



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH IN OFFICIATING



by Carl Jungebrand

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When referees are asked to name the most valuable characteristics of a good official, they often compile a long list of different skills needed to successfully officiate a game. Having been asked this same question at numerous officiating events, across a number of different sports, the answers are almost always the same, about 90% of the time. Basically, this means that most officials consider these traits required and universal.

The most common answers include decision-making, control of the situation, bravery, objectivity, psychological perspective, physical strength, non-verbal communication, understanding and command of regulations, honesty, stress management, athleticism...

When dividing the characteristics into psychological and physical categories, between 70% and 90% of all answers fall into the psychological category. There are also characteristics that can be placed into both categories. When asking the same question to anyone in sports, the answers, in my opinion, tend to be similar. This leads me to believe that the base for successful officiating is 70% to 90% psychological and 10% to 30% physical.

For this reason, I'd like to ask the following provocative question: "How does the training of officials compare to the required characteristics?" (Think for a minute before continuing).

When examining the training of officials, usually the percentages are exactly the opposite. Most often, 70% of training focuses on physical and technical factors, while only 30% focuses on psychological factors. I've often wondered why this is. There are many potential answers, but the most common reasons have to do with the difficulty of the subject matter for the instructor, and the challenge of compiling (let alone understanding) the training materials. The big question we are then left with is how do we make it all relevant to the officials?

## LOOKING FOR THE WINNERS

We often run into a situation where there aren't enough referees to work the number of games scheduled. On the local level, this is even more typical. If the base of the pyramid isn't stable, it will restrict our ability to identify future top officials, because there aren't as many potential candidates. I think we should approach the recruitment of officials with a different plan of action.

I honestly believe that winners - regardless of their category of employment - can be identified by certain characteristics, decision-making, and

operating styles.

Oftentimes, top officials are talented winners, who reach the top because of their attitude and choices. Some also have a little luck, because they were at the right place at the right time.

Why aren't potential officials - especially when moving to the higher ranks of officiating tested with the same model that employers use when hiring top executives? This would help us determine each candidate's strengths and weaknesses and allow us to find the tools to help refine them. The use of professionals in these types of evaluations is definitely welcome.

## RELYING ON NATURAL ABILITY

In top-level sport (and top-level activity, anywhere), the base of success is built on constant, systematic development. You must have goals, a plan to achieve those goals, monitoring and analysis of progress, and a new plan to put into place. An official is in the thankless position of rarely having a true coach. There are instructors and educational events, but development most often happens during the game on the court. And if that is actually guided, the results are often better. The process is the same as learning to drive a car. You get the basics in driving school, but you don't really learn until you are out in traffic. In most sports you have instructors for officials, but the practical training and

coaching is missing. This part requires a lot of manpower, time, and financial resources.

Even without systematic training, in every sport there are occasional officiating "stars" that appear. Where do these "stars" come from? Often they are the talented individuals, whose personality traits are strong in just those areas that are required in officiating. A successful official's self-description could look like this:

"I'm a natural leader, who doesn't forget to take others into consideration. I have to make decision - often difficult ones - that are critical for the operations. Despite all of this, I realize that my role is to observe from the side. I get along with people, but I also know how to keep my distance from people when necessary as to not cloud my judgement. I work well under pressure, I understand that others have high expectations for my performance, and the results often reflect others' opinion of my success."

Just as with players, there are officials who are skilled in certain areas more than others. For some, all you have to do is hand them a whistle and a ball and say "Take care of business." Then, there are others you have to teach how to walk before they can run.

#### **CONTROL YOURSELF**

Each of us has strengths and weaknesses. The line between genius and insanity is very thin. In other words, our strengths can turn against ourselves, if we don't identify and control them. Here are a couple of examples: the ability to work independently is a strength, but being a loner and not recognizing the work of others is a weakness. On the other hand, being goal-oriented is a strength, but stubbornness makes operating that much more difficult.

I was speaking with my father recently, and I said, "You older people are really hard-headed. You never know when to let up." His answer got me thinking: "Why is it that in us older people it's seen as a negative, while in younger people this same characteristic is considered a positive, as in goal-oriented?"

In the end, the fact is that the problem is over-doing something, which turns it



from a positive to a negative. This is why it's critical to know your own strengths and weaknesses. By recognizing them, you're able to control and guide them. A good thing to remember is that even if you repress your weaknesses, they're never gone forever. When you lose control at some moment, they will rise to the top again.

**WHAT IS OFFICIATING?**

Try first to define the term "officiating" in as simple terms as possible (when you have your answer, move on).

People often make the mistake of turning small issues into overly big and important things. At many officiating events we talk about how many factors are part of officiating and how difficult an official's job is. Sometimes officiating is turned into a weird science that includes so many factors that it would realistically be impossible to manage all of them successfully. There are also many explanations for failure, but most often the reason is that the official wasn't psychologically or physically ready for a situation.

Based on that assumption, I say that officiating is nothing but:

1. Knowing how to anticipate what will happen.
2. Understanding what is happening now.
3. Reacting correctly to what has happened.

Understanding the food chain of basketball will also help one to assume an official's role. As an example: a player develops something new for his game (a new move, jumping higher, new shooting style), then the coach assimilates this new ability into his game plan, and then the official, after seeing the new situation, adjusts his officiating so that this new element is within his controlled environment. I doubt that a coach or an official can create something that a player hasn't already done. This is good to remember when thinking of why we are on the court, and what our role truly is in the grand scheme of things.

**MEMORY BANK**

How can we strengthen our psychological attributes so that we can control the action on the court? I believe that failure strengthens our mode of





operation, if we understand that it's a part of our regular business, and we know how to accept it. Naturally, the first step in development is to admit our deficiencies and be ready to correct them. It's not always easy because officials have strong personalities, just as players and coaches do. This is top-level athletics we're talking about.

Most "failure" situations we've learned the hard way-through experience. Another less painful way is to learn through others' mistakes. I don't know how many things I've learned from watching other officials in action. I've always tried to assimilate good attributes from other officials, while not forgetting that we are all individuals and we have our own personalities, and we can't forget that (whether or not we want to or not). This means that someone else's good traits may not be suited for you! Sometimes you see young officials trying to copy everything from other officials-even their bad attributes.

But, we can't always be in the stands watching a game. That's why audiovisual material is a good additional tool that should be used whenever possible. It's important to build a memory bank of situations that you might face as an official. By strengthening your memory bank, regularly adding to it, you can also increase your likelihood of making the right decision under pressure. Top athletes often use this same technique to improve their own performance.

#### EXPECTATIONS

Another thing that helps us understand people's reactions towards an official's performance is that they each have their own expectations for any product, service, or performance. If the expected and the actual meet, a person is usually satisfied with the result.

So, what are peoples' expectations towards officiating? It's almost always unreasonable. Most sports fanatics expect officials to be 100% correct. If this happens, it's deemed normal. This is why we only hear about officials failing, not succeeding. In a normal game, however, the officials will make about 100 calls. One can ask, if 20 of the calls were obviously wrong - which would mean some sort of catastrophe every two minutes or so - what would a spectator's opinion be? Most often the answer is, "The officiating is bad." In my

mind, the public's opinion would actually be much more critical: "Total failure." Still, on average, the official would have been correct in 80% of the calls.

In a normal game, there are usually two to five calls that are clearly wrong. Using the previous scale, this means a success rate of 95% to 98%. For a player, that percentage would mean a (exceptional) great game. For officials, you also have to consider the times you don't blow the whistle, meaning there are actually 200 to 250 decisions to be made.

#### A SUCCESSFUL OFFICIAL IS PROACTIVE

To close, I'd like to stop and consider the role of proactivity as a part of a successful official's operations. Proactive means taking initiative and being active. Basically it means that an individual should make decisions based on his own choices instead of outside factors. Proactive people guide their lives based on their own decisions and don't follow outside influences. Sometimes in officiating we meet similar situations, such as when a certain game didn't meet expectations. To say "They played dirty and acted in an unsportsmanlike manner" are normal words to hear from an official sometimes after the game. What the official really is trying to do is pass along responsibility for his or her own failure to others. A proactive response would be "Why did you let them play dirty?" A healthy dose of self-criticism is key to development. Look in the mirror before trying to find external reasons for failure.

Proactivity in officiating could be an official trying to guide the game's flow towards the nature of the game. By anticipating situations or immediately correcting bad developments will greatly factor into the flow of the game. Most players appreciate this type of official. In all honesty, proactivity is much more taxing and tiring than just observing and ruling from the side as a heavy hammer. But this proactive effort will always lead to results that will keep all parties happy. Winners always take initiative and actively affect their own environment at any level. They are winners because they - and not the actions - control what will happen next.

A saying that winners can always use: "Others are doing well. What can I do to achieve the same?"