

"We got screwed," Hartzell says. "These guys are my friends — three guys I know well, one I consider a close friend — and we don't shoot a free throw until six minutes are left! But I know that when any official walks onto the court, he just wants to get plays right."

It's difficult to understand how both of those perspectives can co-exist inside Hartzell, but that's what makes his balancing act so complex and unique.

Close friend Welmer relates a story from last season during a game with Hartzell, "A friend of (Hartzell's), who's an A.D., was giving 'Harts' a hard time," says Welmer. "He had some choice words for Rick, and Rick threw his compadre out of the game."

Welmer laughs at the memory, but for Hartzell, it was just a normal part of officiating the game.

Horizon League Supervisor John Adams praises Hartzell for his commitment to officiating. "Rick drove from St. Louis to Milwaukee all night one year to work a quarterfinal playoff game in the Horizon League. If we always used the best guys, we'd use Rick in the finals every year," says Adams. "But it's never been about the money for Rick. Our league pays maybe half of what the Big 10 probably pays."

Creighton A.D. Bruce Rasmussen, a friend and colleague of Hartzell's, says Hartzell is just as accepted in that community. "In officiating, there are a lot of perceptions about you. Someone might think you could influence a game from an A.D. perspective," he says. "Rick has tremendous respect in the A.D. community and is spoken of in glowing terms by coaches. You know where he stands and respect him as an A.D. and feel the same way about him as an official. He is universally accepted as an official and that tells you something about him."

Longtime Division I men's basketball official Steve Olson is a close friend of Hartzell's. "There's no bigger fan of Rick's than me," says Olson. "He's achieved a great balance in his life between officiating, his job and his wife, Jill."

Jill represents perhaps another side to the multi-faceted Hartzell. She tells of their initial meeting at a gym — she was working out and he was rehabbing a sore knee. Sports discussions continued as they were on the same time schedule for his therapy and her workout and eventually Hartzell asked Jill to join him for a Kenny Chesney concert. "It was a good evening. We talked a lot

and found out we had a lot in common," she says despite the fact that Rick is nearly 20 years her senior.

It took awhile before she learned that Rick was a Division I official, but "once I watched him officiate, I realized how firm he had to be in both his jobs. You don't want to mess with Rick. He takes it seriously, but it's also fun to watch him," she says. "When I get to meet officials, I see another side of Rick. You see their personalities on the court, and it's different than real life. Rick sometimes calls his officiating 'adult daycare.' I call it a 'male soap opera.'"

There is a good-natured kidding to their relationship and mutual support. Jill caught the officiating bug and it's been Rick encouraging her as she has begun exploring the hard court with a whistle.

"After my first seventh grade game," Jill recalls, "I called him up and said how horrible it was - the crowd yelling at you. It upset me.

"I've learned a lot though, and most of it from Rick."

The two married just last year. It was her first, his second. His divorce in 1995 from his first wife Kathleen "had nothing to do with basketball," Hartzell says. "In fact, officiating probably helped me get through it. We had it together at one time, but we just couldn't keep it together. She's remarried and lives locally and we have a good relationship. Both our kids — Amanda and Nate — are doing beautifully."

Nate races late model stock cars on dirt tracks and Rick serves as mechanic. Last April the Hartzells had a scare. Jill got a call while in chiropractic school that Rick was being life flighted to Iowa City.

"He was working on the carburetor," she recalls. "You pour gas into the carb and he did it the wrong way. A little gas came out the side and when the car fired up, there was no spark. So he did it again, and this time, fire exploded up in his face. He dropped the fuel, and the fire went down into his pants. While it didn't burn his pants, it fried one of his legs, hand and the side of his face.

"He's healed really well and looks good, but I thought I was going to have a fried fiance when I got the call."

Hartzell bounced back in the offseason and is currently working his full schedule again, refereeing roughly 80 games in the Big Ten, Horizon, Conference USA, Big 12, Mountain West conference.

He still wants to work the Final Four. That's his officiating goal. In his day job, Hartzell would like to represent the Missouri Valley Conference on the NCAA Men's Basketball Rules Committee, a mixture of coaches and administrators.

"To me it would make pretty good sense to be on there," he says. "They've nominated me five times through the Valley, but I can't get on.

"I think I could give them some insight," Hartzell says.

For a man who is so fully immersed in college basketball, walking that narrow line, that's no small promise.

*Dave Simon officiated basketball for 18 years. He currently lives in Grapevine, Texas, and writes a weekly newspaper column in addition to his full-time job. D*

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