

Keep Your Distance From Spectators

What does "the law" have to do with an article about "spectator sports" in a magazine dedicated to officials? Fair question. It's a given that officials often ply their trade in front of spectators. Where the law comes in is here: Officials in far too many instances are bringing spectators into the loop of participants in significant ways, which affects officials' exposure to legal liability.

Throughout the history of officiating, officials have been cautioned against interaction with spectators while officiating. Sage advice indeed. And sage advice gets to be that way by being borne of the hard lessons of experience.

Still, for whatever reason, there are far too many reports of officials at all levels engaging spectators in conversation, answering spectator barbs and becoming involved in verbal jousting and physical altercations with spectators under circumstances that can only lead to unwanted consequences.

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Although there are many reasons why officials should not converse with spectators, the avoidance of legal hurdles is at or near the top of the list.

There are also persuasive reasons, from a credibility standpoint, that dialogue with those not directly involved in a game is counterproductive. Here are some reasons not to address spectators:

1. When you respond to the barbs of a spectator, or worse, if you initiate interaction, you raise the onlooker to a peer status. Not only is that demeaning to you and your fellow officials, it is what the heckler wants. If no attention is paid to fans who flex their vocal chords, the hecklers' efforts are unsuccessful.

2. Dialogue with fans violates all known officials' codes of mechanics and ethics. Bringing a spectator into your circle of conversations only serves to detract from your effectiveness and credibility as an official.

3. Should the discussion escalate into anger (it may not be a long trip), you will place yourself and those around you in a position of danger.

4. It is simply unintelligent for a referee to think he or she is accountable to a person whose only qualification for being in the venue is the purchasing of a \$2 ticket (sometimes it's not even that much!).

Many officials who are otherwise alert, competent and well-prepared for the task at hand, do not react appropriately to spectators approaching or addressing them. Legal complications from speaking with spectators can and have borne costly and embarrassing consequences to officials and their associations. There is no good reason for those situations ever to exist. Nor is there any excuse for officiating associations not to train their charges in the mechanics of dealing with spectators. Training can prevent a lawsuit.

Ignoring the comments of spectators off the field or court is as important as ignoring comments during the game. Officials who disregard mechanics in that area demean themselves and place their fellow officials as well as athletes and coaches at risk. For those who train and certify officials, bear in mind that what is sought by an abusive or argumentative fan is attention. It is within the official's power to deny that attention. However, those game management techniques — and the reasoning behind the techniques — need to be taught.

Should a spectator act in a way that interferes with the administration of the game, get the site manager, security or other host personnel involved in dealing with the offender. Not only will you insulate yourself from potential safety and liability issues, you will be able to fully concentrate on the safety of the athletes and calling the game. That's why you are there in the first place!

Written by Alan Goldberger, an attorney and official from Clifton, N.J., who wrote the book Sports Officiating: A Legal Guide. This column is intended for informational purposes and is not legal advice. □

A Response Can Lead to Violence

Here is a real-life comment from a youth league football official recounting being challenged by a spectator: "This one individual ... said, 'You and I are going to talk at the end of the game.' Well, that sounded like a threat. I said, 'We can talk now,' and here he came." Witnesses told the news media that the spectator rushed the field and punched the referee in the face. The official's comment was made to the press (which was a mistake) by way of explanation of a situation ending in the official being assaulted on the field by the spectator. Although the lesson may be obvious to some, it remains elusive to many officials. Avoid responding to spectator taunts.

Dash a Disruptive Fan's Dreams

Fans who want to be disruptive may have different goals: work the officials, get the crowd going, get attention, be part of the game, etc. Officials must make sure they don't give fans what they want by responding to their criticism or jabs. If referees keep a clear focus on the participants, then fan behavior will not impact their officiating. As a result, they will be able to successfully perform their duties on the field and court and not open themselves up to liability if something goes wrong.