



Talking to officials: guidance for teams

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Introduction

This is a guide to how coaches and players may more effectively communicate with officials during a game, and what they can expect in return. The aim is to reduce the number of teams who adopt a negative approach that can lead to antagonism, which is one of the reasons often reported as to why officials are leaving the sport.

Key messages:

- a team (even the head coach) does NOT have the right to question officials' decisions (despite what many players and coaches think), especially in a combative fashion – that is dissent
- officials are normally happy to provide answers to sensible questions when asked in a measured manner, but this should not include implicit criticism of their judgement
- normally, communication will be between a sideline official and the head coach; or between officials in the middle of the field and a team captain
- there is a process for correcting a misapplied rule, but that does not apply to judgement calls

While much of this relates to the rules, it is important to remember that this is part of the BAFCA Code of Practice and must be adhered to by all members.

The following sections set out expectations for some common scenarios, then we talk about the right and wrong ways to communicate.

Common situations

What if a team believes a rule has been improperly enforced?

Rule 3-3-4-e gives the head coach a process by which they can legitimately question the application of a rule.

The coach's conference procedure should **only** be used to query errors in rules application. It cannot be used to question the officials' judgement. For example, it is OK to use it when the officials march off 10 yards when it should only be a 5-yard penalty, when they apply postscrimmage kick enforcement when it doesn't properly apply, or even if they think the officials have forgotten the rule that players blocked into the catcher have not committed kick catch interference. **It is not appropriate to use a coaches conference to disagree about whether contact between players constituted pass interference, or whether the pass was catchable, or whether there was holding or whether it affected the play or not.** Those are examples of judgement calls.

Note that a team that does not have any timeouts remaining can still request a coach's conference. If their challenge is not successful, they are penalised 5 yards for delay of game. However, the officials have discretion to ignore a request if they believe it is made to gain a time advantage.

A more common option for teams is to make a polite enquiry – out of curiosity not frustration. For more on this, see the section below on how best to ask a question.

What if a team believes the officials missed a foul?

Unless there is a video judge (see separate section below), there is nothing a team can do about this. Nobody is perfect - missing a foul happens and is more likely to happen:

- the smaller the officiating crew (4 officials have the same number of players and area of the field to watch as 8; officials are trained in what to prioritise)
- the less experienced the official (but even the most experienced don't see everything)
- the more tired or stressed everyone is (officials, players, coaches)
- when the team doesn't know the rules properly and the foul they think was missed wasn't actually a foul (some analysis a few years ago showed that this was the most frequent cause of allegedly "missed" fouls)
- while technically the action was a foul by strict application of the rules, the officials have been trained to apply it less strictly (the officials' textbook, *Manual of Football Officiating*, has a whole chapter on this) – e.g. officials are advised not to call holding that they judge doesn't affect the play, and to ignore marginal formation problems that don't provide either team with an advantage

What if a team wants to know how much time is remaining?

This splits into two sections: (i) what the rules formally entitle them to and (ii) what informally officials are trained to do in addition to that.

First the formal bit. Rule 3-3-8-c requires that whenever the clock is stopped during the last two minutes of each half, the officials must notify the captain and head coach of the time remaining. (This doesn't apply if there is a visible game clock in the stadium, but that's rare in domestic football.) This also includes the two-minute warning. This doesn't mean that the official has to stand face-to-face with the captain/coach to do so – calling out the time in the general direction is sufficient, provided it's reasonable to expect it to be audible. This principle also applies when a team uses its final charged timeout of the period – the referee should inform the head coach of this.

The consequence of Rule 3-3-8-c is that a team doesn't have a right to know the time either before the two minute warning or when the clock is running after it. However, at other times officials will normally try to respond to reasonable requests. Reasonable requests are those that occur:

- when the officials haven't anything else to respond to (i.e. not while the ball is live, just before it will do so, or just after it has become dead)
- a reasonable period of time after the last request
- when asked by the head coach (and especially not when asked by random players in the team area who are simply curious)

Before an official can answer a request, they:

- need to perform other dead-ball duties (e.g. getting into position, counting players on the field, dealing with chain crews and ball persons, administering penalties)
- need to find out the time from the one official who keeps the game clock on the field (this is nowadays usually done by radio, but is then dependent on that official not being busy and then the clarity of the radio communication)
- even if the official you ask is the one with the clock, they have to share the time with the other officials (usually by radio) so that the other team can be equally informed

What if a team wants to know which of its players committed the foul just called?

There is no "right" in the rules for a team to know which of its players committed a foul, but officials are trained to supply this information whenever possible.

Inevitably, some fouls are committed where the player (or players) involved cannot be identified. This includes:

- where the official's view is partially obscured, or they lose sight of the player after the foul is committed
- where the player is one of many in a small area
- where a team's uniforms don't make the numbers clear (this is a reason for the rule on jersey number contrast, but it also makes it easier if players' numbers appear on their shoulders as well as front and back of the jersey, and perhaps also on the back of their helmet)
- where the official has a memory lapse and can't remember the number(s) – common when there are multiple fouls

Where known, the player's number is given during the penalty announcement by the referee to the crowd, but it should also be passed on to all members of the crew (via radio) so that the nearest official can tell the offending team's coach. There is no duty to tell a coach of the identity of an opposition player who has committed a foul.

When a player is disqualified, the referee will come over to the head coach and inform them personally of the player's identity and (briefly) the reason for the disqualification.

The principle of keeping the head coach informed also applies to situations where there is an unusual enforcement or judgement, though of course what is regarded as "unusual" will vary.

What is the best way to ask a question?

There are appropriate ways in which a team can seek information if it genuinely does not understand a ruling (but is not seeking to have it changed). However, we don't want to detract from the game by:

- permitting conduct that demeans the officials (e.g. by expressions of dissent with their decisions, including "appealing" for penalties)
- delaying the game unnecessarily or repeatedly
- allowing any or every Tom, Dick or Harry to interrupt the officials' normal duties and concentration

From the unsportsmanlike conduct rule (Rule 9-2-1), it is clear that for a player or coach to address an official about a ruling (or anything else):

- except for players, they cannot come on to the field or go beyond the 20-yard lines to do it (without permission from the referee)
- they cannot use abusive, threatening or obscene language or gestures
- they cannot do anything that provokes ill will or is demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game

Also, based on other rules, they cannot:

- stop the play clock (if it has started) other than by calling a team timeout or a coach's conference

This means that queries are best raised while the game clock is stopped and the officials are not otherwise engaged (e.g. during team timeouts, injury timeouts, the interval between periods, and the gap between a score and the subsequent kickoff).

Queries should be expressed as genuine questions. Ironic or sarcastic questions are not acceptable (they provoke ill will).

Normally, only the head coach or one captain should be addressing the officials. However, it is sometimes reasonable for an assistant coach or another member of sideline personnel to act on the head coach's behalf, as long as it is clear that they are doing so. Similarly, a player may act on behalf of their captain. The crucial thing is that only one person should be talking to an official, and that multiple voices if not controlled tend to lead to undesirable situations.

It's worth remembering that not all questions that are asked are heard – particularly in noisy stadiums or where there is considerable distance between the questioner and questioned. Accents and the fact that officials usually have a radio earpiece in at least one ear can also inhibit communication.

Assuming the question is heard, the official must make one of three decisions, whether to:

1. ignore or defer the question because they are doing something else (e.g. the ball is about to become live)
2. ignore or defer the question because it was not an appropriate question (e.g. it questioned an official's judgement)
3. immediately answer the question

Normally the official should be able to answer the question themselves. Occasionally they may need to bring the question to the referee's notice, or get information from another official (e.g. the timekeeper for timing questions).

What can a head coach do to help the officials?

1. Adopt and enforce a team policy that limits the number of assistant coaches and players who the coach authorises to speak to the officials. If someone who is not authorised does speak to the officials, their coach or teammates should remind them of their team's policy.
2. Not ask questions at times when the officials are obviously busy, or when the ball is about to be made live.
3. Address questions to the nearest official, not the Referee. (However, we appreciate that often, due to various factors, the nearest official is not able to provide an answer.)
4. Use the coaches' conference procedure in Rule 3-3-4-e whenever they genuinely believe the officials have enforced a rule improperly.
5. Never complain to one official about another official.
6. Keep an even temper and not use words, volume or gestures that might be judged (by either the official or, more importantly, by spectators) as provocative or antagonistic.

When does reaction become dissent?

Players play with passion and emotion - coaches share the same traits. At various times, players and coaches can be happy or sad, joyous or disappointed, satisfied or frustrated. These are normal human emotions (officials have them as well), but need self-control.

Ideally, when a team is frustrated, they would just keep quiet and get on with it, but we accept that sometimes frustration gets expressed. Usually this is spontaneous, brief and moderate; driven by passion and emotion. However, by definition, this is **dissent** – which the dictionary says is "the holding or expression of opinions at variance with those commonly or officially held".

Players and coaches are entitled to be disappointed. Usually, everyone can move on from it. It is only when it is excessive or challenges an official's authority that it becomes something that has to be dealt with, which moves us into the realm of "acts that provoke ill will or are demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game" (Rule 9-2-1-a-1). At what point an official judges this to be worthy of action depends on the official, but the advice they are given is that the following should always be a foul:

- making an aggressive gesture towards an official
- speaking in an abusive, aggressive or denigrating manner to an official that can be heard clearly by spectators
- making "demonstrative disagreement", such as raising hands in incredulity
- smacking themselves to demonstrate how they were fouled
- running directly at an official to complain about a call
- making excessive enquiries about a call, even in a civilised tone

Persistent minor dissent can also be treated as foul-worthy. For example, an official may ignore the first time something is said, and perhaps even the second, but any more means a flag.

Of course, officials are encouraged to engage with captains and coaches to remind them of their responsibilities and to stamp it out at first sign. However, officials are not obliged to do this.

What is different when there is a video judge?

On the rare occasion when there is a video judge, teams have the privilege of requesting that a play be reviewed.

Normally, reviews are instigated by the officials, but a head coach can request a review provided their team has not run out of timeouts. A team however loses its review privilege if it requests a review and the play is not changed, so this is a valuable asset not to waste lightly.

Only certain aspects of a play are reviewable, but the BAFA list (see Rule 12-2) is wider than those provided by NCAA or NFL rules. As you would expect, review covers many situations, including: scores, turnovers, whether the ball was live/dead, touched/untouched, inbounds/out-of-bounds, who has possession, whether a pass is forward/backward and complete/incomplete. It also covers the legality of substitutions, passes and kicks, plus the location of the ball with respect to a first down and errors with the down number or clock.

However, our system also allows review for many fouls. In particular, a review can be used to create or cancel a foul, though this is restricted for most of the game to fouls with a 15-yard penalty or those on a specific list relating to passes and kicks. However, during the last two minutes of the game or in extra periods, all fouls are reviewable.

Teams need to bear in mind that the chances of a review changing the play are low if:

- there are only a small number of cameras, with limited viewpoints
- the action is obscured by players, officials or anything else, or the quality of the video is poor
- the camera was moving during the play (e.g. there is motion blur because it is panning)

For example, a review of a call at the goal line or end line is rarely going to be conclusive if the only camera angle is from the halfway line. This would be a senseless loss of the privilege to review. We advise teams to leave these sorts of review to the officials.

Can a team follow up after a game?

Yes, a team can always follow up with BAFRA about any issues they have with the officiating. The usual contact for this is the Director of Training (training@bafra.info). It helps if video of the incident(s) in question can be provided since this normally provides the most detailed and objective depiction of what happened.

While sometimes the video does show that an official missed an appropriate call, it also often proves that the call on the field was right (either by rule or that the official's judgement was supportable) and that the team has misunderstood the rule or the officiating guideline that underpins it. Equally, video is often inconclusive. Sometimes, there will be an opportunity for education, which is to be encouraged. BAFRA doesn't have the resources to guarantee to deal with all enquiries of this nature – like most clubs, the association is run by volunteers.

Teams should appreciate that many officials spend a considerable amount of time watching video from their own games and others, often spotting their own or a colleague's mistakes and learning from them. This is an important part of training and personal development. Teams are very much encouraged to provide game video to BAFRA for this purpose (contact video@bafra.info to agree the easiest way to share it).

Appendix 1: Relevant rules relating to coach/official communication

3-3-4-e Charged Team Timeouts

This covers the situation where a team believes a rule has been improperly enforced.

A player, incoming substitute or head coach may request a head coach's conference with the referee if the coach believes a rule has been enforced improperly. If the rule enforcement is not changed, the coach's team will be charged a timeout, or a delay penalty if all timeouts have been used.

1. Only the referee may stop the clock for a head coach's conference.
2. A request for a head coach's conference or video review must be made before the ball is snapped or free-kicked for the next play and before the end of the second or fourth period (Rule [5-2-9](#)).
3. After a head coach's conference or video review, the full team timeout is granted if charged by the referee.

3-3-8-c Referee's Notification

This covers the requirement for the officials to notify the teams of the time remaining. Note that it only applies during the last 2 minutes of each half.

If a visual game clock is not the official timing device during the last two minutes of each half, the referee or his/her representative shall notify each captain and head coach of the time remaining each time the clock is stopped by rule. Also, a representative may leave the team area along the limit line to relay timing information under these conditions.

9-2-1 Unsportsmanlike Acts

This is the general rule covering conduct, by anyone subject to the rules. Underlined sections are my emphasis.

There shall be no unsportsmanlike conduct or any act that interferes with orderly game administration on the part of players, substitutes, coaches, authorised attendants or any other persons subject to the rules, before the game, during the game or between periods. Infractions for

these acts by players are administered as either live-ball or dead-ball fouls depending on when they occur. [\(A.R. 9-2-1:I-X\)](#)

a. Specifically prohibited acts and conduct include:

1. No player, substitute, coach or other person subject to the rules shall use abusive, threatening or obscene language or gestures, or engage in such acts that provoke ill will or are demeaning to an opponent, to game officials or to the image of the game, including but not limited to:

(a) Pointing the finger(s), hand(s), arm(s) or ball at an opponent, or imitating the slashing of the throat.

(b) Taunting, baiting or ridiculing an opponent verbally.

(c) Inciting an opponent or spectators in any other way, such as simulating the firing of a weapon or placing a hand by the ear to request recognition.

(d) Any delayed, excessive, prolonged or choreographed act by which a player (or players) attempts to focus attention upon himself/herself (or themselves).

(e) An unopposed ball carrier obviously altering stride when approaching the opponent's goal line or diving into the end zone.

(f) A player removing his/her helmet after the ball is dead and before he/she is in the team area (**Exceptions:** Team, media or injury timeouts; equipment adjustment; through play; between periods; and during a measurement for a first down).

(g) Punching one's own chest or crossing one's arms in front of the chest while standing over a prone player.

(h) Going into the stands to interact with spectators, or bowing at the waist after a good play.

(i) Intentionally removing the helmet while the ball is alive.

(j) Dead-ball contact fouls such as pushing, shoving, striking, etc. that occur clearly after the ball is dead and that are not part of the game action. [\(A.R. 9-2-1:X\)](#)

(k) After the ball is dead, using forcible contact to push or pull an opponent off the pile. [\(A.R. 9-2-1:XI\)](#)

(l) Feigning an injury.

PENALTY - Unsportsmanlike conduct. Live-ball fouls by players: 15 yards [S27: UC-*]. Live-ball fouls by non-players and all dead-ball fouls: 15 yards from the succeeding spot [S7 and S27: UC-*]. Automatic first down for live-ball and dead-ball fouls by Team B if not in conflict with other rules. Flagrant offenders shall be disqualified [S47: DSQ].

2. After a score or any other play, the player in possession immediately must return the ball to an official or leave it near the dead-ball spot. This prohibits:

(a) Kicking, throwing, spinning or carrying (including off the field) the ball any distance that requires an official to retrieve it.

(b) Spiking the ball to the ground (**Exception:** A forward pass to conserve time (Rule [7-3-2-f](#))).

(c) Throwing the ball high into the air.

(d) Any other unsportsmanlike act or actions that delay the game.

PENALTY - Unsportsmanlike conduct. Dead-ball foul. 15 yards from the succeeding spot [S7 and S27: UC-*]. Automatic first down for fouls by Team B if not in conflict with other rules. Flagrant offenders shall be disqualified [S47: DSQ].

b. Other prohibited acts include:

1. During the game, coaches, squad members and authorised attendants in the team area shall not be on the field of play or outside the 20-yard lines to protest an officiating decision or to

communicate with players or officials without permission from the referee. (**Exception:** Rules [1-2-4-h](#), [3-3-4-d](#), [3-3-8-c](#) and [3-5-1](#)).

2. No disqualified person shall be in view of the field of play (Rule [9-2-6](#)).

3. No person or mascot subject to the rules, except players, officials and eligible substitutes, shall be on the field of play or end zones during any period without permission from the referee. If a player is injured, attendants may come inbounds to attend him/her, but they must obtain recognition from an official.

4. No substitute(s) may enter the field of play or end zones for purposes other than replacing a player(s) or to fill a player vacancy(ies). This includes demonstrations after any play ([A.R. 9-2-1:l](#)).

5. Persons subject to the rules, including bands and audio/video/lighting systems operators, shall not create any noise or distraction that prohibits a team from hearing its signals or obstructs play (Rule [1-1-6](#)).

PENALTY - [1-4] Unsportsmanlike conduct. Dead-ball foul. 15 yards from the succeeding spot [S7 and S27: UC-*]. Automatic first down for fouls by Team B if not in conflict with other rules. Flagrant offenders shall be disqualified [S47: DSQ].

[5] Unsportsmanlike conduct. The referee may take any action they consider equitable, which includes directing that the down be repeated, assessing a 15-yard penalty, awarding a score, or suspending or forfeiting the game [S27: UFA].

Appendix 2: The Football Code

The Football Code is one of the introductory sections of the Rulebook. It has this to say about talking to officials:

When an official imposes a penalty or makes a decision, he/she is simply doing his/her duty as he/she sees fit. He/She is on the field to uphold the integrity of the game of football, and his/her decisions are final and conclusive and should be accepted by players and coaches.

The BAFCA Code of Ethics states:

- a. On- and off-the-record criticism of officials to players or to the public shall be considered unethical.
- b. For a coach to address, or permit anyone on his/her bench to address, uncomplimentary remarks to any official during the progress of a game, or to indulge in conduct that might incite players or spectators against the officials, is a violation of the rules of the game and must likewise be considered conduct unworthy of a member of the coaching profession.

The next edition will update this to reflect the new BAFCA Code of Practice (see below).

Appendix 3: BAFCA Code of Practice

BAFCA's Code of Practice also addresses the relationship between coaches and officials:

- No competitive contest can be played satisfactorily without impartial, competent officials.
- Officials must have the respect and support of coaches and players.
- On or off the field, the recorded criticism of officials to players or to the public shall be considered unethical.
- There should be a co-operative relationship between coaches and official's organisations, with frequent interchange of suggestions and ideas.
- Coaches should whenever possible, accept invitations to attend officials rule meetings.
- Coaches should extend officials invitations to discuss rules interpretations with their squads, and on occasion to officiate at team scrimmages.
- On the day of a game officials should be treated in a courteous manner.

- They should be provided with a private room in which to meet and dress for the game.
- Conferences between coaches and officials should always be conducted according to procedures established by BAFRA.
- The official Rule Book shall be followed in coach/official relationships at all times.
- Any criticisms which the coach may have concerning officiating should be made in writing to BAFRA.
- A coach must not permit anyone on their team or sideline to address, uncomplimentary remarks to any official during the progress of a game, or to indulge in conduct which might incite players or spectators against the officials, is a violation of the rules of the game.
- Use of film or tape in checking officials: It should be recognised that slow motion study of controversial decisions by officials is far different from on the spot decisions which must be made during the course of a game.
- To show film or tape, with the deliberate intention of questioning the competence of an official, other than to BAFRA must be considered unethical conduct.

Breaches can be dealt with both by BAFCA and the BAFA Disciplinary Committee – the BAFA Regulations make breaching the Code of Practice one of the explicit ways by which the game can be brought into disrepute.

Appendix 4: BAFCA training material

BAFCA's Level 2 coach qualification training includes the following:

As coaches, especially if you are a coach of children, children should be aware of the basic rules and strategies of the game. However, it is really important that emphasis is on fun, enjoyment and learning.

In most sports, officials are used to apply the rules and regulations in their sport and give appropriate sanctions where rules have not been adhered to. This is usually communicated via hand signals, flags, whistles and then verbal communication.

As a coach, there is responsibility for promoting the roles of officials in sport. Officials should also promote consistency and fairness to participants, spectators and coaches.

Coaches should set a positive example, uphold and support the decisions of officials.

It also says the following about having respect for officials.

1. Referees have more training than players and spectators

No matter how experienced or knowledgeable an athlete or parent is, it's important to remember referees have specific training in the rules of the game, how to observe the game, and how to make difficult calls. They are also often in a better position to see the play, especially compared to parents on the sidelines or in the stands. If you're still convinced you can do a better job, leagues are always hiring.

2. More focus on the ref means less focus on the game

There are many aspects of sports that are unpredictable and out of a player's control. However, there are some things an athlete can control. Players, spectators, and coaches can't control officiating, but if players are overly focused on how the officials are calling the game, they are likely less focused on playing the game to the best of their abilities. Similarly, coaches should advocate for their team, but focus more on instructing and guiding players than haranguing referees. For parents in the stands, you could spend your time focused on the ref, or spend that time focused on watching and encouraging your young athletes to do their best with the one thing they can control: their own performance.

3. Referees should be treated like coaches

One of the ways coaches can model respect for officials is to make an effort to personally greet referees before the game, just as you would the coach of the opposing team. And while it may not be practical for every player to greet the officials, encourage captains at the pre-game meeting or coin flip to introduce themselves to the officials. These efforts help turn nameless, faceless referees into people, particularly people to be respected, in the eyes of young players.

4. Rude teams don't get close calls

Referees do their best to call games objectively, but they are still human. On a tough call that could go either way, a referee may be more likely to rule in favour of a team whose players (and coaches) have been respectful and focused on fair play throughout the game. It's a natural bias to reward favourable behaviour and the people who have treated them respectfully.

5. Yelling at officials models poor communication skills

For parents and coaches, it's important to think about what yelling at refs teaches young athletes. Youth sport advocacy organization Play by the Rules has outlined several different ways yelling at refs hurts kids by communicating to them that:

- mistakes are not acceptable
- there's no need to take accountability for your own performance when you can blame others
- it's acceptable to disrespect an authority figure whenever you disagree with their decision
- even though it's rude, disruptive, and distracting to others, yelling is acceptable behaviour

6. Try it before you criticise

Having athletes and parents try officiating during scrimmages at practices is a great way of illustrating the difficulties referees face. It's the old "walk a mile in someone else's shoes" lesson, but it's effective for helping parents and athletes be more empathetic toward referees.

7. Remember it's just a game

No missed call during a youth sports game is going to make or break an athlete's career. Youth sports are an environment for learning about and falling in love with sports, not heaping pressure on athletes, coaches, and officials. And in the off-chance a player, coach, or parent makes a mistake and is disrespectful to an official during the game, make an effort to resolve the conflict after the game with a face-to-face conversation with the referee. This helps illustrate to young athletes that after a conflict with another person it is important to take responsibility for your actions and make amends with the other person.