

“Judgment”... You Either Have It or You Don’t!” Fact or Fiction?

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Nearly forty years ago as I sat in on one of my first local association meetings I heard a veteran official comment about judgment, “You either have it or you don’t!” Being new to the world of sports officiating I took his comment as gospel and I sat there and asked myself, “Do I have it?”

For years this comment bothered me. If it was true, why should I bother joining a local group to try to improve? Why ask questions? Why have a mentor? It didn’t take long before I realized that this veteran’s comment was said in error.

There’s no question that like athletes, officials begin their careers with different “**God Given Talents**”, in our case the basic skill of judgment. But what makes up judgment when it comes time to making a call on the field? Let’s take a look at seven important factors that play a role in our success as officials.

First and previously mentioned is our **initial entry-level skill**. No two people are alike. This initial talent or skill may be aided or hindered by physical conditions such as eyesight, hearing, and fitness. Individual cognitive thinking skills vary from person to person. The key thing to remember is that we can do something to improve each of these areas. If there’s one thing many officials are guilty of it’s not devoting enough time year-round to their personal fitness and appearance. When it comes to the eyes, it’s easy, see an eye specialist and get corrective help. Don’t be too proud to wear glasses as needed.

The next important thing we can all do to improve our chances of success is to work hard at knowing and understanding the **rules of the game**. This takes time and dedication. It’s not something you can do on your own. You’ve got to interact with our officials who are well respected and versed in the rules. You’ve got to utilize the many resources available that can give you comprehensive tests and weekly quizzes. Equally important is developing an understanding of the rules, why they were made or changed. What effects do they have on coaching, playing, and officiating the game? This takes a year round commitment, not something just to think about during the season or on game day.

If you want to have an excellent chance to make the right call you need to be in the right place. Like knowing the rules, knowing where to be and how to get there are equally important. There is no substitution for **good mechanics**. Being out of position is the first step in missing the call. Recognizing when you are out of position [and this will happen] and what to do in those situations is a key to avoiding the missed call or inadvertent whistle when we didn't see the fumble.

Another factor that may contribute to your skill level is your **experiences with the game**. Did you play the game? Have you ever coached the game? And when it comes to officiating you need to crawl before you can walk, and you need to walk before you can run. Don't expect to be working a high school varsity schedule the day after you get your first uniform. Don't expect to jump to the college or pro levels just because you have a year or two under your belt. There's a lot to experience and learn as your career continues. Can you be an outstanding official without ever playing or coaching? The answer is "Yes". There are a lot of excellent coaches who sat on the bench and became students of the game. The best players don't always make the best coaches or the best officials, but being a player gives you an insight into the game that non-players need to learn in other ways. Having some coaching experience will give you an insight into strategy and technique. Understanding the emotional side of coaching is a huge factor in polishing your people skills when handling an emotionally charged situation.

Speak to any successful official and you will most likely hear them talk about the people who made the biggest impacts in their success. They're talking about the officials and coaches who mentored and role-modeled for them. The **mentors** who took them under their wing, gave them advice and council, set an expectation bar that was demanding but attainable, and had the courage to tell them when they were wrong. Every successful official needs a mentor. When you think you can do it on your own and do it better than everyone else before you, you're heading for a big let down and disappointment. Usually the less successful people in life call this politics.

Over the years as I seen officials come and go. One of the things that separate the best from the average is an individual's "**Coach-Ability**". We all say we want feedback and advice. And during most of our early years we work in autonomy where, unless we critique ourselves or have

crewmates who really hold themselves and the crew accountable, we receive little if any constructive criticism or feedback on our work. What I've seen happen when the opportunity presents itself for mentoring and feedback are individuals who blossom and grow or individuals who melt from the feedback. They are devastated and really only thought feedback was a pat on the back. So you have to really look inside yourself on this area and ask the question, "Am I coach-able?" Hopefully that answer is and will continue to be a resounding "Yes!"

Another critical factor to our success is our people skills. Do we accept the basic premise that this is not our game? It belongs to the players, the coaches, and the fans. We are only its guardians. We need to be able to officiate a game that players can play, coaches can coach, and fans can enjoy. It's not about us. How solid your **people skills** are [mentioned earlier] can play a huge role in your acceptance and ability to be a leader on the field. Look at the most successful people in officiating and life and they will have this common trait, their ability to handle people in a respectful manner. You earn respect by giving respect.

You need the ability to figure out why things go right and why things go wrong. You have to be able to recognize why a play breaks down. Was it my mechanics? Was it lack of rule knowledge? Did I ignore my mentor's advice? Am I defensive on taking criticism? Do I need to spend more time looking the part and getting in shape? When you seriously analyze these seven areas and see how you measure up, you'll be on the road to a successful officiating career. A good friend and mentor of mine, Jim Keogh, always said, "When you're green you grow and when you're ripe you rot!" To the kids playing that game, it's the most important game of their life. Make it your most important game too!