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PERSPECTIVE OF A ROOKIE OFFICIAL - Mr. Justin Thomas Rocchi

Submitted by Reg Caulfield, Supervisor of Nova Scotia

This article gives the perspective of a rookie official on the AUS/ACAA panel in Nova Scotia who, like most of the readers of this publication, loves refereeing basketball and is trying to be the best he can be. Justin was awarded the gold medal game at the U15 Men's National Championships at last summer's tournament in Halifax. The feedback and evaluations received from National Evaluators, Jamey Jennings and Seward Neilsen, will be valuable in his progression as an official. During a fall clinic offered to new High Performance Officials in Halifax, Justin hosted a discussion with the group on his personal experience when he was in the same position. As a result, we decided other young officials would benefit from hearing Justin's story and decided to have a Q&A with him. Here is his story.

What is your work situation and how does it allow basketball to be a part of it?

I'm currently working for IBM Canada as a SAP FICO and S/4 Simple Finance Consultant (basically, I configure the external reporting and internal controls for companies that use SAP as its ERP). At first glance, it may not seem like it has any commonalities with my officiating career. However, both of these jobs are client-facing, require a hefty amount of communication, and depend upon substantial input before a game (or presentation...). They both reward my 'technical obsession'. I'm originally from Hamilton, Ontario (the home of the Fox40 whistle [my plug for Ron Foxcroft]). I am currently living in Halifax, Nova Scotia where I also completed my Masters at Dalhousie University and have since decided to keep Halifax as my home base while working for IBM Canada.

My two clients are based out of Barrie, Ontario and Montreal, QC, so I've been flying back-and-forth on a weekly basis between the client site and Nova Scotia. It has given me an appreciation of how lucky I am to have a job that allows me to referee on most weekends. Jumping on the plane Thursday evening is always an exciting time as I know I'll be able to have a visceral escape from the long workday that is generally in front of my ThinkPad.

Why do you officiate basketball?

Friends, family and co-workers often ask me this question. Every time I receive an assignment, an exuberant feeling overcomes me and I can't think of doing anything else but officiating. I'm sure you have had that same feeling. Refereeing, for me, is an outlet to let my mind drift away from the number crunching and t-code punching that I do during the workday. I know it's impossible to referee a perfect game, but there is an innate, internal drive inside to be perfect. The end goal is to have a perfect game and also a perfect season. So, there is a relentless pursuit to make this a reality, whether it's watching a game tape, learning from mentors or receiving constructive criticism. Refereeing has taught me it's more than okay to make the unpopular decision. It's about managing your environment and, at times, to be brave and courageous to make that unpopular call or no-call.

What was your first reaction when you started officiating in Nova Scotia?

When I started officiating in Nova Scotia, I realized I was in a hotbed of basketball. Expectations were high and officials were always competing for the best game in town. It was a very competitive environment where your work was performance-based and you were responsible for your personal development. I soon learned that if I wanted to achieve my goals, I would have to become very focused, dedicated and professional on and off the floor. A skill definitely needed was strong communication to deal with players and coaches. I loved the atmosphere, the energy of the crowd and the noise. I knew I wanted to be part of the highest level.



How difficult was it to adjust to the various levels of basketball?

It's always a challenge to be in an environment that is outside of your comfort zone, whether it's a job, refereeing or a social setting. It's important to remember that all officials have been in your position and you can reach out for support and guidance. There are a number of incredibly talented officials across Canada, who have untapped knowledge and would welcome the opportunity to guide or mentor a rookie official. The NSBO Executive – Roger Caulfield, Reginald Caulfield, Chris Ross and Reg Jewkes, has been very supportive of my advancement in Nova Scotia. They have offered me every possible developmental opportunity and provided me with an attainable personal development plan. In order to grow as a referee, you have to leave your comfort zone. Officiating challenging games is essential in order to advance to the next level. You need to work games that will

test you both mentally and physically. I worked over 50 games as a volunteer to practice 3-person rotations in order to be eligible to go to a High School Division 1 Boys tournament last year. I could not have reached that goal without the support and guidance of these senior officials.

What resources have you utilized in your development and how would ensure your continued growth?

Camps, camps, camps!!!!!! I've been to half a dozen camps over the past two years and am planning on attending another three next summer to expand my toolbox on and off the court. It's not only about the on-court experiences, but also about hanging out with senior officials, mentors and clinicians off the court. You can learn as much, if not more, while having an off-court discussion with an experienced official. I've been blessed to have a number of incredible mentors over the past few seasons which has accelerated my development tremendously. Matt Boyle, a fellow Nova Scotia official, has been a remarkable mentor over the past three years. People call him the «young officials' crusader». He offers me unbiased feedback, direction, and helps me to mentally prepare for game situations he has been in, so I don't make the same mistakes he made starting out. This kind of mentoring is priceless and exactly what every rookie official should have access to. The biggest factor about having someone like Matt is that he tells me like it is, whether it's correct or if I booted the call – no sugarcoating.

What attributes do you believe new officials should have before starting a career in basketball officiating?

There are a number of characteristics that I see as essential for success in the field of officiating. Those include, but are not limited to, physical fitness, advanced knowledge of the rules, good communication skills, openness to feedback as well as a willingness to work hard and put in the required time. Physical fitness is paramount to the success of the modern-day official. If fitness isn't a top priority, you're in the wrong serious hobby. Eating healthy, lifting weights and practicing some sort of breathing-exercise/stretching like yoga have to be integrated into your routine. How can one expect to referee high performance athletes if they're out of breath from physical exertion and have clouded mental capacity?

Now that you have reached the AUS level, how would you go about advancing to the next level (if interested)?

First and foremost, I am proud to be a part of the 2015 Nova Scotia AUS/ACAA panel. It's an awesome group of men and women officials in the pursuit of officiating the highest level of basketball in Nova Scotia. I've also been lucky enough to be a part of the NBL Canada panel in the Maritimes. My next challenge, at this level, is to be evaluated and recognized as one of the elite officials on the panel, deserving of a play-off assignment. I also hope to advance to national championships where I can be evaluated and acquire my Level IV Certification. Of course, my ultimate goal is to be invited to a CABO Identification Camp and eventually receive my FIBA card.



From the mouth of a rookie on the Nova Scotia AUS/ACAA panel, Justin T. Rocchi

OFFICIATING BY THE RULES

Submitted by Mike McPhee, Interpreter of Ontario

My article in this issue was prompted by the growing atmosphere that seems to suggest that we, as officials, should be more aware of the entertainment aspect of the game of basketball, than we should be of the need to have it played in a fair and equal situation. Comments like “You can’t make that ruling at that time of the game”, or “The fouls are 5-1”, or “We don’t call that at this level”, all constitute a disservice to the game at all levels. We, as officials, are not part of the entertainment that a game provides. We are charged with adjudicating a sporting competition. One good definition of our job is as follows: An official is the person of authority, in a variety of sports, who is responsible for presiding over the game from a neutral point of view and making on-the-fly decisions that enforce the rules of the sport, thereby maintaining the order of the game.

The most frequent “on-the-fly” decisions having to be made are violations and fouls. A violation is defined in Article 22.1 as “an infraction of the rules”. Violations address the procedures to be followed for handling or touching the ball, placement on the court (players or ball), as well as movement by players, the shot clock, and procedures around putting the ball in play, or shooting free throws. Fouls are defined in Article 32.1 as “an infraction of the rules concerning illegal personal contact with an opponent and/or unsportsmanlike behaviour.” The contact is further defined with the cylinder principle, the principle of verticality, guarding parameters, screening parameters and the “no-charge semi-circle”.

Many of the violations in the game are like stop signs in traffic. It says stop so drivers and pedestrians expect the vehicles facing that sign to stop. In a basketball game, the player either stepped on the boundary line or he didn’t, he either touched the ball or he didn’t, was touching the backcourt or he wasn’t, or the ball hit the ring or it didn’t. As officials, when we see those things, we have no trouble blowing the whistle and stopping play as expected. The participants accept the stoppage and move on, only becoming upset when the whistle isn’t blown. The rules clearly define what a player shall not do in Article 34.1.1 (hold, push, charge, impede by extending hand, arm, elbow, shoulder, leg etc. or by bending body abnormally outside cylinder). So it follows that if a player was to do those things, then 34.2 “a personal foul shall be charged against the offender”. The participants in the game expect that to be the result of the behaviours cited. They often react negatively when they perceive that the expected result doesn’t happen.

The CABO points of emphasis have continued to focus on travelling (setting up for a shot, starting and ending a dribble) and on contact (on the dribbler and post play) for the past number of years. Why must there be this repeated selective focus? I believe it’s because officials have bought into the idea that some things should be massaged, instead of enforced. Some of us are inspired more by the statements in Articles 47.1 - 47.3 than by the statements in the previous seven rules. There are even comments, made by some, indicating that there is a hierarchy of importance to the rules, and that some shouldn’t be enforced because they don’t matter or don’t affect the game (3 seconds for example). Let’s focus though on the items which are the “points of emphasis”.

The rules clearly state how and when a pivot foot is established, and when a dribble ends. Our mistakes occur when we get caught up in the idea that, for example, we can't call spin moves as travelling violations because they are "athletic moves", despite the fact that most players put the pivot foot back down before releasing the shot. The jargon of the "euro step" is used to excuse an extra movement of the pivot foot after the dribble has ended or begun, or we use other jargon like "gathering the ball" to create a definition that excuses illegal pivot foot movement as a dribbler begins a lay-up through a crowd. We also err when we make statements like: "You can't call that at this level." Travelling and ball handling decisions should be based on the "stop sign" parts of the definition in the rule. The pivot foot was either lifted before the dribble began, or it wasn't; the pivot foot returned to the floor again before the shot/pass was released, or it didn't; the ball either came to rest in the hand/hands, or it didn't. If it did then the whistle shall be blown.

The rules and consequences of contact are even harder for officials to adjudicate, if they get caught in the "massage the game" philosophy. A player can commit many violations and still play (if the coach wants him to), but committing 5 fouls means his game is over. So we start to worry about the success of players, and start to vary our rulings. If the idea prevails that the game should be an offensive one, then we begin to see repeated situations where the offensive player displaces or impedes the defender and no whistle is blown, or conversely a whistle is blown when a defender is charged with a foul, even if moving within the legal parameters when contact occurs. If the idea is that the game should be viewed as a defensive one, an increased use of hands, arms, and bumping on the perimeter begins. Or displacement and holding in the post (ruled as competing for position) and pushing in box-out situations are allowed to occur and build in intensity without being called. The contact jargon is even more confusing to an official who is developing his or her skill level. Statements like "Protect the shooter", "Keep the big/skilled/star players in the game" and "Avoid marginal calls" are all problematic because they are subjective in the mind of the speaker and cannot be readily defined by research or by the official who hears them. Granted, contact is not as cut and dried as the violation stop signs mentioned above. However, there are two critical aspects that we must always consider. The contact was either legal or illegal. If legal, then there isn't any reason to stop the game. If the contact was illegal, then we have to decide if it created consequences (advantage/disadvantage). If it had a consequence, then we stop the game. If it didn't, then it can be ruled incidental and we don't stop it. In all of these contact decisions, we must keep in mind the spirit and intent of the rules and the need to uphold the integrity of the game. It is our job, by definition.

ARE YOU REALLY HONEST WITH YOURSELF?

Submitted by Jamey Jennings, Supervisor of Newfoundland

The late, great Greek Philosopher Thales (624 BC-546 BC) is noted for his quote "The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself." If you have been self-reflective at any time, you will realize that Thales had something important to offer humanity and it still holds true even today. Whether you look at life as a whole, or at your personal situation, this quote should hold some meaning for you. As basketball officials, it should also trigger some reflective process – when we finish the game or a season, are we, or have we been, really honest with ourselves?

To be self-reflective is something we all need to be doing - it helps us grow as individuals. As basketball officials, it should help us get better – if we are honest with ourselves. We will not always have “a great game” – although that is what we should be striving for. Some nights, we will be “in the tank” so to speak, and our best effort will not be evident. If so, let us admit it to ourselves and if needed, to our partner or our crew.

For officials who have been around for a while and worked at the highest level in the land (University and Small College), this writer feels it is of the utmost importance to be self-reflective after each outing, and each season. Your evaluators will provide feedback from their observations on what could make your game stronger and you, a better official. Not all will agree with the given feedback – that is human nature. But if you can take the feedback and reflect on it, you may realize that the evaluator has something to offer and is trying to help you improve as an official.

The same holds true for those attending CCAA, CIS, or Canada Basketball Summer Championships, where an official may receive information overload over a period of several days. Take notes on your evaluator’s feedback to try and improve your game. To be self-reflective, re-read those notes later in the season and see if you have been honest with yourself and incorporated the feedback into your game. If you can access game tapes, have a look to see what the evaluators have told you. For those being evaluated for the first time, or those being evaluated for a second or third time within the provinces, it is very important that you attempt to be self-reflective about your games – in order to improve and get better. It is a disservice to the game and yourself if you officiate the game the “CABO WAY” when evaluated, and then after the evaluation, go back into your old habits. Better games, better assignments, and “moving up the ladder” so to speak, come with personal growth as an official, and should not take place solely because for your length of service.

I am sure there are many a night that many CABO members have said to themselves “I would have liked to have that foul call back” or “I should have called a travel on that . . .” or other plays that happened in the game. That is an example of self- reflection. I am sure there are other examples members could give. By doing so, you are attempting to be honest with yourself and the game, which makes it better for all. It is my hope that you will try to apply self-reflection in your officiating career. It should, in the end, make you a better official.