

High School Football Officiating Philosophies

Introduction

Developing an officiating philosophy is an important skill for success. Retired Big Ten referee, Tom Quinn always referred to this as the three-legged stool. One leg being rule knowledge, another leg is mechanics, and the third leg is philosophy. If one leg is weak, the stool will topple. When all three legs of the officiating stool are strong we have a game the players can play, the coaches can coach, and the fans can enjoy. Officials cannot pick and choose the rules to enforce, but an official who combines both technical and practical skills can support the rules and still not call every play exactly by the book.

Philosophy is not something that comes easy. It takes seasons to develop and it's something that is ever changing. The best officials approach the game with an attitude that says we never stop learning. Those who feel they "know-it-all" will quickly be humbled in the world of officiating. With 22 players and nearly 150 plays per game to officiate, there will be hundreds of rulings and judgments to be made during the course of a game. Football can be a complex game that is not as black and white as the rules make it. Being able to handle the gray areas of judgment and enforcement is critical in applying the spirit and intent, which the rule was written.

According to NASO (Training Room, March 2002), officiating philosophy is described as who we are and how we handle game situations. Remember, we have the responsibility to be the guardians of the game. This is an awesome, yet important, responsibility that we need to take seriously. The game belongs to the kids playing it. Remember no matter what the age of the kids, it's their game, not ours.

As we go through our careers we see different types and styles of officials. Some officials know the rulebook like the back of their hand. They can quote chapter, section, and paragraph when it comes to any rule imaginable but have a hard time calling pass interference, holding, and other situations. Their technical textbook approach makes them the show rather than the players or the game itself. Other officials hardly touch the book but seem to have a feel for the game. They seem to understand the "accepted" calls that really impact the game. These officials generally are more successful than the technical official but aren't able to help the crew in situations when rule knowledge is critical. The third official is the one who balances the rulebook with common sense or "game sense". At the professional and upper college levels, officiating supervisors spend more time with their staff on how to call the game than specific rules. At lower levels of officiating, the lack of immediate supervision and feedback limits officials in developing these skills. The lower levels are also where officials develop their own philosophies through trial and error and rely on mentors to hone their game skills. This is why officials must be lifetime learners.

Football officiating requires the crew to be more consistent in their calls than any other sport. Whether it is a four or seven-person crew, everyone must be on the same page and have compatible philosophies if there's going to be consistency throughout the game. Adapting to the level of play is another critical factor in officiating success. What is a foul at one level may not be a foul at another level. The ability to adapt to the play and judiciously apply the rules demands good officiating philosophy. Nothing will drive the players and coaches up a wall faster than having holding or pass interference called differently among crew members. Sideline officials must enforce the same standards for coaches on their sideline as their partner across the field. Successful officiating is not a science it's an art. Individual and crew success comes from everyone being well grounded in officiating philosophies.

Let's take a look at some common calls where sound officiating philosophies are used...

Game Control & Safety Fouls: There is no gray area when it comes to the safety of players, coaches, officials and spectators. These rules must be officiated to the letter of the law. Safety fouls such as personal fouls, clipping, illegal low blocks and unsportsmanlike penalties must always be called no matter where or when they occur during the game. A personal foul or clipping may occur on the opposite side of the field from the point of attack and it should always be called. The same holds true for unsportsmanlike acts, which can quickly deteriorate a game and cause game control problems for the crew. Officiating

philosophy is always to err on the side of safety in these situations, even when in doubt. Additionally, officials must be cautious in their administrative decisions when it comes to stopping a game due to lightning or unplayable field conditions. In your decision making, always remember the safety of the players, coaches, officials, and fans comes first. Equally important, remember you are an independent contractor who may be held responsible in court if you are negligent in your decisions.

Holding: This is probably the most difficult area for officials to master. We've all heard coaches and/or fans say "You could call holding on every play!" Very little if any truth lies in that statement. Holding is subjective to the degree and effect on the play. It also changes from the level of competition. What is holding in lower level games may or may not be holding at the high school, college, or pro level. What if we called holding on every play until the players quit holding? The players couldn't play, the coaches couldn't coach, and the fans would leave. It would be you, the official, as the focal point, and that would lead to a very long afternoon or evening and hardly resemble the game of football. When making a judgment on holding try using these philosophies: Call any major take down that will embarrass you or your crew if it were not called. Even if it is not a takedown, call holding at the point of attack. Did the blocker gain an unfair advantage from the hold? Did the defender have his jersey stretched or have to reach for the ball carrier with one arm? Was he taken in a direction by the hold that he didn't want to go in the first place? Did the defender give up on his pursuit? These are all factors to help make your decision. If you decide it's a hold and throw the flag, be able to describe in a few words what the foul was. Know if it was a takedown, a hook and restrict, a jersey stretch, a twist and turn. If you can't put it into a category of holding than it probably wasn't a foul. The same holds true for defensive holding on pass receivers. Did the hold impede the receiver from running his pass route? Did the QB even look to this receiver before throwing to the other side of the field? No effect, no foul for holding.

Formations: The offense is required to have seven players on the line of scrimmage and only the two end players [#s 1-49 or 80-99] are eligible pass receivers. Wing/flank officials should work with teams to avoid nit-picky formation fouls. Avoid calling the interior linemen off the line of scrimmage unless their positioning is obvious to everyone. When backs and ends potentially cover another eligible receiver, use your trail foot to indicate the backside of the line of scrimmage. Tell a player he is "on" or "off" the line but never tell him to move. A wing/flank official can also tell a player, "I am on the line". It's the player's job to know if he's an end or a back and if he should be on or off the line. Between plays talk to your umpire or referee to help get linemen up on the line. Talk to or get word to the player's coach that if the lineman or back doesn't set up properly, it will be a foul.

Play Clock: Throughout most of the game and especially when there is no visible play clock, avoid calling delay of game penalties if the snap is imminent. Get a feel for the QB's cadence and potential snap. The 25-second clock may be ready to expire but you're the only one who knows or really cares. When the QB has his team up on the ball and ready to snap, give him the benefit of the doubt. If the problem continues, your referee should communicate with the QB to pick up the pace. The referee should also consider that his/her tempo may be too fast. Late in a half when time is critical, you have no choice but to enforce the play clock as the rule is written. Remember that if the QB snaps as the play clock hits zero, you have a legal snap without a delay penalty.

Change of Possession: Do yourself and your crew a favor. Following a change of team possession, spot the football on the back edge of a yard line whenever possible. This will guarantee your crew at least one series that you won't need to measure for a new first down. Football is said to be a game of inches but this is one time it isn't. Only you and your crew will know the difference.

Measurements: Following a touchback, you should never have a situation that requires your crew to measure for a subsequent first down. The ball was placed at the 20-yard line and needs to get to the 30-yard line. Crews that end up measuring during this first series show a lack of focus and game awareness. Always know the line to gain, particularly in this situation. After a 3rd or 4th down play where progress is very close with the line to gain; be flexible and allow a measurement, especially if the line to gain is between yard lines. On tight 4th down plays, put both teams at ease with a measurement since a

change of possession is involved.

Preventative/Deadball Officiating: The average play takes about seven seconds to complete. The average interval between downs can be 30-40 seconds when you consider spotting the ball and starting a new 25-second clock. This “down” time is a great time to talk to players and coaches in an attempt to be preventative. Telling a player to watch his hands, he’s close on a QB hit following a pass, or a lineman to get up tighter on the line of scrimmage are all good preventative mechanics in avoiding needless fouls. Just make sure you do the same thing for both teams. It’s said the best officials are also the best dead ball officials. Keep officiating after the play is over by watching the action on the perimeter of the pile. The term “keeping your head on a swivel” refers to watching and boxing in all the players with your eyes until they clear of possible dead ball fouls. Make your presence felt at the end of each play by using your voice and moving into the vicinity of the play. Players who know you are watching are less likely to commit a personal foul or unsportsmanlike act.

Common Sense: During local association meetings or training classes, clinicians continually mention that common sense or game sense applies to officiating philosophy. Officials are instructed to use common sense when making decisions not specifically covered by the rulebook or when minor infractions have no bearing on the play. Problems and inconsistencies occur because the parameters and definitions of common sense are different for everybody and never clearly defined or written in a manual. Common sense in officiating is a lot like life, one person’s ‘treasure’ may be another’s heap of trash. Local official’s associations can help your consistency by defining common sense officiating in their weekly meetings and prescribing acceptable practices to use in different game situations. A good understanding of the game in general can strengthen an official’s awareness to use good common sense in certain situations.

WordNet defines common sense as having sound practical judgment, which is very important for football officials. The experience from officiating games, working with mentors and association members can enhance an official’s judgment and common sense. The more time an official spends listening and exchanging ideas with fellow officials will strengthen their skills to make instant common sense decisions during a play. A textbook official will call a game literally as the rules are written, but a well-rounded official will apply common sense to his/her knowledge of rules and mechanics.

Communication: Sound skills in calling fouls are obviously critical to all officials. The officials who rate out as the best in their conference or position are generally regarded as outstanding communicators. They know when to listen to a coach or player and when to speak. Good officials choose their words wisely and never belittle a coach in front of his team. Officiating is as much a “people skill” business as it is a rules and mechanics business. If you want respect, give respect. A common theme from college and pro officials is “kill them with kindness”. Another important tip to remember is to always bring another official with you when you need to talk to a coach. Having that crewmate nearby helps keep you calm while a coach rants and raves. It also ensures that you won’t be misquoted. Always have that friendly witness in a potentially hostile environment.

Call the Obvious: Credibility begins with getting the easy call right. Miss the obvious and you’ll have a hard time selling and having credibility with the tough call. When developing your officiating philosophy, work to learn what the accepted calls are. Too often inexperienced officials try to revolutionize the game and show everyone how good they are by making every call possible. Most of these officials last just a few seasons before disappearing or quitting because they don’t advance for what they claim is politics or the “good ole boy system”. If something needs to be changed, work through your local association rather than being out there on your own. No one succeeds and advances by themselves.

Conclusion NASO said it best... “The best officials are those that let the game come to them”. They see what is happening, absorb the information, take an extra second to process that information and decide the impact to the play. The best officials know the rules but don’t use them as a crutch. Good officials communicate well with players, coaches and other officials. They are the best at “people skills”. The best

officials aren't afraid to make the game deciding call or no-call. They continually adjust their philosophy to the level of the game and the changes in the game. They are lifelong learners!

[Note... Additional game areas for philosophy can be found in the Axioms section where 17 specific situations are discussed.]