outburst. Examples: Nervous outburst followed immediately by an excuse, verbally or by gestures. After a decisive call, you see with your peripheral vision that a player or coach is coming in your direction with the obvious intent of an emotional protest. Do not wait for him to arrive. Instead, try to avoid a direct collision by moving away and resuming the game as fast as possible!
- ▼ Officials can never allow themselves to become angry, no matter what the provocation or pressure. Avoid emotional outbursts. Never blow your top, shout, point with a finger, or use violent gestures. Always keep your temper. A decision or action taken in anger is never sound. Be a fireman and not a fire maker! Everyone in the arena must always see you in total control, even when coaches, players, fans and everything around you appears to be in total chaos. You cannot control the game if you cannot control yourself. Control requires composure, concentration, and confidence. Successful officiating demands that officials eliminate all game irritants.
- ▼ Never enter in physical contact with a player except to help him get up from the floor.
- ▼ Avoid discussions with players and coaches. If necessary, keep the communication short and never threaten the person's ego. Example: After contradictory double whistling of the two officials, do not allow "conferences" on the court surrounded by players and coaches. Resume the game as fast as possible!
- ▼ Do not forget that a technical foul creates tension in the diplomatic relationship between referee - players and a disqualifying foul means rupture of this relationship and declaration of war. Advice: When you have almost decid-

ed to disqualify a player or a coach, do not do it immediately but count mentally to five and only then take the final signalization.

- ▼ Be merciless and unhesitating in assessing penalties for insolent gestures or insolent words that you see or hear. At the same time, try to ignore comments made behind your back, coming either from the crowd or from a team bench. For the good of the game, forget them instantly. "Hear only things you have to hear and be deaf to everything else!"
- ▼ Do not try to control the crowd and never engage in arguments with fans. Avoid banishing loud fans from the arena unless their behavior does not allow normal game flow. Never make irritating or belligerent gestures to the crowd.
- ▼ Always try to wisely use your sense of humor (if you have any!) and at the right moment. Humor dissipates nervous tension and animosity.
- ▼ Pick out the key members of the team and use them to your advantage. Do not alienate them. Normally, the players follow blindly the behavior of their coach.
- ▼ Remember: The beginning of the game is very important for creating the atmosphere in which you will officiate the whole game. You must clearly show what you will allow and will not permit. Players and coaches will adapt their behavior to your requirements. Very often an early technical foul may eliminate the need for more technical fouls later.
- ▼ When necessary, use the power given to you by the Rules to influence more or less the tempo of the game in some specific moments. Example: If things are going too fast in a nervous atmosphere and there is a danger of losing control, slow down the tempo and change the ambiance by handing the ball for a throw-in a bit slower; or else take a couple of seconds more to administer free throws. The opposite can also occur, where you can use similar situations to speed up the tempo and resume the game as fast as possible after some questionable call created a complicated situation.
- ▼ If you feel you have made a poor call, immediately forget about your mistake

or omission. Do not blame yourself but move on as fast as possible. Concentrate only on your next call. Think positively about the future and forget the past. You are as good a referee as your last call. Some officials often aggravate relatively innocent emotional actions of coaches and players by not being able to interpret whether they are angry because of a mistake they made, or their protest is addressed against the decision of the referee. Example: A player is alone and driving to the basket when the ball slips from his hands and he commits a violation. After the call, he kicks the ball and immediately after that makes an obscene gesture. Moderate emotional outbursts such as: "This was not a foul" or "He fouled me and you did not call it" should normally be tolerated, especially if they are not systematic.

- ▼ There are officials who feel that they have made a very poor call immediately after their whistle. As a referee in similar situations, you are immediately faced with the dilemma: To assert your authority or correct your call. To be or not to be! This problem cannot be solved with a simple answer. Sometimes it is possible and even strongly recommended to correct your mistake immediately after the call. You can be sure this will not undermine your authority, especially if it is an exception and not a systematic practice. Example: A signal for an obviously wrong direction in an out-of-bounds situation. In other cases, an eventual attempt for correction of the refereeing decision could lead to critical consequences and therefore should be avoided. Example: You cannot correct a call for a player's fifth foul or, in general, one even slightly dubious call in a decisive moment of the game.
- ▼ When you are in doubt about the accuracy of your call, be more tolerant of eventual protests and try to avoid sinking deeper, intensifying your mistake by handing out technical or disqualifying fouls. "In case of fire throw water and not petrol!" After similar situations, try to avoid staying in the vicinity of the team bench of the team who was "disadvantaged" by your call.
- ▼ After an obviously poor call in favor of one of the teams or after a severe, but correct sanction/disqualification/, do not go for compensations in favor of the opponent's team.

- ▼ Keep all personalities out of your work. If a coach has flagrantly insulted you and was disqualified or if a player had argument with you, do not look for revenge and do not have a special attitude towards them in future games. You must be able to forgive and forget. Every game is a new game!
- ▼ Never fraternize with players or coaches from one team before the game, during the game, or after the game. Such actions psychologically influence opponents and fans, even if you are totally objective in your officiating.
- ▼ Avoid as much as possible making calls from long distance. They are not accepted, even if they are correct.
- ▼ In case of systematic group protests after each of your calls, do not try to argue with the players or sanction some of them. Immediately contact the coach and warn him that you will declare a loss by forfeit if this unwanted theater continues. You can be sure that he will react and efficiently deal with the players.
- ▼ Your way of signaling an infraction can psychologically influence the reactions of coaches and players. Nowadays, you are strongly advised to blow your whistle with firmness and confidence. The whistle will produce a single, sharp blast and not a feeble canary sound that automatically creates doubts about the accuracy of your call. A humanistic official shall maintain calm and relaxing signaling, especially during tense and emotional periods of the game. Make sure all your signals are clean and definite. Do not overact.
- ▼ A gaze of three to four seconds can also be used as a very effective warning threat signal, particularly when players dispute refereeing decisions or coaches protest from the team bench areas. A gaze can also be used sometimes by a player or coach as kind of silent protest against your last call. Never forget that words of anger may eventually be penalized, but not a gaze even if it is murderous.
- ▼ Pay attention to your posture because it indicates your attitude to others. Posture also shows how tense or relaxed a person is. Your posture may however enable an experienced play-

er or coach to "size up" your ability to handle tense situations and determine whether you can be influenced in critical periods by using systematic group protests or other unfair tricks or tactics.

- ▼ Try to smile-not ironically-even in tense and nervous situations. Thus, you will show to everyone that you enjoy officiating even in critical moments because you love basketball. The tense, gloomy, and strained face of some officials gets on the nerves of players, coaches, and fans.
- ▼ Here are a few words addressed mostly to young FIBA officials in regard to the necessity of self-confidence. Once again, I will present two extreme situations: Some officials are too shy, too soft, and too pessimistic about their ability to officiate. Each second during the game, they tremble and expect to have some problems or meet critical situations. On the other hand, there are the officials who have the confidence that they are the best referees in the world and it is quite impossible for them to commit a mistake. They are haughty, admire each of their calls, even in the case of poor ones. In a word, they are narcissistic. For such referees, I will quote an ancient formula that states: "In general, the real value of a professional could be represented by a fraction whose numerator is what the others think about him and the denominator - what he thinks about himself." The correct path to follow is the golden mean between those two extremes: Therefore, be confident and optimistic, trust your abilities, but try to avoid the syndrome of self-admiration. Never forget that you are a human being and not a robot. It is normal for you to sometimes make a mistake. Your aim should be to try to achieve perfection in order to make such mistakes a rare exception that will have no influence on the outcome of the game.

FINAL CONCLUSION

I always remember what my friend and teacher, the late FIBA President Robert Busnel, used to say: "I have many times seen a referee leave the court at the end of a closely contested game, congratulated by coaches and players. His skill in applying psychological tricks reached such a height that it hid his technical imperfections on the court."