

# ***Are Officials Full-time Professionals?***

By Dave Sabaini on June 16, 2015

The teacher arrives at her school and enters her classroom a full 45 minutes before the first students are scheduled to arrive. She lays out her lesson plans for the morning and begins preparing herself for her job.

Across town, a small business owner hangs up the phone after a call to one of his employees who is scheduled to come in earlier than usual. The owner has an important appointment at a bank, and finishes getting dressed in his best suit.

A few blocks away, a lawn service employee begins explaining all the options available to a homeowner who is facing a weed problem, and answers his customer's questions completely and patiently.



Downtown, a doctor leaves her office on her way to a conference where she'll learn about the newest techniques in her area of specialization.

In our "regular" lives away from officiating, we are considered "professionals." In that capacity, we are typically expected to be more efficient, knowledgeable and better

prepared than those who seek our services. Those who seek our services *expect* us to be professional: to know our stuff, look the part, be available, be consistent and be reliable. Most of us would never *think* of being otherwise in our day-to-day jobs.

But our officiating avocation is sometimes a different story.

Many associations seem to have at least one official who nobody seems to want to partner with. This person might be frequently late, too timid, a shirker of meetings, improperly uniformed, disrespectful to coaches or athletic directors, or plain incompetent.

There is a saying that goes something like this: "at the end of the day, your reputation is all you have." If that's true, too many officials are leaving themselves with precious little.

Why do people who usually treat their 9-to-5 jobs with the utmost professionalism suddenly "pull a 180" when it comes to their officiating? What do those who hire us expect from us?

## **COMMUNICATION**

There was a line made famous many years ago in American cinema that said, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." It made for great film, but it makes for terrible professionalism.

If your assignor or an athletic director attempts to contact you to see about your availability or to confirm your assignment, get back with them as soon as possible. Leaving those who schedule officials up in the air about our intentions is not a good way to conduct business. Strive for a one-call-per-inquiry maximum, and you'll help save them time and uncertainty.

While we're on the subject of communication, it would be a good idea to take a look at how we communicate with coaches, too.

Much has been written about body language, tone of voice and facial expressions when tension exists during a game. Examine how you handle yourself in times of stress, and modify your behavior where needed. After all, officials who lose control of their temper are often perceived as not being up to the task.

It also pays to review how you speak to the athletes during the competition. Do you treat them the way a competent professional would, or do you talk down to them in a condescending or sarcastic tone? You can expect to get back whatever you give.

Of course, there is the issue of communicating with each other. Our fellow officials have the right to expect that we will be willing and engaged participants in a meaningful pregame and postgame conference. They have a right to expect that we take what we do seriously enough that we will go over, every game if necessary, even the most basic mechanics and rules issues with each other.

If our employers would expect it from us, why wouldn't our colleagues in stripes?

## **RELIABILITY**

Have you ever expected an important package or document only to have it arrive late or not at all? Do you remember the aggravation followed by anger, then helplessness you felt? That's how game-site administrators feel when officials show up mere moments before the scheduled start time. Worse yet are those officials who don't show up at all.

Every official has some sort of "horror story" regarding a scheduled partner who didn't show up because they "wrote the wrong date or time in the book," "got caught in traffic," "had to work late" or some other weak excuse. Some officials are even known as notorious "double-bookers" booking multiple games for the same date, then keeping the best game and "dumping" the other games on available colleagues. Such behavior is simply unethical.

A good rule of thumb should be: if you wouldn't try it at your regular job, don't try it as an official.

## **APPEARANCE**

Most places of business, even many factories, have dress codes. Employees are either required to wear certain clothing to perform their job or to wear anything from "business casual" to full business dress. Employees who fail to meet the dress code are reprimanded. Fail to meet the code often enough, and in the words of Donald Trump, "You're fired!"

Yet as officials, we too frequently encounter partners whose uniform isn't up to standard. Perhaps it has been a while since the uniform has been cleaned. Maybe the fit harkens back to seasons long passed. Have the shoes been cleaned or polished since the Reagan Administration? Are the insignia current and proper for the contest?

Worse still: is a shave in order? Does your stomach arrive at the game site before the rest of you? Are you physically able to perform the task in front of you?

The saying "you never get a second chance to make a first impression" certainly holds true in officiating. How you look the moment you step on the field or court as an official goes a long way toward giving those present an idea of what type of official you are.

## **EDUCATION**

Many of us have ongoing training, certification coursework or continuing education requirements as a part of our jobs. When such a requirement is made of us, there is rarely any discussion — at least with our boss — about the merits of such extra schooling. Turning it down would certainly result in delayed promotion, loss of a raise or perhaps termination.

Yet when it comes to officiating, there are folks who cry loud and long about having to attend a certification clinic, rules interpretation meeting or (gasp!) an optional mechanics clinic. What is it about officiating that makes certain people feel that after they “have so many years under their belt” they don’t need to review rules or mechanics, or that they can’t possibly learn anything new?

The games we officiate change every year. Rules change every year. In order to simply keep up with the games we love, we should eagerly embrace every practical opportunity to keep our skills and knowledge at the top level. Clinics should be welcomed, not loathed.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Treating our avocation more like our vocation will serve to improve not only our game, but our enjoyment of our game.

Those for whom we work will take notice of the effort we put forth and treat us accordingly. Respect is not given, it is earned. Earn it by being as professional ON the field as you are OFF the field.