ASEP
Officiating Youth Sport
Study Guide

Welcome to ASEP Youth Sport Officiating! We're glad you chose to become an official. You're an essential part of youth sport; after all, without you, the games can't go on. But the games—thanks in part to you and others like you—do go on, and on, in a never-ending procession of opportunities for kids to play sports, have fun, and grow through the experience. In fact, more than 20 million kids between the ages of 6 and 16 play organized sports each year. Do you know why they play? These are the reasons, listed in order of importance that kids give:

1. To have fun
2. To improve skills and learn new ones
3. To be with friends and make new ones
4. To feel the excitement of competition
5. To succeed or win
6. To exercise or become fit

These reasons help shape how we want you to approach officiating. The focus in youth sports is much different from what it is in professional, college, or even high school sports. In higher ranks, the greatest—and sometimes only—focus is on winning. As you can see, winning is fifth on the list for kids. So what should you focus on as a youth sport official? We want you to zero in on five things:

1. Be impartial and fair in your duties as an official.
2. Provide for a safe experience for the players.
3. Keep the sport fun for kids.
4. As appropriate, help players learn the game.
5. Respect yourself, the game, its regulations, the players, the coaches and the fans.

Let's spend a few moments with each item.

Be Impartial and Fair

One of the main reasons sports have rules is to provide teams an equal opportunity to succeed (we often call this "a level playing field"). Officials are present at contests to ensure that the contests are being played within the confines of the rules and to ensure that no one is getting an unfair advantage. This responsibility leads to difficult decisions at times: calling a runner out on a bang-bang play to end a close baseball game, calling a fifth foul on a team's best basketball player with one minute remaining in a tie game, calling a net violation on a front-row volleyball player at match point. Officials are the only people involved in the contest who are impartial and unbiased. You shouldn't—and can't—care who wins or loses. You can keep the sport fun for the players and have fun fulfilling your responsibilities, but be sure to also maintain your objectivity and impartiality. Players have a difficult time having fun if they feel they are being cheated or treated unfairly.

Provide for a Safe Experience

Another important reason sports have rules is to provide players the opportunity to play within a safe environment. The illegal-contact rules in sports like basketball, soccer, and others were written to keep players safe and reduce the likelihood of injury. We have "out of bounds" and "playable area" rules in many sports to help prevent players from crashing into bleachers or other obstacles while making a play.

You can do many things as a youth sport official to provide for a safe experience. Check out the facility and the equipment that will be used for the contest to ensure a safe environment. Make sure there are no unusual or unsafe objects around the playing field—things that players could crash into, trip over, or fall or slip on while playing the game. Look for personal gym bags near the court or field boundary lines, extra bats or helmets in foul territory, an equipment wagon or field liner just outside the confines of the field, or holes or mounds on the playing field. Make sure the equipment that youngsters will use is safe. For example, bats and helmets aren't cracked, and volleyball nets are properly secured, with cables covered or padded. If in doubt, the rule book is usually a good resource for proper safety precautions and guidelines. If you can, fix it. If you think the equipment might be unsafe and it is beyond your ability to correct the problem, speak with one of your league supervisors. They may not be aware that a safety hazard exists.

Also be sure to apply the contest rules as they were written regarding safety. This is sometimes very difficult, and it requires good and reasonable judgment. We go into more detail on this in "How Strictly Should You Enforce Rules?"

Keep the Sport Fun

Officials can set the tone for a fun environment. One of the best ways to do this is to convey that you enjoy what you are doing and that you're happy to be there. Your tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language speak volumes to youngsters. The participants want to have fun, but they also want to feel good about their involvement. An encouraging and non-threatening tone of voice can help them feel more comfortable. Smiles, affirming nods, and even laughter (when appropriate) are expressions that can encourage participants. And finally, open body language (e.g., hands at your sides or behind your back) indicates you are approachable and open to hearing what someone has to say. Arms crossed on your chest can convey a "know-it-all" or "don't-mess-with-me" attitude. Hands in your pockets might suggest you're bored.

Words of encouragement can also be appropriate. Telling a participant, "Nice hustle," "Nice play," or something similar, tells them that you're paying attention and that you noticed the player and his or her effort. So often the child's effort is overlooked in youth sports. When kids feel good about what they are doing, they're more likely to have fun.

Help Players Learn the Game

Officials often have the opportunity to help players improve their skills and learn the rules of the game. Skill development is typically the role of the coach, but officials often have opportunities to assist youngsters here. We certainly don't want you to put on a clinic, but an occasional piece of instruction can help young athletes develop their skills and enjoy the game more. As an umpire you might be able to give a catcher some minimal instruction about attempting to block wild pitches. Or, as a volleyball referee you might be able to give a player instruction regarding the proper way to pass a ball. You need to be careful in this instruction; you don't want to give different information than what the coach is providing, and you wouldn't want to help one team but not the other.

More often, officials have opportunities to help players learn the rules of the game and their application. If you can take the time to briefly explain why you made a specific call, you can help the player learn not only the correct rule but also the proper technique or skill. For instance, as a basketball official occasionally you call players for traveling. If you explain to them that they moved their pivot foot, and even show them what they did, they will have learned more about the rule and might have learned how not to do it again. The key is to be concise; don't take away from the game. And don't undermine the role of the coach. Remember your two primary roles in the contest are to be impartial and fair and to provide for safety. Keeping the sport fun and helping players learn the game are the things that set you apart from officiating at the upper levels.

Respect

Respect yourself and other officials, the game, the rules or laws of the game, the players, the coaches and the fans. Also show that you respect the people involved. Show respect for yourself as an official not by being arrogant, telling everyone you're in charge, showing off, or demanding obedience, but by conducting yourself in a respectful and civilized manner. Players and their coaches and fans should leave the contest thinking it was well officiated and saying, "Who was that official? I don't remember seeing her very much."

The way to show respect is to be in the proper uniform, be on time, know and understand the regulations, interact appropriately with the players and, as needed, with the coaches and fans. Do not interfere with the game being played; officiate it. When you must deal firmly with a player, do not humiliate him or her, but get the job done respectfully, get the problem corrected, and move on.

Respect for the game and its participants means being cordial. Using terms such as *sir, ma'am, gentlemen, ladies* and *coach;* saying *good morning, good afternoon, welcome, hope you have a good game* (but not good luck) or *have fun.* Rarely use an actual name unless dealing with an injured player. Never be overly friendly with any participant. Respect for the game and its participants also means knowing and understanding the regulations, applying them fairly and evenhandedly with a good measure of common sense, and using them to keep the contest moving. Respect for the game also means being in good physical condition so you have the ability to keep up with the level of play you're responsible for.

We appreciate your commitment to officiating this season. In turn, we're committed to helping make this season enjoyable and satisfying for you. Our goal is to help you know

- your responsibilities as a youth sport official,
- how strictly to enforce rules,
- how to communicate with coaches and players, and
- how to recognize and handle conflict.

We'll address those issues throughout the rest of this guide. And in doing so, we'll help prepare you to have a great season of officiating.

Your Responsibilities

Okay, you know we want you to be impartial and fair, provide for the players' safety, help keep the games fun, and help players learn the skills and rules of the game when it's appropriate to do so. We want you to keep those goals in mind throughout each game and throughout the season. But what are your specific responsibilities?

If you fulfill the following five responsibilities, you'll be well on your way to a great season.

1. Know the rules!
   - There is no substitute for knowing the rules of the game. You can do all the other things mentioned throughout this guide, but if you don't know the rules, you can't be successful. Sometimes we think we know the rules of a game because we played it. That might be a good start, but there are many rules within a sport that players and officials just don't know. Study your rule book!
   - Studying a rule book can be boring—so make it interesting! Test your fellow officials on the rules. Read one full rule in the rule book each night before the beginning of the season. In addition, be sure to read any other pertinent program information, and complete any and all tests.
   - The stronger your knowledge of the rules, the better able you will be to loosen up or tighten up when necessary. This concept is explored further in the section titles "How Strictly Should You Enforce Rules?".
2. Come dressed for officiating.
   - Many facilities may not have a place for you to change into your official's uniform. Come to the contest ready to work.
   - Wear an official's shirt or vest, or whatever the league requires. Take pride in your appearance and don't "downgrade" because it's children's sports.
   - If you're wearing the proper uniform and your appearance is neat, you will make a good first impression, which is extremely important in officiating.
3. Be in good physical condition.

- Keep in mind the level of competition you're officiating. The higher the level, the better conditioned you'll need to be. You'll need the speed and stamina to be in the right place at the right time to meet your other responsibilities.

4. Arrive at least 20 minutes before a game.

   - There's nothing worse than arriving at a game site—and everyone is waiting for *you*. It's difficult to get your mind, and sometimes your body, ready to officiate without preparation. You are responsible for many things before the game begins (see "Before the Contest Begins"). Arriving at least 20 minutes before the game helps you meet those responsibilities.
   - One of your main responsibilities is the safety of the players. Before the game is the time to take care of some of that business. Inspect the field of play, the facilities, and the players' equipment.

5. Begin the game on time.

   - Often multiple games are played in youth sports. If any game begins late, it usually delays remaining games, which makes for a long day or evening.
   - Beginning the games on time not only helps to keep things on schedule, but it also shows that you are in control of the situation and that you respect the players, coaches, and fans.

6. Keep a good game flow.

   - Quite often this is out of your control, because the players are still developing their skills. Games tend to be choppy, with many interruptions for violations and illegal play.
   - You can exert some control and establish a good game flow in dead-ball situations— such as time-outs, substitutions, throw-ins, and between innings. Keep the players moving and hustling. These may also be opportunities to do some of the things we mentioned earlier, such as encouraging players or letting them know what they did wrong so they can learn from their mistakes.

This isn't an exhaustive list—you'll be responsible for communicating with players and coaches, and recognizing and handling conflicts (these issues are addressed later in this guide). But by fulfilling the five responsibilities we've mentioned, you'll be on your way to doing a great job.

Before the Contest Begins: You should do three things

1. Meet with whoever is in charge of the contest (the contest manager). You'll want to know where they will be during the contest, in case you need them for any administrative assistance. You'll also want to ask them about any important relative information, such as the functioning of equipment, pertinent team information (e.g., forfeits or sportsmanship issues), and what to do when finished.

2. Inspect the playing area to make sure it's safe. Report hazards to the contest manager. Remember that this is one of your primary responsibilities. Look for unusual or unsafe objects around the playing field and make sure that the equipment to be used is safe. Do not start play if you think it is not safe.

3. Meet with the coaches. During this meeting, you should be cordial, but keep conversation to a minimum. Understand that coaches are trying to get their teams ready to play. You should do the following things:

- Introduce yourself (not necessarily by name), welcome them, ask if any player has a medical concern or other special concern and wish each a good game.
- If necessary, briefly clarify the organization's expectations (i.e., the organization's philosophy and how it affects your officiating). This is especially important at the beginning of the season;
- Communicate your goals for officiating the contest, but generally say nothing more than you look forward to an injury-free, well-played contest and hope the players have fun.
- If necessary, point out recent modifications in the rules.
- Do *not* promise that you will make a particular call in a specific situation.

When an Injury Occurs

Because one of your main responsibilities is to provide for safety, you've most likely done all you can to prevent an injury. But injuries are an inevitable part of sports: Ankles get twisted, knees get scraped, and players collide and go down in a heap.

What Do You Do When a Player Gets Injured?

First, you are not a doctor. Don't be placed in the position of determining whether a player should be taken out of the contest, given ice, sent to the hospital, or provided with a particular type of treatment. One of the coaches' responsibilities is to provide first aid and determine what should happen next. Your role as an official is to assist with the situation and prevent further injury.

Your first resource in many cases is the rule book. Some rule codes provide information about when to stop a contest, what happens to the player if you must stop the contest for an injury, what happens if there is blood on the player or on the player's uniform, and so on. Know those rules.

Next, be too safety conscious. If you think a player's safety is seriously at risk, stop the contest. It is better to err on the side of safety and stop the contest to prevent a serious injury or further injury than to let the contest continue. Don't make your concern allowing one more run to score or a goal to count. The outcome of the game is not worth sacrificing the player's well-being. The coaches and spectators will (or at least they should) appreciate your putting safety first.

When you believe an injury is minor, you might want to wait until the end of the play to stop the contest. An example of when to wait might be in a basketball game when a defensive player gets a steal and starts a fast break. You notice another player limping in the backcourt. You might want to wait until the player who stole the ball either makes the lay-up or sets up the offense before you stop the game.

When you stop the game for a possible injury, follow these steps (again, check your rule book to determine if a specific procedure is already established for you in that particular sport):

1. Stop play.
2. Indicate that you are calling an official's time-out. This can usually be done by saying, "My time" while putting your hand on your chest.
3. Go to the injured player and ask if he or she needs a substitute or the coach (or a trainer if one is available). Never touch a player unless it is to stop profuse bleeding or you are a trained first responder.
4. The player's response will dictate what you do next.
5. If the player doesn't or can't respond, beckon the coach out immediately.

How Strictly Should You Enforce Rules?

When young athletes are still developing their skills, talent can vary greatly from player to player. If you were to enforce every rule in the rule book, you would be stopping the contest nearly every 10 seconds. Are there some rules that you can put aside at the lower levels? Or should you enforce every rule on every occasion?

A baseball or softball shortstop, in trying to touch second base on a force play, just misses the bag. A basketball player, in trying to pivot, drags her pivot foot a few inches. A volleyball server's toes touch the end line as she serves. A soccer player making a throw-in begins with two hands over the head and both feet in contact with the ground, as the rules indicate, but in releasing the ball, the player lets his back foot rises slightly off the ground. Do you make any of these calls? Just how strictly should you enforce the rules of the game?

That's not an easy question to answer; it's not as clear cut as it might seem. While we can't provide directions for all types of calls, we can give you guidelines to help you know what rules to enforce. Remember, you're trying to be fair and impartial and to make each contest safe, fun, and a good learning experience for the players. You don't want to unnecessarily penalize players for weak skills. Stopping play for almost every infraction, let alone *every* infraction, especially for ones that do not affect players' safety or fairness, can spoil the match or game for players and their fans. But, you do want to enforce rules that are at the core of the game, that pertain to players' safety, and that have a direct bearing on the outcome of the game.

These are some good general guidelines to help you know what rules to enforce:

1. Consider the skill level of the players you are officiating.
2. Establish your tolerance level.
3. Be consistent throughout the contest with the rules you enforce (see "Making Consistent Calls"), but if the contest gets too rough, you might need to tighten up calls. Sometimes with a weaker-skilled player, the body doesn't do what the mind wants it to. In the examples given previously, each player might have known what he or she was supposed to do, by rule, but the body did not cooperate. In those cases you may be a

bit more tolerant—and not be as strict with rule enforcement. But remember to be fair and consistent!

A basketball player picks up the ball and runs four steps down the court with the ball in his hands. A soccer player making a throw-in uses a one-handed, baseball-style throw, instead of using two hands over the head. A softball player touches the base instead of the runner on a tag play. In these examples, the players either didn't know the established rule or totally disregarded it, so you have no choice but to enforce the rule as written. You might also, if appropriate, explain the call to the player. By informing youngsters of their infractions and how they were committed, you can help the players prevent them from occurring again. Use your voice to communicate confidence and decisiveness. But remember to maintain a tone of fun and encouragement. For young athletes, making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. Athletes need to know that they can't expect perfect performances and sometimes an "Oops" can be a good term to use when a player recognizes an honest mistake.

We've already discussed the need to enforce rules pertaining to players' safety. Those rules cannot be compromised and must be enforced as written. And as officials, fair and impartial ones, you do not want to change the outcome of a game by what you call or don't call. Who's to say the call you made (or didn't make) early in the game didn't affect the outcome at the end of the game? Your call selection also can contribute to the control, or the lack of control, you have over any contest. This is all a part of the challenge that comes with officiating. Learning to be consistent and having good judgment comes with experience. Watching more experienced officials can be beneficial as well.

Some other tips that will help you with your call selection and rule enforcement are explained in the following sections.

An Ounce of Prevention

The term *preventive officiating,* often used among officials, may refer to safety issues, call(or no-call) selection, or addressing certain behaviors. Officials can use preventive officiating to defuse potential problems. In a typical contest an official might make hundreds, sometimes thousands, of calls or decisions. So you should consider anything that can be done to make the job easier and help the participants have fun and be safe. What would you do in the following scenario?

Situation: A free-throw shooter is on the line, preparing to shoot. Her toe is on the line.

Options: You have three choices:

1. Don't say anything and let her shoot; then call a violation.
2. Overlook the violation and don't call anything.
3. Let her know before she shoots that her toe is on the line, and that it's a rule that her toe must be behind the line.

Certainly at this level, the third choice is the appropriate way to handle that situation. And there are plenty of other situations that call for a similar response. Here are a few more examples of preventive officiating:

Situation: A volleyball player enters the game as a substitute to serve. She's so excited to be in the game that she serves the ball without receiving the proper signal from the referee.

Preventive officiating: Blow your whistle to stop play, and inform the server she must wait for the signal from the official. Give her back the ball and begin the serving sequence properly.

Situation: A baseball player steps to the plate to bat with a very loose-fitting helmet on his head.

Preventive officiating: Instruct the player that for safety reasons he must have a properly fitted helmet on while batting. Allow him to find an appropriate helmet and step in to bat.

Situation: A soccer team is instructed that it is to receive a corner kick. The offensive player takes the ball and puts it midway between the near goalpost and the corner of the field.

Preventive officiating: Blow the whistle to prevent the play from beginning, and instruct the player that the ball must be placed in the corner of the field.

Sometimes it is appropriate to warn players before they violate a rule, and other times it is not. Remember the reference to dead-ball situations when we discussed establishing a flow to the game? Dead-ball situations are ideal times for preventive officiating. Note that in two of the previous situations, the official didn't stop the game to give instructions or prevent infractions; the game was already stopped. In the volleyball example, the official did stop play: The ball was served illegally, and rather than award a side-out for the illegal serve, we're suggesting a re-serve for that situation. It is usually inappropriate to stop a game to give an instructional lesson or warn players that they are about to violate a rule. Again, keep in mind your goals at this level of play and prevent what you can; just be consistent and fair.

Another great time to use preventive officiating is when players or coaches are be-coming agitated or argumentative. You can defuse potentially difficult situations before they become real problems by talking to the player or coach, warning them that they are approaching inappropriate behavior, and asking them to settle down.

Situation: You notice two opposing soccer players getting agitated with one another to the point that it appears they may say something inappropriate or become physically aggressive.

Preventive officiating: Blow the whistle to stop play (if appropriate). Or, during the next dead ball, get the two of them together, speak to them calmly about why they are there and how you want them to behave (sportsmanlike) and have fun. Respond with something like "Are we cool?" If the players offer to shake hands, that's good, but don't force it. Proceed with the proper restart, keeping an eye on those athletes for the remainder of the contest and even when the game ends. That way you can detect additional signs of hostility.

Advantage Concept

Let's look more closely at the advantage concept. In some sports you can delay enforcing a rule or not call it at all if the team that would have benefited from the call already has the advantage. The best examples of this concept are found in soccer. Say that player A is dribbling the ball downfield when player B makes illegal contact with player A. Player A maintains possession of the ball despite the illegal contact and furthermore has a break toward the opponent's goal. It is likely that the official would not call the illegal contact by player B, because calling it would actually put player A (and player A's team) at a disadvantage. The foul may be subsequently called if the advantage does not materialize.

A similar example can be found in basketball. In this next case, defensive player B1 intercepts a pass going between A1 and A2, two offensive teammates in their frontcourt. Player B1 has a clear break toward her basket. A1, attempting to knock the ball loose from B1, makes contact with B1's arm near mid-court. B1 maintains control of the ball, however, and dribbles the length of the court to the basket for an easy, uncontested lay-up. In this situation, especially with more highly skilled players, you could "no-call" the contact because B1 has a clear break toward her basket. You might actually be penalizing the offensive players (putting them at a disadvantage) by calling the foul—in other words, taking away a sure basket for an out-of-bounds or bonus situation. At lower levels, on the other hand, there is no guarantee that the lay-up would be made, so it might be better to call the foul. Regardless, in this situation, if you no-call the contact near mid-court, and B1 misses the lay-up, you can't go back and then call the foul. Too much time would have elapsed between the two actions.

This is a complicated and confusing concept, one that is often misunderstood by players and coaches and misapplied by inexperienced officials. Calls based on advantage or disadvantage may not be understood, especially by younger players. Many times players might only sense that they have been fouled without realizing they actually had or maintained an advantage over their opponent. So they quit playing, knowing they have been fouled. In soccer, referees are instructed to shout, "Play on" and swing both arms up and forward in a grand sweeping motion to apply advantage. In other sports (and in soccer, too), you should say, "I saw that," or "Keep playing." Also, make a less dramatic gesture than the soccer referees do, perhaps a gentle one- or two-handed, hands-down, palms-forward, "let's go" gesture.

It is probably best to call the game more by-the-book, at least for players who are 11 years old or younger, rather than misapply the advantage concept. As you gain experience as an official (and as players gain experience), it will become easier to (and clearer when to) apply the advantage concept to the games you officiate. If no foul occurred, but somebody acts as though one did, simply say, "Nothing there," or "No foul," and add, "Keep playing."

Making Consistent Calls

We've told you that you shouldn't always be a by-the-book official, strictly enforcing every rule. Yet in some ways it's easier to go strictly by the book—so long as you know the book well! Of course, you need to know the rules of the sport, but how do you maintain the consistency that's desired from all officials when sometimes you don't make all the calls that you could? Here are some tips for being consistent—while at the same time not strictly enforcing all the rules.

- Know a little bit about the kids you are officiating before the contest begins. How old are they? How many games have they played already? Have these two teams played each other before? You might not have access to answers to all these questions, but any background information you can acquire might help you during the contest.

- Watch the teams warm up; this will tell you a little bit about their skill level—and things you might have to deal with during the game.

- As mentioned earlier, establish a tolerance level before the game (or at least early in the game) that is appropriate for the skill level of those you are officiating. Think to yourself, *Based on the talent and skill level of these players, I might not be able to call [this rule] as tightly today.* Know going into the contest what kind of calls you want to make and what kind of flow you want to establish.

- Once the contest begins, you are in control of what will—or will not—be called. Let your mind focus on being consistent, but don't over think what is happening. Officiating is basically reacting to some kind of stimuli. But once you establish a certain kind of call, or certain application of a rule, you must do it the same way each time for each team.

- Officiating mistakes happen. If (based on your own judgment or realization or appropriate signal by a member of your officiating team, but not based on what a coach, player, or fan tells you) you make a mistake during the game, miss something, or call something that didn't really happen (which we all do), forget about it. You can't take back what just happened. Officials' mistakes are part of the game. It's just like missing a free throw, spiking a ball into the net, or striking out. In some sports, if you discover the mistake quickly, you may change your call. For example, a football official may waive off a flag that was thrown. Or a soccer referee, after signaling a goal was scored, may disallow it upon quickly learning it was scored because of a foul. You cannot, however, "un-blow" your whistle if it stopped play, but you might be able to change the restart. If you can't change your call or it's too late, that's okay. What's important is to go forward, get on with the game, learn from the experience, and improve because of it. The worst thing you can do is dwell on it and miss the next call.

- Get it right, of course, if you can. If you do make a mistake and have an opportunity to correct it, do so. This goes back to the dead-ball situations mentioned earlier. If you've just verbalized that the ball is to go to the blue team, and you know it really should go to the white team, there's nothing wrong with taking a moment to correct the situation and giving the ball to the proper team: "No, my mistake, it's white ball." This goes a long way toward being consistent and gaining the respect of coaches, players, and fans.

- If you blow it and you can't make it right, do not give the other team a make-up call. Make-up calls go against a team to make up for a bad call just made against the opponent. For instance, you call a lift on a player in volleyball because it sounded illegal. As soon as you blow your whistle and give the signal, you have a sinking feeling of: *Oops, she really didn't lift that ball; it just sounded bad.* So, a few plays later, you call a lift on the other team, just to even things up. If you start making calls just to even things up, there's no way you can be consistent. You lose track of whose turn it is for the call. Just call what you see. Again, if you make a mistake, forget it and work hard not to miss the next one.

- Don't guess. If you're not sure something illegal just happened, don't call it. Call only what you know for sure happened.
- Concentrate, even when the game gets long and boring. Sometimes games (especially with younger players) can get lopsided or drag on. Your mind might drift to other places or things, like getting home, what you want to do after the game, or just about anywhere but where it needs to be. Play a game within the game to help you keep your focus. For instance, watch the clock on every dead ball so you know the exact time remaining. Count up the number of shots on goal by a certain team or player. Count the number of times the pitcher throws to the inside of the plate. Don't let yourself be focused on something other than the game (or the game within the game). This will help you concentrate and stay consistent.

Communicating With Coaches and Players

One of your duties as an official is communicating with coaches and players. When coaches and players know up front what to expect from you, the contest usually proceeds more smoothly. Here are suggestions for communicating with coaches and players, as well as others tips about communication.

Coaches

Before the Game

- Clarify the organization's expectations for the contest and your officiating objectives.
- Review any rule modifications, but do not say how you will call this play or that one.
- Share with coaches the organization's stance on foul language and other behaviors that are unacceptable and how these behaviors will be dealt with if they occur.
- Be wary of making specific promises. You might be in a situation that differs from the rule you promised (e.g., a player with a medical condition that causes her to make verbal outbursts).

During the Game

- Promote an atmosphere of cooperation.
- Leave any attitude or game face—which coaches (and players) will interpret as meanness, not helpfulness—at home.
- Let the coaches know you will be fair and impartial and that you're there to help the kids have fun, be safe, and learn the game.

Players

Before the Game

- Meet briefly with captains or team reps before the contest.
- Set the tone for how you'll officiate.

- Teach the kids the protocol of the game (e.g., officials communicate to teams through captains or team reps about how substitutes enter the game).

During the Game

- Be understanding and supportive of the players.
- Use preventive officiating to warn players about infractions.
- Take opportunities to teach the game, promote good sportsmanship, and encourage players to have fun playing the game.
- Never ask a player to make your decision for you (e.g., safe or out, goal or no goal).

What We Hear

Listening to surroundings is an important part of communication. But during the course of a contest, you might hear many different things. What do you react to and what do you ignore? Here are a few things to consider regarding what you may hear and how it may be delivered during a contest.

- **Questioning.** Sometimes coaches (and players) just want to know what you saw and why you made the call that you made. "What did she do?" They might not be questioning your judgment; they might just want a simple explanation: "Coach, she stepped on the plate while she attempted to bunt the ball." Be approachable and willing to give an explanation in those situations. Remember, you want the players to learn more about the game at this level. However, questioning that becomes excessive or that begins to break your concentration is inappropriate.

- **Yelling.** Coaches will often communicate with their players by yelling. It might not be a nice way to deal with certain situations, but it might be the only practical way to get their attention. They might also deal with you the same way. If they just want to get your attention for some order of business, that's one thing. But if they are yelling at you because they think you missed something or they don't like what you just called, that's quite another thing. Try not to let coaches yell at you from across the floor or field. It doesn't set a good example, and it sends the wrong message to the players and fans. You may say to a coach, "Coach, I'm willing to hear what you have to say, but please don't yell at me from across the floor. I'm not going to yell at you, so please don't yell at me. Now, what was it that you wanted?" In many cases they will apologize for yelling, and they probably won't do it again. If they do, follow the steps on pages 38–39 to handle the conflict.

- **Bench chatter.** Sometimes as players who are not currently in the contest wait on the bench or wherever, they verbalize opinions about such things as their coach, the players in the game, or the job you are doing. In general, ignore that kind of bench chatter. Address it only if becomes vulgar, offensive, or abusive. And then address it with the coach. The coach, by rule, is responsible for the bench. Don't engage in dialog with a player who isn't in the game; let the coach handle it.

- **Self-talk.** Many players and coaches often talk to themselves, usually under their breath. Sometimes it's about their own performance, their team's performance, or your performance. Don't have "rabbit ears." Try to ignore the self-talk of players

and coaches. Officials have to confront enough situations; don't go looking for trouble. If the self-talk is loud enough for the fans in the third row to hear, it is no longer self-talk. If inappropriate, address it as you would any other inappropriate situation.

What You Say and How You Say It

How you say things to players and coaches can be just as important as what you say. Effective communication is essential to becoming a successful official. Here are a few items to help you be an effective communicator.

- Keep an upbeat tone of voice with players, especially the very young ones.
- When appropriate, use humor to keep things upbeat.
- If appropriate, let players know what they've done right and wrong.
- Use language the players can understand.
- Offer praise to players when they do things well.
- Address coaches and players calmly and professionally. Don't raise your voice to them, even if they don't give you the same courtesy.
- Never tell a coach, "Sit down and be quiet." In most every sport, the coach doesn't have to sit down and doesn't have to be quiet. Be specific with what is inappropriate about the behavior and let the person know what you want him or her to do. "Coach, you must stay in your coaching box."
- Don't be afraid to admit you might have made a mistake. "You might be right coach. I might have missed that one. I'll work hard so that it doesn't happen again." You don't want to have to say that too often. Say it only when you think you might have really blown one.
- Be sincere.

Body Talk

You communicate a huge amount of information without saying a word. Consider what you communicate to someone when you frown, or when you stand with your hands on your hips, or when you roll your eyes—or, conversely, when you smile, or when you stand straight and poised for action, or when you are focused intently on something. In fact, it's estimated that 70 percent of our communication is nonverbal. So what does this mean for you as an official? In "Keep the Sport Fun" we brought up a few points about what to do with your hands. Here's a list of suggestions to help you use body language to send the right message to coaches, players, and fans.

Body talk: Stance. Practice good posture when standing.

Message: I'm confident and ready.

Body talk: Hands. Keep hands and arms at your side or behind your back when addressing a coach or player. Avoid putting your hands on your hips or in your pockets. Do not put your hands on a player or a coach.

Message: I'm approachable and willing to listen to what you have to say.

Body talk: Hustle. Use the appropriate amount of speed to get in position to make the call.

Message: Being in the best position to make the call is the most important thing I can do.

Body talk: Positioning. If you want to get a better look at something, move your feet to get there; don't just bend at the neck and waist—unless of course, the nature of the sport doesn't allow you to move.

Message: I'm willing to do what it takes to get the best angle and be in the best position possible to get the call right.

Body talk: Facial expressions. Smile. Give affirming nods. Avoid frowning and disapproving looks. An occasional look that says, "I saw that," is okay.

Message: I like what I'm doing and I'm happy to be here. I enjoy the interaction with the players and coaches.

Body talk: Signals and gestures. Give signals and gestures the way the league and the rule book instruct. Avoid over exaggerating your signals.

Message: I'm in complete control of the situation. I'm calm, cool, and collected. I'm not the show here; the players are. There's no need to draw attention to myself.

Recognizing and Handling Conflict

If you know and fulfill your responsibilities (which we talked about earlier), if you enforce rules fairly and consistently, and if you communicate well with coaches and players, you'll probably encounter a minimum of conflict. But conflict can—and will—arise, no matter how well you officiate, so it's to your benefit to recognize and handle conflict when it does arise.

Conflict can come in the form of an upset coach, player, or fan. It can arise over a specific play or call (or no call), or it can boil over from something that happened the previous week or from something that happened away from the contest. Seasoned officials learn to anticipate conflict, to sense when something that happened—or that is about to happen—might turn into an argument or dispute. In the next section we provide several warning signs of conflict and guidelines for handling conflicts with coaches, players, and fans.

Warning Signs of Conflict

Officials not only have to watch the play closely and be ready to respond as appropriate, but they also must watch for warning signs of conflict from players and coaches. Here are signs to watch for:

Before the Contest Ever Starts

- The same two teams previously played each other and there were problems.
- The teams or coaches have a history of bad blood.

During Warm-Ups

- There is an excessive amount of showboating.
- Players are trash-talking or taunting one another.

During the Contest

- The players, coaches, or fans are complaining that they are being cheated.
- The coaches and players want to officiate the contest for you—basically they want to do their jobs *and* yours.
- A coach uses excessive gesturing of signals and, through his or her behavior, begins inciting the crowd.
- The game becomes excessively physical and out of control.
- Coaches are yelling at you and blaming you for players' poor performance or lack of skill.

Conflicts With Coaches and Players

1. Establish and know your tolerance level. Most officials will tolerate some inappropriate dialogue or behaviors from coaches and players. Determine the behaviors you absolutely will not tolerate ahead of time, such as these:

- Abusive or foul language
- Questioning your integrity
- Fighting

Here are other behaviors you might tolerate to a point:

- Gesturing
- Questioning your calls
- Yelling at you

Still others you might tolerate, depending on the situation:

- Leaving the coaching area
- Entering the field of play to talk with you

2. If you already know going into a contest what behaviors and language you will tolerate, you will be better prepared for the worst. As always, be consistent from game to game and from team to team.

3. Be approachable to a point. Sometimes players, and especially coaches, just want to bend your ear a bit. That's okay, provided they haven't crossed the line or gone right into the "absolutely will not tolerate" category.

4. Control your emotions. When conflict arises, try to remain calm and professional. These situations can be explosive enough; if you allow your emotions to get the best of you, you've lost control of yourself and the contest. Issue warnings and sanctions just as you would with any other call. The tone and signaling emphasis you use for traveling, for example, should be the same one you use for a technical foul.

5. Issue a warning. Do this as players or coaches begin to approach the "will not tolerate" behaviors. Give a firm yet unemotional warning. When a coach or player has crossed the line of tolerable behavior or language, let him or her know that you have heard or seen enough. Officials often use the common "stop sign" warning signal with words: one hand up, about shoulder height, palm facing the person being warned.

6. Use sanctions. Every rule book provides a penalty for inappropriate or unsporting behavior. If a warning has been issued and the behavior continues, or the behavior falls within the "will not tolerate" category, issue the sanction (e.g., technical, card, restriction).

7. Eject a player or coach when necessary. If a sanction has been issued and the behavior continues, you have no choice but to eject the guilty party. This is not easy to do. In some cases you might eject someone who is older than you, maybe even a friend of your parents. Don't think about who the person is; just deal with the behavior. You've given them ample opportunity to get them under control. If the behavior warrants ejection, the person has grossly crossed the line of appropriate behavior, set a bad example for the participants, and made a mockery of the game—and must be dealt with accordingly.

8. Involve the contest manager. When someone has been ejected, he or she should leave the facility (or at least be out of sight and earshot of the contest). Occasionally the ejected party is unwilling or slow to leave. If that is the case, let the contest manager assist you by removing the ejected party. If a contest manager isn't present to assist you, inform the ejected party that the contest will not continue until the person leaves. If the person still refuses to leave, terminate the contest, file a report and let the appropriate authority decide whether there is a forfeit and whether to identify the winner (unless the regulations expressly give you that authority).

9. File a report. Inform the league administrators so that they are aware of the situation. Many organizations have rules regarding ejection, and there might be further consequences for such behaviors.

Obnoxious Fans

1. Establish and know your tolerance level for fans' behavior, just as you do for coaches and players. Officials normally try to ignore many comments and behaviors from fans, primarily because many fans don't know the rules well and are extremely biased. However, these fan behaviors should not be tolerated at youth sport contests:

- Abusive or foul language
- Racial or ethnic comments
- Fighting
- Entering the field of play

The following are other behaviors you might choose to ignore (depending on intensity and repetition):

- Gesturing
- Yelling at you
- Questioning your calls
- Questioning your integrity

2. Issue a warning. As with players or coaches, give a firm yet unemotional warning if a fan begins to approach one of the previously mentioned behaviors. Use the "stop sign" warning signal: one hand up, about shoulder height, palm facing the person being warned.

3. Eject a fan when necessary. If a fan persists in any of the previously mentioned behaviors after being warned, eject the fan. Again, you might be ejecting someone who is older than you. Don't think about who the person is; just deal with the behavior.

4. Involve the contest manager (see item #8 in "Conflicts With Coaches and Players").

5. File a report. Again, be sure to inform the league administrators.

Reasons and Rewards

Officiating is not always easy—especially when so many others want to do your job for you from the stands or think they can do a better job. You're constantly under scrutiny.

You're striving for the perfect game, just as the players are.

But there are so many rewards. At the beginning of this guide is a list of the reasons kids give for wanting to play sports. Well, we should tell you the reasons that officials officiate and the rewards they gain:

- Staying close to, and being a part of, a sport that they love
- Giving something back to a sport that they love
- Interacting with kids in a positive, wholesome environment
- Earning some extra income
- Getting some exercise in a fun way and staying in shape (depending on the sport!)

And here are a few of the rewards of officiating:

- Developing lifetime friendships with fellow officials and others involved with the game
- Gaining greater confidence and self-esteem
- Enhancing decision-making skills
- Enhancing interpersonal skills
- Affecting the lives of the participants by being a positive role model
- Improving your ability to handle difficult people and situations
- Gaining a realistic perspective on the role of sport and its importance in the world
- Earning extra spending money

We encourage you to determine your own reasons for involvement in officiating and the rewards you hope to obtain. We hope this guide has been informative and helpful. You are involved in a very important aspect of sport, one that is often overlooked and taken for granted. Truly, without you the games don't go on. Thanks for being a youth sport official—and may the experience be a rewarding one for you!