



FIBA

We Are Basketball

SEE THE WHOLE PLAY



by Fred Horgan

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No one could be expected to open a book to its final chapter and expect to have a clear grasp of the complete story. The same can be said for someone who enters a discussion when it is almost finished and is then asked which side of the debate he or she accepts.

Both of these analogies have something in common: before fully understanding what has happened or before making an accurate judgment of responsibility in a conflict that has taken place, we must first have an appreciation of "the entire story" or of the differing points of views that have initially led to the disagreement.

This isn't necessarily an easy task. It demands concentration, objectivity and the ability to grasp not only what is happening but also the circumstances that have led to the situation being observed. The last step, perhaps the most difficult one, is to make a final judgment of accountability based on all of these variables.

Respected instructors on the rules of basketball and the application of those rules to the game itself have a common and constant theme in all of their clin-

ics. The message is simple enough: if officials hope to make accurate, consistent and defensible decisions in the course of refereeing a basketball game, they must first concentrate on seeing "the whole play", rather than simply picking up the final moment when the potential infraction occurs.

This reality is based on what instructors and commissioners perceive as a weakness common to (but, unfortunately, not always limited to) less experienced officials. These are the individuals, who have, to some degree, grasped the rules of the game but who have not yet learned how and when to apply these rules. In other words, they have yet to appreciate that limiting their focus to the actual moment where a potential infraction occurs is far too shortsighted and could possibly result in an assignment of "blame" that is totally in error.

The first evidence that such a flaw exists is usually as simple as an official's failure to observe action away from the ball, action that could eventually result in a potential infraction of the rules as the play continues to develop. In the most blatant situations, an official can clearly be seen observing action in the immediate vicinity of the ball, even though that action isn't in his or her area of primary responsibility. This sometimes leaves as many as eight or even nine players unobserved. This is especially relevant to guarding and/or screening action that initially





develops away from the ball, action that would remain unseen if the official responsible for off-ball coverage has his or her eyes elsewhere.

An excellent example can be found in the principles that determine responsibility in these guarding and screening situations. Two key terms are too often misunderstood (or missed altogether) in assigning such responsibility for any contact that might develop. These terms are "establishing" and "maintaining" and the principles that determine responsibility for illegal contact differ depending on whether the guarding or screening player is establishing a legal position on the court or is maintaining a position that has already been legally taken.

The guidelines themselves are quite clear in describing what constitutes a legal or illegal position in relation to the player who is doing the guarding/screening, but the problem develops if the official fails to see a player initially establish a legal position because that legal position is taken in an area away from the ball, an area that the responsible official unfortunately is not observing because his or her focus is on the ball itself. If this is the case and if the play around the ball then moves to the area of the floor where the legal position has already been established, then the official could very possibly misjudge what has now become a totally legal, "maintaining" action to be instead an "establishing" action, and as a consequence erroneously judge that action to be an infraction of the rules.

A simple clarification is in order. To establish a legal guarding position, the guideline states that the defensive player must have both feet on the floor; however, when maintaining such a position in reaction to a dribbler's attempt to avoid the defensive player, the "both feet on the floor" requirement is no longer necessary. Indeed, the defensive play could very well be in motion and have neither foot on the floor at the point of contact without being held responsible for the contact, provided other guidelines for maintaining a guarding position are observed.

The same philosophy of "seeing the whole play" can be applied to an incident where a player without the ball is being guarded, especially in post play situations. The rule's guidelines state that in establishing a legal guarding position the defensive player must allow a moving opponent (who does not have the ball) the time and/or distance to stop or change direction, a maximum of two steps. In relation to a stationary opponent, the requirement is that a guarding position taken outside the visual range of the opponent must permit that opponent one normal step.

If normal contact then results as a consequence of movement by the player being guarded, the defensive player is absolved of responsibility. If, however, the player who is being guarded suddenly receives the ball, then the necessity of allowing room to stop or change direction, or of allowing one normal step in the case of a stationary opponent, no longer applies. In this circumstance, it is crucial that the official see the whole play in order to determine which player has a right to a specific position on the court and therefore who carries the responsibility for any contact that might take place.

Another important application of the "see the whole play" principle exists insofar as post play is concerned. This is the necessity of observing and penalizing any initial contact that might occur, rather than not ruling an infraction until the second or even the third illegal contact takes place. This is a source of great frustration for players who see it as unfair and inconsistent when it appears the initial foul is ignored but the retaliation that follows is promptly penalized. It is an unfortunate reality that when a basketball game deteriorates to the point where rough play dominates and, in extreme cases, fights develop, the beginning of the deterioration can inevitably be traced to a failure to control contact in the post positions and to penalize fairly and consistently such contact before it has the chance to grow to the point of unsportsmanlike behavior.

Many other applications of the "see the whole play" principle can also be identified: the establishing of a pivot foot, the relationship of foot movement to the beginning of a dribble, game management (especially as it applies to bench decorum), legal/illegal movement of the ball to the backcourt and other such responsibilities that ultimately must be arbitrated by the game officials. The principle and its applications should be a primary point of discussion during the officials' pre-game discussion, and well worth repeating and assessing in post-game evaluations as well.

Seeing the whole play is essential to determining fair and consistent responsibility if an infraction is eventually to be called. Without such awareness, legal offense as well as legal defense will be seriously compromised.

