Effective Communication Between Officials and Coaches

By: Sandy Nitta*

After being appointed as the MPSF Supervisor of Officials a year ago, I spoke with almost all of the MPSF coaches, as well as a few coaches from the Golden Coast and WWPA Conferences. I asked all of these coaches, “What do you want to see from an Official?” Their overwhelming response was, “We want officials to acknowledge coaches when we ask a question, let us know they are listening, and that they will look for what I asked them to watch.”

Before these conversations with coaches I was totally against this, thinking, “They just want to sway the calls to go in their team’s favor.” While there might be some validity in this thought process, I felt a true sense that the coaches just wanted to be heard. After observing coaches’ behavior during games, this is what they are asking for and it calms them down, so they go back to a coaching role instead of an official role.

When speaking with Tom Tracy, Assistant Commissioner of the CWPA, and he told me about the book, *Verbal Judo* by George J. Thompson and Jerry B. Jenkins. After reading the book, I think it is important to share these points with you.

**Communication revolves around five facts:**

1. All people want to be treated with dignity and respect.
2. All people want to be asked instead of being told. You
3. All people want to know why they are being asked or ordered to do something.
4. All people want to be given options instead of threats.
5. All people want a second chance to correct their mistakes.

This global message promoting Respect, Understanding and Forgiveness can connect all people everywhere.

I have seen some officials who are very good at this style of communication and others who are not. I believe those that use this style have patience. Officials who exercise patience work well with coaches and, in my observations, the coaches settle down and begin to coach again. The officials who do not exercise patience, are quick to reach for the cards – yellow or red. Sometimes an official will issue a card from across the pool to protect their partner or because they see unacceptable behavior by a coach that the official on the bench side cannot see. This is unavoidable, but these scenarios are the exception and not the rule. The official can set the tone by whether or not he or she exercises patience.

*With input from, and the support of, Bob Corb, National Coordinator of Officials.
Here are a few examples of what an official can say to a coach:

A. Coach calmly says: “Hey can you watch the two hand grab by drives?” Your reply should be:

1. “Sure thing coach.”  
2. “I will watch for that.”  
3. “You got it coach.”  
4. “Ok I’ll watch but please stand behind the goal line.”  
5. Walk over to the coach and tell him/her what you saw and you will watch for it.

B. Coach is yelling and screaming: “Come on! You can’t see the two hands grab by drives?” Your reply should be:

1. “Settle down coach. I’ll watch for it.” vs. “You have to settle down! I am watching!”  
2. “Sure thing coach but please settle down and stand behind the goal line.” vs. “I said to settle down and you have to stand behind the goal line.”  
3. Walk over to the coach and tell him/her calmly to settle down, from my view I did not see it but will watch for it vs. Walking over to the coach and telling him or her in a tone of anger “You must settle down. I did not see what you saw!”  
4. Walk over to the coach and tell him/her what you saw and that when you see this incident you will call that 100% of the time vs. “You are wrong and I will call the game as I see fit.”

Things not to say or do:

1. Don’t call coaches by their name.  
2. Don’t escalate when talking to the coach.  
3. Don’t just walk away – Body Language  
4. Don’t walk away and put a hand up - Body Language  
5. Don’t lecture the coach on the rules.  
6. Don’t lecture the coach and tell him he is wrong and this is what happened.  
7. Don’t put your arm around him/her and explain your call. No physical contact!

Communicating with Female Coaches:

I also reviewed what Lynn Wittstock had talked about in her presentation at the Referee school about the differences between the men’s and women’s games, what Bob Corb had posted on the ADVANTAGE website during last year’s women season, my own experiences as a head coach, and the thoughts of some of the current female coaches at the collegiate level. Here are some things to consider:

1. Be aware of the perception that female coaches are often treated differently than their male counterparts and give female coaches equal leeway in how they may approach you.
2. When interacting with a female coach, be gender-blind in terms of what is and what is not acceptable decorum. For purposes of maintaining decorum treat all coaches the same.

3. While holding male and female coaches to the same standard of acceptable behavior, be respectful of the frequent differences between the way male and female coaches express themselves. Listen for the intended message especially if it is expressed less directly by a female coach (increased use of sarcasm; directing conversation to bench but intended for the referee, etc.).

4. Every person who has earned the position of head coach should be treated with respect. When working with a female coach begin with the assumption that she knows the game and is as clever tactically as her male counterpart.

5. Before every game, know who the head coach is; if a coaching staff has both males and females on the bench, don’t assume the head coach is a male.

**Final Words:**

If a coach is totally out of control, an official should not stand for this kind of behavior from a coach. Sometimes you must bring out the yellow and/or the red card. Before it comes to this boiling point, try to calm the coach down, listen to what he or she is saying and hopefully it does not come to bringing out the cards!

**Note to Officials:** As an Evaluator on your game, if you follow these guidelines and still have to issue a red card, we will support you 100%.