



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL QUALITIES OF A GOOD REFEREE

(Adapted from WEINBERG: "Psychology of refereeing" Chapter 1)

The match finished over an hour ago and there is no need for us to feel especially under pressure, nor do we have to demonstrate anything to players, coaches or the public. We are drained, physically and emotionally, and we sit down to enjoy a cold drink, make ourselves comfortable and try to wind down. But for some reason, we are unable to switch off. In our minds we go over each and every one of the decisions we have made. We wonder what other members of the refereeing body will think of what we have done. We worry about having made mistakes, and the objections of the spectators are still ringing in our ears. We keep telling ourselves: "Forget the game", and we try to do so. We tell ourselves: "I was qualified to take this match"; "my colleagues and I agreed on everything"; and "on the whole, I did a good job". And yet there are still niggling doubts despite all our efforts to brush them aside. It is quite common to have such conflicting thoughts after the game, and referees at all levels, be they amateur or professional, have to learn to deal with them. It does not matter whether one is part of a larger group of referees, for football, volleyball or tennis, or whether it is a smaller group, say for basketball, TENNIS or all-in wrestling. The more recently we have refereed a match, the more familiar these disturbing thoughts may be.

THE FUNCTION OF THE REFEREE

Why is it that referees have these confusing thoughts? It is largely due to their specific function. After the sportsmen and coaches, this is what one might call the third dimension of sporting events, although it has to be said that the referee has one of the most difficult tasks. Good refereeing speeds up the flow of the sporting event, bearing in mind that the result of the match depends on the tactics and skill of the players; by way of contrast, inefficient refereeing spoils the enjoyment of the game for players, technicians and fans. The referee's decisions are always subject to public opinion, which means that they are often criticised and questioned in terms of errors committed. Now if the game is running smoothly, very few people are even aware of the referee's presence. So how should referees judge themselves or be judged? Their main job is to ensure that the game is being played according to the rules and regulations, and to intervene as little as possible.

To phrase it more precisely: referees must feel committed to the four following responsibilities:

1. To see to it that the sporting event takes place in accordance with the rules of the game.
2. To intervene as little as possible and not make themselves the centre of attention.
3. To establish and maintain a good atmosphere so as to make the event as enjoyable as possible.
4. To show an interest in the players.



MENTAL AND PHYSICAL DEMANDS OF REFEREEING

There is a close relationship between the psychological skills and the physical performance of referees. So the success or failure of a referee depends both on his physical abilities (e.g. the preparation for the specific demands of a given sport, the technique and mobility, visual faculties) and his mental ones (e.g. confidence, concentration, emotional control). This relationship between the physical aspects of refereeing and the psychological ones is fascinating. We referees often talk about the importance of psychological skills more than physical ones in the discharging of our difficult task – when one has to make an unpopular decision, or make sure that the match does not slip out of one’s grasp, or keep calm without getting worried. In actual fact, experienced referees point out that command of psychological skills represents 50 to 70% of a referee’s success. It is thus rather surprising that in the training courses or at the conventions the focus is on physical techniques, interpretation of the rules, wearing suitable uniform and both written and practical examinations. If referees and reporters agree that the psychological aspects are very important in successful refereeing, why is so little time spent in the teaching and practising of psychological skills? One major reason is the misconception that psychological skills are considered to be innate: either one has them or one does not. But these skills can be improved, just as physical ones can. Those referees who are best prepared were not born with a complete package of psychological qualities; it is rather that they have repeatedly and systematically practised the capacity to concentrate, how to stay calm under pressure, how to remain confident and maintain good relations with other members of the refereeing organization. And it is precisely because these are not just qualities but skills that it is imperative that they be practised if they are not to disappear.

Consequently, what it takes to make a special referee seems to be a combination of physical and mental skills. The best sort of combination will be seen more clearly when we start looking at the most important qualities in a good referee.

QUALITIES IN A GOOD REFEREE

Although refereeing calls for a certain amount of technical knowledge, there is undoubtedly an art in becoming an outstanding referee. And the art demonstrated by a referee during the game depends largely on his personal qualities.

One might think that the characteristics of a good referee have been defined and used extensively as criteria for evaluating referees. But if 100 refereeing experts from different sports drew up their lists of qualities that make a good referee and placed them in order of preference, we might end up with 100 different lists and preferences. So we are not going to give an order of preference for the qualities of a good judge, nor supply an exhaustive list of these essential qualities.

What we are going to do, taking into consideration the results of the latest investigations, is to sum up those qualities that the top referees have in common.

RELIABILITY

COMMUNICATION

DECISIVE THINKING

ELEGANCE

INTEGRITY

COMMON SENSE

CONFIDENCE

MOTIVATION



Once we have described these qualities we shall report on the way in which they can be related to specific psychological skills and the techniques used to develop these skills.

1. RELIABILITY

Sportsmen and coaches expect consistent behaviour from referees: their decisions should be the same in identical or similar situations, and the same norms should be applied to both sides. Players and coaches often criticize the lack of consistency and even get angry about it. Referees themselves recognize the importance of reliability in their task. A recent survey of basketball referees, for example, showed that 73% of those consulted agreed with the sentence: "I believe that reliable refereeing is more important than sticking to the letter of the rules".

Problems arising from lack of reliability

Experience has shown that lack of reliability generates the following problems among others:

- The players are always trying to guess what is permitted and what is not.
- The coaches feel frustrated and have no faith in the competence of the referees.
- The referees try to "balance out" the mistakes they call allow a player or a team because of earlier refereeing mistakes.
- The players do not know what to expect when a referee is inconsistent in the decisions he makes. If a referee ignores an offence one moment but then allows the same offence later, both players and coaches are confused. This uncertainty often leads to anxiety, frustration, anger and even physically aggressive behaviour on the part of those who feel they are being unfairly treated. One of the main threats to reliability is the tendency of referees to "compensate". If they are asked: "Do you think that referees try to compensate if they realize they have been unfair a team?", 77% of referees replied in the affirmative. At first this might seem fair, but trying to restore the balance only makes the situation worse since deliberately making incorrect decisions completely spoils the game.
- In search of reliability
- Genuine reliability does not come from trying to make up for errors of judgement but from consistently enforcing the rules throughout the game. No two situations on the field are ever completely alike, so it is up to the referee to make sure his standards are consistent. In this way, the referee's decisions will be regarded as reliable and fair. In summary: sensible decisions and interpretations of the rules are the best guarantees of reliability.
- This reliability within the game, which includes consistent interpretation of the rules of the game in one single match, is of crucial importance for efficient refereeing. But no less important is the reliability which ensures the correct and similar application of the rules from game to game. To acquire the necessary reliability for top-level refereeing calls for two prerequisites. The first is to have a good technique, to know the rules of the game and exhibit the qualities described earlier. Many referees turn out to be not very reliable simply because they are not in complete command of the interpretation of the rules, the positioning in the field or the specific techniques of refereeing.
- The second prerequisite has to do with mental and emotional faculties. A good referee needs to have a stable state of mind. Any inconsistencies in the course of the game are usually connected with psychological ups and downs. The ability to



achieve the right psychological level and maintain it during the game is of fundamental importance for efficient refereeing.

2. COMMUNICATION

Communication is the quality of being able to get on well with others in a productive way. Good communication skills are important in any field of human activity but perhaps even more so in refereeing. Referees need to try to establish good channels of communication with players and coaches alike. As referees we are not trying to win any popularity contests, but we are not out to make enemies either. The key to establishing good communication is effective communication. If we can communicate effectively with players and coaches, then they are likely to cooperate with us and not question our decisions.

We referees can also improve communication if we treat players and coaches with courtesy and respect, and we should be able to expect the same from them. Although we should be cordial and polite when refereeing, we should also keep a certain distance so as to remove any doubt about taking sides. We should be accessible and receptive to questions and complaints without letting the rhythm of the game being disturbed by a barrage of comments. We should avoid lengthy discussions and get the game going again as quickly as possible.

3. DECISIVE THINKING

A referee's decisions should be made as soon as he sees something, or immediately afterwards. This does not mean that decisions should be made without hesitation. It may sometimes be important to wait a moment to get the full picture of what has just happened. But hesitating for too long gives both players and coaches the impression of uncertainty, so they are more likely to start complaining if the decision is a slow one. The decisions are not subject to formal protests, which means that controversy can be avoided if we make up our minds swiftly and decisively. And the closer we are to the game, the more important is the speed with which we make decisions. Any signs of doubt will only give rise to questions and controversy. A clear-cut decision is called for, giving the impression that the referee is completely sure about what he has seen.

4. ELEGANCE

Competitive sport is usually an emotional affair; the action moves along quickly and is constantly changing. Furthermore, given the importance that sport is acquiring in our society, it is not surprising that emotions and tension run high for players, coaches and spectators, especially in the opening and closing phases of the competition. A referee has to remain cool, calm and collected, regardless of what is going on. Although it is not necessarily possible to control the emotions of others, we are expected to control our own emotions without being influenced by the situation, whatever it is. In our interviews with referees, they generally made it clear that they responded better when they were able to remain calm and relaxed. This idea of being able to remain relaxed is extremely important for referees because they often feel under pressure from coaches, players and fans. Regardless of how well we do our job, we will always leave 50% of the coaches, players and spectators dissatisfied. And yet there are referees who try to get on well with everyone. Such an attitude is both a waste of time and dangerous. Attaching too much importance to being right 100% of the time will only succeed in making us too self-critical and will increase the risk of having to stop the game.



One aspect of relaxation is not being frightened of making mistakes, upsetting the crowd or losing control. When referees talk about their best games, what they recall is not being afraid of penalising players or being criticized by coaches and players; on the contrary, they say they feel calm and serene. When the mind is not worrying about the negative consequences of the mistake, it can concentrate fully on the task in hand.

Referees must keep their self-control at all times, especially when under great pressure, when there are likely to be fights, injuries, offences and outbreaks of violence. A referee who keeps calm and does not lose his self-control, and yet manages to assert himself and his leadership qualities, prevents such situations from turning into serious incidents. When the tension is mounting, our gestures and movements must, as far as possible, be slow and deliberate. Although it is normal for there to be a certain amount of emotion while we are refereeing, it is very important that we keep our emotions and actions under control so as not to weaken our effectiveness as referees.

5. INTEGRITY

What integrity means is conducting a match impartially and honestly, totally independent of the reactions shown by the players, coaches or spectators, the time remaining till the final whistle, the result, earlier decisions or any other sources of influence. The best way to guarantee our integrity is to bear in mind those phrases “the more friends you have, the more opinions there are” (or “blow the whistle for what you see with your own eyes”).

It is extremely important that we maintain our integrity both on and off the field. Although we are aware of our responsibility when we are refereeing, we should also think about our integrity when we are not on the field. For this reason, we should not air our opinions on players or teams to those we may be involved with in the future and never place a bet on a match we may be taking, however small the bet. Finally we reveal our integrity in the choices that we reject. We never accept an appointment that might compromise our values, as could be the case in a situation where a close friend or relative is involved as a player or coach.

6. COMMON SENSE

Common sense begins with a full and detailed understanding of the norms governing a given sport. Once it has been acquired, knowledge of the rules of the game may serve as a guide for determining the legality of the game. Afterwards, the common sense that comes from experience will permit us to cope with the various situations that arise in refereeing. The referee who continues to study the regulations and makes use of his experience to improve himself, is probably the one who will go on to become a competent referee. We have to repeatedly practise taking games so as to improve our common sense, just like an athlete needs to exercise certain techniques in order to improve his physical skills.

When referees describe examples of situations in which they acted sensibly, they inevitably say that they were:

- - totally focused on the game or the event;
- - free from distractions or able to leave them aside;
- - unprejudiced by decisions taken in advance and the subsequent reactions of the people involved.



- Good referees know that if their thoughts are up in the clouds they become less effective. A lapse of concentration may lead to a wrong decision that can make the difference between winning and losing. Many sporting events last for 2 or 3 hours and it is not easy to keep one's concentration all the time. Fortunately, concentration is a skill that can be worked on and strengthened

7. CONFIDENCE.

- Competent referees have confidence in themselves and in their skills. This self-confidence affects any game or situation. Referees who have confidence in themselves do not lose control in the face of difficult situations. This does not mean that they never have any feelings of doubt but it does mean that they do not lose their self-confidence because they have made a wrong decision or suffered other setbacks. All we referees have memories of games that we would rather forget, but a referee who is confident will not allow these memories to affect his belief that he is doing his job well. Two quotations by veteran referees show clearly the crucial role that confidence plays in good refereeing. A basketball referee told us: "If you don't have confidence in yourself, it's better not to show up. Coaches and players sense immediately that a referee is not confident about his decisions and they will try to exploit the situation. I always try to give off a confident attitude every time I referee. Without self-confidence, it is difficult to gain the respect of coaches, players and fans."
- A woman referee for volleyball expressed the same view and said: "The difference between feeling confident or not while refereeing is based on not experiencing doubts when quick and important decisions have to be made. You simply act by doing the best you can."
- Although confidence may undoubtedly be difficult to acquire, a top referee will maintain a positive attitude whatever the circumstances. Such referees do not worry about events that are beyond their control, but are confident enough to take pride in their best qualities. If we approach an appointment for a match feeling that it is going to be too much for us and without belief in ourselves, we are preparing for a match that is going to get us into deep water.

8. ENJOYMENT/MOTIVATION

The top referees enjoy their task immensely. This sense of pleasure is closely connected to a positive mental attitude and feelings of vitality and energy. Being a good referee calls for a good dose of hard work, dedication and practical experience, all of which stem from a high level of motivation, which in turn is linked to enjoyment. If a referee starts to lose this feeling of enjoyment he will also lose the motivation for the hard work required of him. The one thing common to all those referees who have given up is that they have lost that feeling of enjoying what they do because of the intense pressure to which they are subjected and the feeling that their efforts are not appreciated.

This lack of enjoyment and motivation can be seen in the following quotation from a football referee who was a scholar and university professor:

"I used to get up with a great sense of anticipation on the morning of the day that I had to referee. I could hardly wait for the match to start because I so much enjoyed the feeling of being totally involved in the action. But as time went on, I started to find it more and more difficult to feel motivated about refereeing, even if it was an important match. I am not sure whether it was due to the insults received over the years from



coaches, players and spectators, or simply the boredom of doing the same thing over and over again. For whatever reason, I lost my enthusiasm. And when refereeing ceased to be a pleasure, I told myself it was time to stop.”

THE ACQUISITION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

We have tried to show that being a good referee is not just a matter of knowing the rules of the game but also calls for a number of personal qualities. Once the right mental state has been attained, our level of refereeing takes us very close to the limits of our potential, and this is the basic key to the acquisition and optimization of our psychological skills. The more effectively we learn to master these skills, the more likely we are to reach our potential as referees.

For example, to establish good channels of communication with coaches, players and fans, we need to develop our communication skills. Learning to express ourselves clearly, being a good listener and paving the way for cooperation are some of the good ingredients of effective communication.

Elegance is related to the psychological skill of being able to relax. Remaining calm and relaxed during critical phases of the game is an important psychological skill for referees. Handling the pressure from coaches, players, spectators and the media calls for the ability to remain relaxed both physically and psychologically. This skill can be learnt by means of certain relaxation techniques such as progressive relaxation, breathing exercises and autogenous training.

Decisive thinking requires good concentration skills and the ability to focus the attention. We referees must concentrate totally on what is going on and never allow ourselves to be distracted. The use of stimulants to enhance our attention span, vision checks and maintaining one's powers of concentration on what is going on are some of the ways of helping to keep the attention focussed throughout the game.

To sum up, the qualities that good referees have are actually psychological skills that can be learned and practised. Unfortunately, as we showed earlier, the typical training of the majority of referees places the emphasis on physical techniques. But the skills that distinguish the best referees from the rest are mental, not physical. The good news is that there are techniques that can help us to learn these important mental skills. Acquiring these psychological skills presupposes effort on our part. But with constant practice we can learn to develop our psychological skills to the point where we are able to control our mental and emotional states rather than feeling that we are controlled by them.