

## CHAPTER 5

# Respect for Officials



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From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavour peace, is derived this second law; *that a man be willing, when others are too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.* For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war.

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—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Boys, the rules don't make much sense, but I believe in rules. And some of us broke 'em. I broke 'em. I can't do this—I can't win like this.

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—Coach Pete Bell in *Blue Chips*

Respect for officials should be one of the most obvious and least complicated components of good sportsmanship, but there seem to be fewer voices in contemporary sports calling attention to this neglected area than to issues such as trash talking, taunting opponents, or cheating. It's not uncommon for one and the same person to strongly object to verbal abuse of opponents but act as if officials are fair game for any and all manner of attacks. Likewise, it's not uncommon for the same person to consider cheating in sport a mortal sin but treat officials as nothing more than a hindrance to victory. After all, if cheating primarily involves violating the rules of the game in order to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent, and behavior toward officials doesn't directly involve your opponent, then it might seem to some people that one could be scrupulously fair in avoiding cheating while being ruthlessly disrespectful toward officials. But good sportsmanship, as we have already explained, is more than mere rule following.

Imagine this situation. You're attending a youth league sporting event—it could be soccer, football, softball, baseball, or basketball. The game is close and the competition is edgy. The parents in the stands become increasingly loud and boisterous. At some point in the game, perhaps after several questionable judgment calls by officials, the outcome is determined by yet another debatable officiating call. At the end of the game the offending official is verbally abused and

literally chased out of the playing area. The irate Little League Parent—the species is not specific to baseball—is so caught up in the moment that he or she yells, screams, and is even prepared to physically confront a youth league official. This is a depressingly common spectacle in youth league sports. The game has broken down—the spell has been broken. People who generally recognize ordinary human civility have failed to live up to standards that guide their conduct in normal, everyday life. They have failed to respect officials—they have failed to respect other human beings.

As we have argued throughout this book, the key to good sportsmanship is derived from understanding the nature of what you're doing as a participant in sport. This holds for all participants, even those indirectly involved as fans. The difficulty is that participants are often so caught up in the intensity of the competition that they fail to appreciate those elements of sport that would balance their momentary passion for success and victory. Remember: Sport is both competitive and playful. It is both important and trivial. It depends not only on my own contributions; it also depends essentially on the contributions of my opponents, teammates, coaches, officials, and the traditions of the sport itself. To appreciate this requires a broader perspective. Let's distinguish between the personal perspective of the participants who see things only in terms of their own interests and a more impersonal perspective that involves seeing things in terms of other interests and perspectives. For example, in the moral education of young children, we often insist that they look at things not only from their own point of view but also from the point of view of those who are affected by their actions. We ask: "How would you feel if someone did this to you?" We ask the child to step back and view things impartially.

Precisely the same issue concerning this clash of perspectives is apparent in sport. From my personal point of view as a player, coach, or even a fan, I am usually most interested in who wins the contest. As a player I compete against an opponent to win. It is often difficult to step back, as it were, and to see my activity from a larger, impersonal perspective, one that allows me to view it more holistically or completely. Such a broader perspective would enable me to understand and appreciate the role played by and the perspective of my opponents, teammates, and coaches. Ultimately, such a perspective would include an understanding of sport itself in the most general sense, why we play our games and to what extent they matter. As we have suggested—and we can now say this a little differently—virtue in sport arises when we are led outside of ourselves, in the direction of a kind of openness to the broader picture, of selflessly seeing the way

things are. And surely an impersonal understanding of sport would include an appreciation of the crucial role played by officials and *their* perspective, not simply our own single-minded devotion to succeed and passion to win.

Consider John McEnroe's behavior toward tennis officials. Of course, fans should have admired a good many of his traits as a tennis player: his fiery competitiveness, his creativity and imagination, his deft touch, his stamina. But his behavior toward officials was often inexcusable. His constant complaints about line calls sometimes turned the beauty of his matches into uncivil, shabby representations of emotional immaturity. From his point of view, he was subject to the most incompetent officiating in the history of tennis. From a broader perspective, he had an unreasonably unforgiving view of human error and an unrealistic certainty about his own perceptual judgments. As one tennis commentator put it, if he had expected the same level of perfection from himself that he did from line judges, he should have walked off the court and quit the game. His unsportsmanlike behavior was in part a function of his inability to attain a broader perspective on his play.

As it happens, we've recently had a special opportunity to experience the role of this perspective in sport. One of our good friends has worked himself up from refereeing junior high school basketball games to being the youngest referee in the Continental Basketball Association, and finally to being a referee in the NBA. It's an extraordinary experience to attend a professional basketball game after extended conversations with one of the referees. It's remarkable to see the game from his perspective as he attempts to control the game, handle the personalities, interpret the rules, reinforce the traditions, establish the "flow" of the game, and understand the psychological dynamics among the players. It is striking to interpret his judgments and appreciate the depth of his own experience and expertise from a standpoint outside the partisan perspectives of coaches, players, and fans. To put it simply, he's good. The only way to *see* this, as well as to respect the excellence he has achieved in his craft, is to attain a broader point of view. And, of course, you don't have to be the friend of an official to achieve this perspective.

## WHY RESPECT OFFICIALS?

The justification of this principle is neither lengthy nor surprising. Since sportsmanship is grounded first of all in the nature of the activity, even our attitudes toward officials should reflect an under-

standing of sport. In organized sport officials are “part of the game.” They are part of the tacit agreement that makes the game possible. One cannot have a sport contest without rules and the enforcement of rules; in an organized contest officials are the interpreters and enforcers of the conditions of competition. Officials are guardians of the spirit of the game. For that reason, respect for officials is closely related to respect for the game. Officials enforce not only the explicit rules but also the traditions and customs of the sport, the unwritten rules. Officials are often the crucial element in a system of sanctions that ensures that the rules are followed. As enforcers of equality they are there to preserve order. We should respect them for preventing the breakdown of the world of playful competition into a chaotic clash of self-serving individual wills, a “war of all against all” as the 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes memorably described a competitive situation without moral constraints. In everyday life we respect police as guardians of civil order, although we wish they were unnecessary, which, of course, would only come about if we lived in a social world populated only by wholly virtuous individuals. Officials in sport are somewhat like police, somewhat like parents enforcing habits of etiquette and good manners at the dinner table, somewhat like orchestra conductors interpreting traditions and establishing aesthetic rhythms.

Officials also deserve respect for the same reasons that players and coaches deserve respect. We should respect excellence wherever it resides, and good officials embody the excellence of their craft. Just as dedicated players and coaches work hard to become better in their respective roles as sport participants, dedicated officials are seriously engaged in learning their game and attempting to be as good as they can be. Most officials share with coaches and players a deep love for their sport. Players and coaches should keep in mind that officials, by their very decision to become officials, have demonstrated a significant attachment to their particular sport. Officials aren’t cynical skeptics in the sacred space of the play world; rather, they are usually fellow believers in the faith. In short, we should respect officials for their excellence, their desire to be as good as they can be, their love of the game, and their essential contributions to the event in which we’re participating.

It is especially important for coaches in youth leagues, high school sports, and even in college athletics to show respect for officials and demand the same of their players. In these situations your role as a moral educator, as a *teacher* of good sportsmanship is accentuated. Here you have numerous opportunities to exhibit and reinforce habits of civility, restraint, and impartiality. It’s important for you to show

your players by example that they can love competition and have an intense desire to succeed and win, but that they can do this while exhibiting good sportsmanship.

Finally, respect for officials is particularly important as a defense against the loser's tendency to complain, to blame, to whine, and not to take responsibility for defeat. Coaches should *never* allow their players to make officials the scapegoats for disappointing outcomes. In the moments after a tough loss, you can help players grow as human beings by forcing them to confront their own play in the game instead of blaming officials for the outcome. And you can begin to develop in your players that broader perspective we've emphasized, by suggesting that maybe, just *maybe*, sometimes the officials are right and we are wrong.

**Coach Skeptical:** That's a good point about not letting players blame officials. In fact, I tell my players that they don't need to be saying anything to the officials. That's my job. But let me tell you what, it's my job to do whatever it takes to win the game. And if that means riding the official until I've got him intimidated, that's part of the game. The officials know that. It might even mean that I might say whatever it takes to get myself thrown out of the game, if we're behind and I think that's the only way to motivate my team. The officials understand that, too. It goes with the territory. If they're not willing to take a little abuse, then they shouldn't put on the stripes.

Well, what is and isn't a part of the game is largely a matter of custom and tradition. And what you're describing is probably the way a majority of coaches behave. In that sense—that is, factually speaking—

**Coach Skeptical:** Factually speaking?

What *in fact* do most coaches do? They probably in fact do what you're describing. But you play a part in determining the customs and traditions. What we're asking is that you think about what makes sense—what makes sense in terms of the essential role that officials play in an athletic contest. Without them, it probably won't be an athletic contest for long. What if it became an accepted practice for coaches to take out contracts on officials they didn't like? Would you say that's "part of the game"? Factually speaking, it would be. But to say it's part of the game suggests that it has something to do with what a game is, that it's part of the nature of an athletic contest. We're saying that it's part of the nature of an athletic contest that officials have an essential function, without which the game would not be a game, and that for that reason we ought to respect them.

## SHOWING RESPECT FOR OFFICIALS

What we have said so far should give you more than a hint of the practical implications involved in respect for officials. But there are some obvious questions that need to be addressed, and we need more specific principles to help us make good judgments about appropriate and inappropriate complaints to officials. Does respect for officials mean that, as a coach, you could never argue, question, or complain about some officiating judgment? No, it does not. The attitude of respect does not necessitate a Pollyannish response to questionable officiating, nor does it imply Milquetoast compliance to whatever happens in the competitive arena. What, then, does it allow?

### The Norms of Civil Discourse

There's no reason why relationships with officials should be governed by any other norms than the ones that govern everyday discourse. Respect for an official's judgment is analogous to respect for another's belief or opinion. I should respect your right as an autonomous human being to make up your own mind, hold your own beliefs, and govern yourself. But that doesn't mean I must agree with you or think you're always right. As a matter of fact, if I respect you as a *rational* being, that is, as a being who can reflect about matters and seek good reasons for believing things, it might mean that I feel I have an obligation to respond to your position, question it, test it, and ask for the reasons for your view. I assume that some beliefs are better than others in terms of their support, in terms of their truth; and I assume that you are interested in truth. So I might give my own reasons in an attempt to convince you you're mistaken. But this should be done with a spirit of civility, that is, with an attitude of respect. I can respect you without necessarily agreeing with or even respecting your opinion. I can engage you in a spirited and even emotional discussion without breaking the bonds of civility.

Likewise, I can respond to officials by questioning and legitimately arguing with their judgments, but I should do this without personal animosity, name-calling, or invective. I should also recognize that some judgments are more appropriately questioned than others. For example, the interpretation of rules is a legitimate area of discussion. However, constant whining about the standard "judgment calls" of an official—the strike zone in softball, offsides in soccer, traveling in basketball—is probably not appropriate. Even the response to judgment calls should be guided by the notion that officials are interested in becoming better, so your questions can help them think about and evaluate their performances. But your questions can only be helpful if

officials respect *your* judgment, and continual obsessive complaints are not normally interpreted as helpful advice. In relationships in which we disagree with others, the tone of our response is crucial, and a good sport will seek to find the appropriate emotional hue of respectful reasoned disagreement.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Should you ever allow your players to question officials' calls or decisions?
  - Consider this: One coach we know of insists that his players always address officials in a quite formal manner. He requires his players to refer to officials as "sir" or "ma'am," "Mr." or "Ms." Is this a good idea? Would this help to develop or reinforce a respectful attitude?
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### The Silver Rule

In chapter 3 we introduced the Silver Rule, Confucius's negative formulation of the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." This maxim is worth considering in every situation that calls for treating others with respect, but it is particularly pertinent in this case. Players, coaches, and fans should keep this simple but profound principle in mind when relating to officials. If you would not want to be threatened, screamed at, cursed, and physically abused if *you* were officiating, then you should not behave in this manner. Broad moral rules do not always generate tidy moral judgments, but the Silver Rule should be extremely helpful in guiding practical decisions in difficult situations.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Have you considered having a prominent official in your sport come to speak to your players about the role of the official? Have you considered requiring your players to volunteer as officials for a lower level of competition in your sport?
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## The Principle of Charity

In logic and critical reasoning there is an important principle that guides appropriate responses to opposing positions and arguments. If you respond critically to someone, be sure you have interpreted the position accurately and reconstructed the best possible defense of it. Then if you find that there are good reasons for rejecting the position involved, you cannot be accused of attacking a “straw man,” rejecting a position or argument that your opponent does not actually hold. This is a principle that encourages impartiality insofar as you attempt to accurately assess what view your opponent holds and what reasons might be given for holding it. An analogous principle might moderate our responses to officials. When responding to or assessing an officiating judgment, you should avoid the habit of continually negative responses, as if officials are *always* wrong. In fact, instant replays on television strikingly reveal how often officials are right and how often the complaints of players and coaches are misguided. A charitable openness to the possibility of the correctness of an official’s judgment is an important moderating influence. Officials are neither always right nor always wrong; however, their very role involves a commitment to impartial interpretation of the rules. There’s no reason to believe that they are biased in favor of your opponent, and there *is* good reason to believe that your own judgment as a player, coach, or fan may be skewed in favor of the outcomes that you desire. A charitable attitude toward officials’ decisions is a practical and useful device to promote good sportsmanship.

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### TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Think of specific examples from your sport in which it is appropriate to question an official’s judgment. Contrast these examples with cases in which it would be inappropriate.
  - Do you agree that coaches should *never* allow their players to blame officials for a loss?
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## Officials and the Level of Play

A final principle should guide responses to officials in terms of how good we should expect them to be relative to the level of play at which they're participating. The principle is this: The level of officiating should be commensurate with the level of play. There's nothing vague about this principle. There is a tacit understanding among most officials that you must become *better*, as an official, if you work at increasingly higher levels of competition. We should expect high school and college officials to be better than youth league and junior high officials. Such expectations will once again act as moderating influences. At the lower levels of competitive sport, we should respond to the poor officiating of beginners and volunteers with disappointed shrugs rather than verbally offensive righteous indignation. At the higher levels, as we have said, spirited discussion is appropriate.

Of course, we can't ignore the fact that there are some bad officials. Put more strongly, some officials may be so incompetent that they should not be allowed to officiate. Whereas I must respect officials as people, I need not respect incompetence; nor must I accept the inability of an official to retain control or maintain the order of the game. Good officials deserve to be praised; bad or incompetent officials deserve a firm but civil negative evaluation, usually by their supervisors. Criticism should always take place within the proper institutional structures, but critics of particularly bad officials do neither the participants nor the sport itself any favors by passively accepting incompetence.

Finally, although our main focus here is the respect of coaches, players, and fans for officials, the implications for officials themselves should be clear. If participants and fans should only expect a level of officiating that is appropriate for the level of play, officials should make sure they are at least that good. Volunteer little league umpires may not have the time to become masters of the craft of officiating, as we would expect major league umpires to have done, but they have to know the game well enough to officiate a good little league baseball game. And, given their limitations, they have to do the very best they can, give their best effort just as we expect the players to give theirs. At any level, an official merely going through the motions is inexcusable. Every principle of respect implies a principle of responsibility: In this case, the respect we owe officials implies a responsibility on the part of officials to perform in such a way as to deserve that respect.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Have you ever officiated a sport you didn't know well—say, little league baseball—because no one else would volunteer and the kids wouldn't get to play otherwise? Were the expectations of the fans about the level of officiating commensurate with the level of play?
  - As we'll explain in more detail in the next chapter, one of the most interesting but difficult aspects of sportsmanship involves the unwritten customs and traditions that develop in a sport. Are there different traditions that allow for a more or less spirited response to officials at different levels of play? For different sports?
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## WRAP-UP

If you've played a sport, you don't have to have a great imagination to see things from the perspective of an opponent or teammate. The perspective of an opponent or teammate is the perspective of another player. And the perspective of an opposing coach is still the perspective of a coach. We've particularly stressed the notion of gaining perspective in this chapter because the perspective of an official is fundamentally different from that of a player or coach.

We've shown that you must understand the vital *role* of the official in keeping the game a game. But we've also suggested that putting yourself in the official's shoes—either through imagination, getting to know an official personally, or through the actual experience of officiating—is an exercise that every coach, player, and fan needs to go through from time to time.

In organized sport, officials are necessary, but, as the truism of common wisdom proclaims, officials, just like players and coaches, are human. They are fallible. They are no less prone to error than coaches and players who want so badly to win, although, as we've pointed out, they are less prone to errors of bias than the players and coaches. The problem for the good sport is transparent: How do you reconcile the clash between the desire for victory and the apparent fallibility of human judgment, especially when such fallibility (real or imagined) keeps the deep desire for victory from being fulfilled? The solution for the good sport is difficult but clear: civility, sensitivity to another's perspective, charitable vision, and reasonable expectations about the craft of officiating. And we need to remember that more often than not, we find ourselves questioning the judgment of an official because the official has just reminded us of our own fallibility, of our own humanness.