

2026

GIRLS LACROSSE

PRESEASON GUIDE



PLAY.
PERFORM.
COMPETE.
TOGETHER.

Let's Pick Up the Pace

NFHS Focuses on Better Game Flow With Rule Changes

Improving game flow and pace of play are the primary focuses of the rule changes approved by the NFHS Girls Lacrosse Rules Committee for the 2026 season.

The committee recommended five rule changes during its annual June meeting in Indianapolis, all of which were later approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

"Girls lacrosse continues to grow at the high school level in both individual participation and state association sponsorship of the sport," said Lindsey Atkinson, director of sports and liaison to the NFHS Girls Lacrosse Rules Committee. "The committee believes the rules of the game are in a good place and changes that support the pace of play for the players that do not create an advantage for the offense or defense or increase risk are in the best interest of the game."

Goal Circle (7 Pen. 1a, 3a)

A change to the penalties for a goal circle foul states that the offending player now shall be placed 4 meters away from the player taking the free position. Prior to the change, the player had to be behind.

The rationale for the rule change is that it improves flow of the game and creates consistency in penalty administration of non-major fouls.

Play 1: A Blue team player takes a shot on goal, and the Red team goalkeeper blocks the shot onto the ground. A Red team defender picks up the ball from inside the goal circle while



Changes to the team time-out procedure when the goalkeeper has possession of the ball in the goal circle are among the five new rule adaptations in place for the 2026 NFHS girls lacrosse season.

the goalkeeper is in the circle and takes off. **Ruling 1:** Illegal. Goal circle foul by the Red defender. A free position is awarded at the closest dot, and the offending player shall move 4 meters away.

Play 2: An attack player, with the ball, steps on the goal circle line when running around the back of the goal circle. **Ruling 2:** Illegal. Goal circle foul

by the attack player. A free position is awarded to the goalkeeper within the goal circle. The offending player shall move 4 meters away from the goal circle.

Starting Play – Draw (5-2 Pen. 1)

When one player draws illegally, a free position for the opponent is now awarded to any player at the spot of the ball.



The rationale for the rule change is that it improves the flow of the game without disadvantaging the non-offending team.

Team Time-outs (4-3-3d, e)

If a possession time-out is called when the goalkeeper has possession of the ball in the goal circle, play will resume at the closest dot and any player may restart play unless play will resume from a free position.

The rationale for the rule change is that it aligns the restart procedure for a team time-out when the goalkeeper has possession of the ball in the goal circle with other team time-outs when the ball is in the critical scoring area.



An NFHS rule change for the 2026 season spells out the specific allowable times for a stick check request to be honored.

Crosse Inspection (2-4-5)

The allowable times for stick check requests have been revised. Stick checks may be requested "at any point during a quarter break, halftime, a team-called time-out, prior to the start of an overtime period, prior to the start of a draw, and shall include immediately following goals in regulation and overtime periods."

The rationale for the rule change is to eliminate the option for checks during general clock stoppages, to help maintain the flow of the game, discourage gamesmanship and allow officials to focus on administration of the game.

Play 3: No. 13 from the Blue team is awarded an 8-meter shot with less than one minute in the second quarter. The Red team coach requests a stick check prior to the 8-meter shot being taken.

Ruling 3: Illegal request. The stick check request will not be granted as stick check requests can only come after a quarter break, halftime, team time-out or prior to the start of the draw or overtime period.



A 2026 NFHS rule change stipulates that girls lacrosse is now aligned with other NFHS sports in not allowing on-field players to wear audio or video equipment during the course of play.

Electronic Equipment (2-8-3 NEW and Pen.)

No on-field player shall wear any audio (microphone) or video (camera) device during a game. A violation will result in a coach misconduct penalty.

This rule change aligns with other NFHS rules codes, clarifying the prohibition of electronic communications with and by players during the game. ■



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NFHS 2026 Points of Emphasis

The NFHS Girls Lacrosse Rules Committee has issued three points of emphasis (POE) for the 2026 season. They are not listed in priority order and are considered of equal importance:

Identifying and Managing Fouls During Scoring Plays

Increased attention to offensive and defensive fouls during a scoring opportunity is needed because of a high risk of illegal play. Understanding, recognizing and penalizing major fouls is critical for officials to manage a safe game. These fouls include cross-checking, crosse in the sphere, and illegal stick-to-body contact by the defense; as well as forcing through and charging by the ball carrier.

Additionally, identifying cardable fouls – such as dangerous follow-through, dangerous propelling, checks to the head, and dangerous contact to a defenseless player – and penalizing these actions is necessary enforcement and improves safety during a scoring play. Watching for defenders that play legally and with safe and proper contact during a scoring play improves officials' ability to recognize when attack players are creating dangerous play.

Taking swift and stringent actions in these situations will lead to a safer game and a better experience for all participants.

Efficient Draw Administration

The draw plays a crucial role in girls lacrosse. It determines possession and can influence momentum. Players, coaches and officials play a role in improving the efficiency of the draw and decreasing the time between goals and the start of play. Delayed draw administration, due to lack of readiness by a team or lengthy set up of the draw by officials, detracts from the flow of the game. Efficient draw administration requires:

- Players limit post goal huddles and celebrations and promptly move to draw positioning.
- Coaches substitute players efficiently. Remember, players subbing into the game after a goal may enter the playing field prior to their teammate leaving the field.



Proper use of the green card by officials remains a point of emphasis in high school girls lacrosse.

- Teams quickly exchange sticks for the draw when they choose to do so to avoid delaying the draw when the officials and opponents are ready.
 - Officials gather the ball after the goal and immediately move to the center. Players should never be waiting for the official to get to the draw.
 - Officials set the draw properly without delay. Players that are uncooperative or continue to move after the sticks are set should be penalized for a delay of game.
- Consistent and proper administration of the draw promotes fairness, minimizes unnecessary delays and supports game flow.

Delay of Game/Use of the Green Card

Proper use of the green card by officials continues to be a point of emphasis. This is important to discourage and penalize fouls that disrupt the flow of the game. Effective

green card management will enforce fair play and minimize repeated violations.

The following are common examples of delay-of-game violations that should be penalized with a green card:

- Defenders failing to promptly move 4 meters away from a free position.
- Offenders continuing to run down the field after committing a foul in the midfield, rather than taking action to move 4 meters away or behind the ball carrier.
- Players failing to promptly clear the penalty zone.
- Teams failing to promptly return to the field after the time-out or when the time between quarters has expired.

The penalties for delay of game are:

- First violation – A green card is issued to the offending team and a change of possession.
- Second violation – A green/yellow card is issued to the offending player for a major foul. The offending player must leave the field for two minutes. This card is not included in the team or player's card count.
- Third and subsequent violations – A yellow card is issued to the offending player or team for misconduct. A player will leave the field for two minutes. The card is included in the team and player's card count.

Proper use of the green card discourages activities that delay the game, improves the flow of the game and contributes to a more enjoyable game experience. ■

QUICK TIP

Each new game is a learning opportunity. Don't just go in, work the game and leave. Get something out of it. If you are unsure of a ruling, for example, take mental notes of what happened, then dive into the rules book at the first opportunity to get a better grip on the ruling. If there are several plays you were unsure of or your partner had some plays you have questions about, talk about the plays with partners after the game. And use technology to get other officials' opinions as well. Texting or emailing a situation to your officiating circles can give you the answers you need.



Flashback: 2025 Rule Changes

The indirect free position when a minor foul is committed by the defense in the 12-meter fan was eliminated in high school girls lacrosse due to a rule change decision adopted by the NFHS Girls Lacrosse Rules Committee.

That revision to Rule 9-1 Penalties was one of six changes approved by the rules committee during its 2024 meeting in Indianapolis. All of those recommended changes were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

Duration of Play (4-1-2)

The clock is now required to be stopped during the last minute of each quarter when a foul is called in the critical scoring area. Prior to the rule change, the clock was only stopped during the last two minutes of the second and fourth quarters when a foul is called in the critical scoring area.

Major Fouls 10-1q(1)

The definition of a major foul for Illegal Stick Contact was expanded to include contact with the opponent's crosse when a player's crosse is held in a horizontal position.

Major Fouls 10-1u(2)

A rough/dangerous check now includes crosse contact to an opponent's hand.

Starting Play -- Draw (5-2 Penalties)

After a player draws illegally, a free position is awarded at the spot of the ball rather than the center line. This change will help improve the flow of the game by eliminating the need to bring



A rule change prior to the 2025 season in high school girls lacrosse made it illegal for a defender to make contact with an opponent's crosse when the defender's stick is in a horizontal position.

the ball back to the center line when one player draws illegally.

Major Fouls (10-1p), Definition of Terms (13)

The definition of an illegal pick has been clarified. To be a legal pick,

a player's crosse must be in a vertical position (between 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock) and the player's body shall be in a vertical plane with a stance not wider than shoulder width. ■

Girls Lacrosse Injury Surveillance Study

As the popularity of high school girls lacrosse continues to increase in the United States, the number of sports injuries may also increase. The NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) and the NFHS Sport Rules Committees use information from the



National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study (High School RIOTM) to monitor rates and patterns

of sports injuries among high school athletes. High School RIO is currently collecting the 20th year of sports exposure and injury data.

In the 2023/24 academic year, girls lacrosse had the 9th highest overall and competition injury rates out of

the twenty sports currently under surveillance in High School RIO. Overall and competition injury rates in girls lacrosse have increased over the study period ($p=0.03$ and $p<0.01$, respectively). Girls lacrosse had the 7th highest competition concussion rate and the 8th highest practice concussion rate in 2023/24. Concussion rates in girls lacrosse have remained relatively stable over time. In competition and practice, concussions were most commonly associated with contact with another player (46% and 60%, respectively).

In 2023/24, the most common injuries sustained in competition were to the head/face (30%), knee (29%), and ankle (18%), while the most common injuries sustained in practice were to the head/face (20%), lower leg (16%) and knee (16%). The most common diagnoses in competition were sprain (36%) and concussion (23%), while the other category (33%) and strain (20%) were the most common diagnoses in practice. Common "other" injuries sustained in practice included shin splints and tendonitis. In 2023/24,

33% of dislocations/subluxations were recurrent injuries.

Understanding patterns of injury in girls lacrosse is one important tool when considering injury prevention efforts to keep athletes as safe as possible.

If you are interested in more information about the High School RIO Study or you are a certified athletic trainer who is interested in becoming a reporter for girls lacrosse, please email the High School RIO team at highschoolrio@datalyscenter.org. ■

Common Sense and Unwritten Rules

Here are a few situations in which reasonableness or responses not found in the rules book or mechanics manual will serve you well as an official.

Don't insert yourself or disrupt game rhythm if it's not necessary.

There are going to be stretches of games when little or nothing will occur in your coverage area. Resist the temptation to find something — anything — to call.

The better officials know when to stay out of the way and call only what needs to be called. That doesn't mean ignore fouls that involve player safety, but being too quick to insert yourself when you don't need to will result in too many flags or whistles for minor violations or for phantom infractions that are better handled with preventive officiating.

Staying in the background when the game doesn't need you to make a ruling takes discipline and confidence. At some point the game will need you and when it does, be ready. In the meantime, back off.

Let the players help you make the call.

Generally, players are not award-winning actors. And the younger the player, the worse the performances. As a result, players can often make some of your more difficult calls easy.

If a player hustles to save a ball from going out of bounds, even if you didn't see which player touched it last, you have an indication of the



Officials such as Crathman Stephens, Lathrup Village, Mich., should only insert themselves into the game when it becomes necessary. Otherwise, let the players play and decide the outcome.

right call. The player whose shoulders and head drop likely caused it to go out of bounds.

In this age of flopping and diving, the "rule" is a little tougher, but reading players' initial reaction to

many plays will often still help you when you need it.

Don't answer the question if you don't have information.

Coaches will sometimes ask



a question about a play called by a crewmember. If you don't know what happened, don't guess. If you don't have information, tell the coach you'll get an answer at the next appropriate stoppage of play or suggest the coach talk to your partner. Whatever you do, make sure you are supportive of your partner.

A coach or player may ask you about a rule you are not sure about. If you don't have the right answer, don't guess. You'll lose all credibility if you answer incorrectly. Instead, seek assistance from a partner or find out the answer after the game and get back to the coach. Then vow to study the rules, so you can answer a question that might come up in the future.

Get the game going after a mistake or ejection.

Ejections and mistakes happen. But it is the responsibility of officials to make sure they don't become a huge deal and negatively impact a game.

When your game has a situation, such as an ejection or a rule controversy, the best thing you can do is to resume play. Once game action resumes, players, coaches and fans will typically worry about the action and forget about the situation that caused the problem in the first place.

While participants will be forced to move on, officials should keep the mistake or ejection in the back of their mind. Don't dwell on what happened but keep in mind it could lead to future issues. Managing the game by making sure your presence is felt even more after ejections for fighting, for example, is a good way to prevent future problems.

If you only think you saw something, you didn't.

There are times you will be focused on action in your coverage area but something on the farthest edge of your peripheral vision will draw your attention. "Wait a second," you'll say to yourself. "That looked like a foul, but I didn't see the whole thing. My gut says it was a foul. Better safe than sorry. I'm gonna call it."

Calling things outside of your coverage area, what is often referred to as "fishing in someone else's pond," is a practice to be avoided. Especially if you're wrong. But most assigners, coordinators and observers will tell you failing to call something that did occur is more acceptable than calling something you aren't absolutely positive happened.

Gut feeling is a valuable officiating tool. Many times your instincts will guide you in the right direction. But your eyes trump all. See what you call and call only what you see. Period.

Give the benefit of the doubt to those who have earned respect.

There will be times — probably in every game — when you get questioned on a decision you made or a penalty you called. How you respond should be determined in part by how you are asked.

Think about the ranting and raving head coach. When things don't go exactly how he or she wants, it's because you or your crewmates are to blame. Now think about the coach who focuses on "coaching" his or her players.

In a tight moment, both coaches question a call. The coach who doesn't go ballistic on every call deserves a more thorough response than the lunatic. Because it is so out of character for that calmer head coach to question a call, taking the time to acknowledge the concern or clarify a ruling is time well-spent. The ranter doesn't deserve the benefit of the doubt since that coach has been on your case about everything. ■

Limit Your Speech, Head Off Potential Issues

When it comes to staying out of trouble with players and coaches, the best motto to remember is, "Silence can't be misquoted." Resisting the urge to yell back when fired upon is one of the hardest things for newer officials to learn. This isn't to say that veterans aren't guilty from time to time, either.

There have been instances when an official has gotten into hot water over something they've said, whether on or off the field. At a time when scrutiny is at its greatest, officials must be more careful than ever about their behavior, including their spoken words.

Away From the Games

Some officials have gotten in trouble at restaurants, bars and similar places because they aren't aware of who might be nearby. Consider the case of an official who expressed frustration at breakfast about being stuck with a game involving two last-place teams. Unfortunately, the wife of one of the athletic directors was at the next table. The complaint found its way to the assigner, who was none too happy about it.

Just recently, a Premier League soccer referee was fired after a leaked video showed him ranting to a fan about one of the league's teams and its former manager.

Officials are instructed not to speak to reporters for good reason. Your words can be inadvertently (or, sadly, intentionally) twisted in such a way to make you look bad. Better to let your supervisor or assigner answer instead.

Gossip among officials is all too common. You'll often hear officials talk about other officials or the plays they or someone else encountered. Sometimes, that other official isn't portrayed in the best light. Contrary to what some officials seem to assume, it doesn't benefit the cause to badmouth fellow officials when speaking with coaches in an effort to make yourself look better. Although coaches may politely agree with what

you're saying at the time, they'll actually think it was a low-class maneuver on your part.

The bottom line is this: Watch what you say and to whom you say it when you're off the field. You never know how things will end up sounding or who might hear them.

Onfield Talk

Resist the impulse to get in the last, or sometimes even the first, word. When coaches argue or players complain, officials tend to want to immediately talk, when the best thing to do is to keep quiet and let them go on for a few seconds. Most coaches know they're not going to get the call changed, but they want to be heard. It can be very effective to say to a coach, "Now, what I hear you saying is ...," or even, "Coach, if it happened the way you say, I probably missed it."

If we talk first, however, we'll end up just talking past each other, with neither of us hearing what the other is saying. We only prolong things when we give in to the temptation to get the last word in after an argument or conversation seemingly ends.

Baseball Hall of Fame umpire Doug Harvey once said that when a manager came out ranting and raving, he would let him go on without saying a word. After about 20 seconds, the guy would start sputtering, and then he could jump in. Harvey said that worked beautifully because most managers weren't smart enough to string together more than about 20 seconds' worth of words.

Avoid Insults and Threats

Don't tell players or coaches to shut up — those are two of the most provocative words in the English language. Never say, "One more word and I'll do so-and-so," because they may take the bait and you'll end up in a war that could have been avoided. If there is chirping from the bench, put up your hand and say, "That's enough." If the rules at your level call for warnings, feel no qualms about issuing one, but keep the tone of your voice in check and leave out the unnecessary, provocative sidebar comments.

It's often been said, and it's true, that officials lose when they appear to be the aggressors. It's a fact of life that players and coaches can say all manner of awful things, but as soon as officials come across



Sometimes, officials need to be heard. Other times, the best course of action is understanding when and how to remain quiet and out of the fray. It's important for Anne Acluche, West Bloomfield, Mich., to understand the difference.

as going after them, the officials become the bad guys.

Talking with players may seem like a good idea, but it can backfire. If things in the game go sideways, the player is likely to complain to the coach that your constant yapping is making them lose concentration. You can be polite and friendly, but keep the idle chatter to a minimum.

There are many things about ourselves, such as our height, that we can't control. We can, however, control our mouths. The less we say on and off the field, the better off we are. ■

QUICK TIP

Texting or using a social network to confirm a game or match is convenient and very common. But if you don't receive a reply from one or more partners, give them a phone call. Maybe they were moved from the game or gave it to someone else and didn't notify the assigner. It's better to be sure than sorry when you are an official short minutes before the game or match.



Divine Nine: Tips You Can Count On

There are innumerable tips on how to improve as an official, maintain a work-life balance, maintain a healthy lifestyle and interact with assigners, players, coaches and fellow officials. So, the advice that follows isn't new or groundbreaking. But there's no denying it's valuable information you can use in your officiating.

1. Head Off Trouble

Make a casual visual inspection of players before a game, and you may avoid a future headache. If you see a player wearing an illegal uniform or illegal equipment, point it out to the coach. That will give the player time to make an adjustment or take off the illegal item.

2. Do a Card Trick

Create a set of index cards with various topics on one side and corresponding numbers on the other. Spread them out on a table and have each official involved in the pregame choose one. The official then has to discuss the topic on the back of the card.

3. Check It Out

Walk the field. Sometimes, safety rules regarding materials, clearances, buffer zones, and hazardous design defects can be overlooked if not routinely checked. If there is a problem with the field, and you deem everything good to go, it may come back to haunt you. Should a participant be injured due to an unsafe facility, you will be the first to get the blame.

4. It Must Be Called

There is a difference between preventive officiating and failing to penalize when in possession of knowledge that a violation or foul occurred. Officials who cannot or will not penalize taunting, baiting, excessively rough, dangerous or unsportsmanlike play, and equipment and uniform violations cannot, by definition, call a good game, nor can they practice effective risk management.



Officials should always make sure to walk the field before the game to take note of any potential safety hazards, as Ellery Blasch, Alto, Mich., does here.

5. Move On From Mistakes

Remember, you only have control of the present moment. The call you made five minutes ago is beyond your control, and the future is always out of your reach. Keep an active mind and stop yourself whenever your mind wants to shift back to a "mistake" or worries about what's going to happen.

6. Avoid Burnout

Too many games can lead to burnout. It's hard to say no when assigners offer you games. Everyone wants a full schedule, but if it's too full, your officiating will suffer. If you're working five games a week for six consecutive weeks, you might reach a breaking point. If you're dreading your next assignment or just going through the motions in your current assignment because you're tired, it might be time to take a break. Whether it's a few days or a week in the middle of the season, getting away from the day-to-day grind of games will help to rejuvenate your game. Plan for that break every season. You won't be disappointed, and your officiating will be better for it.

7. Use Players to Deliver the Message

Bad news or instructions don't always have to come directly from you.

Use players to deliver your preventive messages to teammates and coaches. Not only will it lessen the chance for a confrontation, but it will help you develop some instant credibility with other players.

8. Act in Control

Project confidence even if you don't feel it. You may be nervous about the upcoming rivalry game. You might be a little unsure if you're ready for your first varsity game. No matter what doubts you have, come across with a belief in your abilities. If it's a close call, sell your decision ... even if you're unsure about it. Participants don't need to know what's going on in your head. It's OK to fake it if you have to.

9. Set the Pace

Games go more smoothly when you set an even tempo. A game that "flows" allows players, coaches and officials to interact without disruption. In such a game, players usually don't commit an inordinate number of fouls or violations. In turn, your mechanics become second nature. You can help set the pace by hustling, encouraging teams to return to the field after time-outs and by being ready to resume play when the players are. ■

Made From Concentrate

There are many things that might disrupt your concentration during a game. They may be internal or external and can occur during play or dead-ball situations. However, there are things you can do, and some you should have the discipline to ignore.

You must be able to set aside personal issues. You can't focus on conflicts with your spouse or employer.

A persistent injury can be a source of concern and repeated distractions. To avoid that, you need to establish proper support for the injury and test it.

There are several things you can address before a game to eliminate potential distractions later. Have players resolve uniform and equipment issues immediately. Keep your distance from the coaches, as they may try to plant seeds that could sprout later. Preventing those minor irritations during the game will help maintain its flow and avoid breaks in concentration.

Equally important is having a firm grasp of your officiating philosophy. Having a clear understanding of when you need to take care of business significantly helps you stay focused. If a situation arises, you must have the resolve and confidence to handle it. Those virtues come only from maintaining a sound philosophy.

Perhaps the most distracting situation arises when you feel you might have missed a call and the coach's protest may hold some validity. Many officials have a self-talk prepared for those inevitable moments. They remind themselves, "Forget that one. Get the next one right." Those who practice yoga often use a self-centering mental process to dispel negative thoughts. In contentious situations, you can help by verbalizing your support. "Good call, partner," goes a long way in reassuring the players and refocusing your crewmate.

You know the derivation of the word "fan" is fanatic. Unless your safety or that of the players is at risk, fans should be ignored. Again, a strong officiating philosophy is key to maintaining focus. You cannot reasonably expect everyone to agree with a call, even when it is correct and obvious. You have the training; let the fans do the shouting.

Those principles also apply to maintaining one's concentration. Time-outs present a great opportunity to zone out. It happens.

Protect against that by having a word with your partner(s) at the beginning of the stoppage. Don't hesitate to take a moment to discuss a

game situation, if necessary, but avoid socializing. Keep your focus instead of checking out fans in the stands.

Other dead-ball situations provide a moment to communicate a message to a captain or a coach. Those instances keep your mind focused on the game and help you connect with participants.

The final challenge is to finish strong. This is generally easier in close games when there's much to do and the adrenaline is flowing. There are usually enough time-outs, providing you and your partner(s) plenty of chances to communicate. Finishing strong can become a bigger issue when the game is a blowout. Many officials simply want to wrap up that type of game quickly. However, that can be a very bad idea if someone gets hurt or a fight breaks out.

If the last minutes are filled with fouls, talk to the players. Challenge them to play a few minutes without fouling. Be alert for any kids showing hostility and have the captain address the situation. If positive actions can't distract you from thoughts of postgame refreshments, remind yourself that some of the losing team and its supporters will be looking for an excuse to blame the loss on you. Stay determined to keep officiating until the final play. ■

Talent Flows When Your Ego Goes

Confidence is not a suggestion when it comes to being good in the officiating avocation. It is at the core of what it takes to be a good official in any sport.

Rarely will you see timid officials succeed at a high level. Experiences and knowledge help create that confidence. As officials get more comfortable, they acquire a bit of an edge. It's a natural progression. However, that edginess can quickly turn into arrogance, which can be a big turn off to the people you work with and for. So how do you toe the line?

Walk the Talk

If you are going to carry yourself as if you know it all, have the knowledge to back it up. There are plenty of people who think they know rules, mechanics and philosophies in their sport. Know them and how to apply them.

Knowledge helps to create legitimate confidence that surpasses the qualities of the arrogant. You can only sweet talk your way through situations for so long without actually knowing before the people around you catch on.

Listen

A really quick way to show you care about anyone other than yourself is to stop talking. Just listen. You may have more experience than anyone in the room but that doesn't mean you can't learn something new.

Even if your partners have nothing to offer you, listening goes a long way in establishing relationships with the person or people you are working with.

When it comes to building rapport with coaches, sometimes all they want and need is for you to listen. Not every interaction with a coach has to be a give-and-take. Sometimes the message is



subtle. If you don't listen, you'll miss it. And the next time the coach may not be as understanding.

Know Your Audience

There are new officials who want to learn everything they can from you. There are officials who are perfectly content with where they are and don't particularly care what you have to say. That's OK! Don't waste your time and energy forcing your knowledge on people who don't want to hear it.

You can easily tell if someone is engaged through their body language and their response to what is being said. Ignoring a partner or coach when they are talking to you is a sure way to make them feel like you think you are better than them whether that is your intention or not.

Learn From Mistakes

Perfection is unattainable, yet we continue to pursue it. Knowing when you're wrong is important, but accepting it is the difference-maker. Don't be a repeat offender!

If you can help someone learn from something you did wrong, you are helping the entire officiating community get one step closer to that, albeit unattainable, goal of perfection.

Be Yourself

Nobody wants to be known as "that official." You know the one, the know-it-all, Mr. or Ms. Perfect, the one whose ego can't fit in the locker room or the official who can't stop talking about how great he or she is.

Just as officials can suffer because they don't have enough belief in

themselves, others pay the price for having too much, or worse, the wrong kind of belief in themselves. There's a huge difference between having a rock-solid ego and being obnoxiously arrogant. Ironically, it's often the folks who try to come off as know-it-alls who really have the most self-doubt.

The reality is every person has a unique set of qualities they bring to the game and their crew (if applicable). Trying to be someone you're not will quickly catch up with you.

Use your confidence wisely. It's important to manage that confidence and use it for the good of the game. Remember that what you do is louder than what you say. Don't let your confidence turn into cockiness. ■

Hurtin' for Certain?

Let's face it — some things are unavoidable. You get older every year. Your injury risk increases with age. And when you do get hurt, recovery takes longer.

But here's the good news: You can take steps to prevent common injuries like muscle pulls, strains and tears. With discipline and preparation, you can extend your officiating career and avoid sitting out due to preventable issues.

A well-rounded injury prevention plan includes three key phases: before the season, before the game and after the game.

Before the Season

Fitness professionals agree — a strong cardiovascular base is the foundation for any good preseason workout. Activities like biking, running, swimming and rowing help improve heart and lung health. Jogging is great for cardio and calorie burn, but it's tough on your joints. If you have knee, hip, foot or ankle issues, consider lower-impact options like cycling or using an elliptical.

If you're already in decent shape, shift your focus to sport-specific movements like cutting, sprinting and pivoting. Regardless of your fitness



In order to keep up with athletes on the move, officials such as Maeve Montgomery, Holland, Mich., need to make sure they are in good cardiovascular shape to avoid injury.

level, start slowly and be intentional. The goal isn't just to get in shape — it's to stay healthy and avoid injuries both during workouts and the season.

How much exercise is enough? The American College of Sports Medicine recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week — that's

30 minutes a day, five days a week. Remember that as you age, your pace and intensity may need to adjust.

Before the Game

Most officials do some form of stretching before a contest. Some do only a little. Others stretch extensively. But athletic trainers want you to know that stretching before a game doesn't necessarily prevent injury.

Stretching and warming up aren't the same thing. A proper warmup raises your heart rate and gets your muscles ready for action. Try jumping jacks, running in place, push-ups or light dynamic movements — especially for sports that involve long periods of standing followed by sudden bursts of movement.

Cold muscles are more prone to

injury. Warming up properly ensures you're ready when the game shifts from stillness to sprint.

After the Game

If you wrap up a game, hop in your car and feel stiff by the time you get home, you may be skipping a key step: the cooldown. Stretching after a game is actually beneficial — your muscles are warm and more responsive. Stretching helps your body recover and prevents tightness the next day. Just make sure you're hydrated — muscles stretch more effectively when properly fueled with fluids.

Speaking of hydration, don't wait until game time to start drinking water. Begin hydrating at least 24 hours before your assignment.

When injuries happen. No one wants

to leave a game due to injury; most officials try to power through. But that isn't always the smartest move.

If there's a certified athletic trainer present, take advantage of his or her expertise. Ignoring pain and hoping it will pass can turn a minor issue into a long-term problem.

Listen to your body. If something feels wrong or the pain persists, it's better to miss a game or two now than be sidelined for weeks later down the road. One missed assignment is far better than a missed season.

Officiating demands a lot from your body, and as you age, protecting it becomes even more important. A smart, consistent injury prevention plan isn't just about avoiding pain; it's about giving yourself more years to enjoy the game. ■

Classify Coaches — Then Deal With Them

To be a top official you must understand coaches, their goals, their methods and their tactics. Coaches' personalities range from timid to terrible, from understanding to unreasonable and from polite to pugnacious.

Knowing coaches' personalities and what type of coach they are will give you a great opportunity to manage the game efficiently. Sometimes a clear and concise explanation will resolve a situation. Let's examine the types of coaches you might encounter.

Dr. Jekyll-Mr. (or Ms.) Hyde

Dr. Jekylls warmly greet you in the parking lot or near the bench and exchange pleasantries, stories and jokes and assure you how happy they are to see you. Then a few minutes before the game begins, they drink the potion that turns them into a monster until the game ends. You must be prepared for the emergence of the daunting Hyde. If you suspect a Jekyll, firmly but politely extricate yourself and go about your pregame routine. The opposing coach



Coaches come in a variety of styles. Part of being an effective official is being able to identify them and how to handle them.



may be watching all of that frivolity and may feel the playing field isn't even. Then, you may have two problem coaches on your hands.

Apologizer

This type usually finds the officials after the game and apologizes for poor behavior during the game. The apology is usually not sincere. Apologizers are worried about the next game when they have the same officials. The Jekyll-Hyde coach frequently becomes an Apologizer after the game. Don't fall for that ruse.

Praiser

The Praiser likes to tell the officials how great they are before the game to the point of absurdity, perhaps even telling the players that you are one of the best officials of all time. Of course, the Praiser is looking for the first call (and all of the following calls) to favor his or her team. When a call does go against a Praiser's team, you'll usually hear the backhanded compliment, "You're better than that!"

Intimidator

The Intimidator uses physical size, voice, histrionics, reputation, previous success, perceived status in the conference or state power structure or general aggressiveness to intimidate the officials. While it's generally unwise to try to match the Intimidator's act, backing down or appearing meek isn't the answer either. Work your game. If the Intimidator steps over the line, forget all the above factors and treat him or her like anyone else: penalize or eject as the situation dictates.

Divider

That type works covertly to drive a wedge between the officials. Examples of

what the coach might say to one official are, "You'd never make a call like that," or "Tell your partner that's two blown calls." Don't buy what the Divider is selling.

Inciter

Inciters try to rile up spectators to "ride" game officials with the intent of pressuring them to make calls in their team's favor. Any coach who attempts to incite spectators must be penalized accordingly or be ejected from the game if warranted.

Whiner

Most Whiners are also nitpickers, pointing out minor or perceived infractions, such as, "That player's towel isn't the same color as the rest," or "The first baseman isn't wearing a first baseman's mitt." There isn't much you can do about the Whiner except grit your teeth and hope the Whiner gets laryngitis.

Polite Coach

The Polite Coach is often a polished critic, prefacing comments with the word, "Sir" or "Ma'am." Usually, the words that follow will be critical, confrontational or even nasty. The Polite Coach, after being penalized or ejected, often laments, "What for? I was polite."

Anti-Officials

Let's face it. Some individuals and some coaches are anti-official or just anti-authority. Anti-official coaches just can't be pleased. They can make your game difficult and trying. Their competitive nature is such that you are an obstacle in their quest to gain a victory. If you understand that type, you can manage that coach more successfully. Remember

not to take it personally. They're yelling at the uniform, not the person wearing it.

Official-Coach

The coach who is also an official can be a nightmare. While the Official-Coach should realize how difficult an official's job is, he or she is often biased, insensitive and out to prove expert knowledge of every phase of the game. Sometimes the Official-Coach goes beyond showing off and tries to show up the officials. That can never be tolerated.

Bookworm

The Bookworm coach is a close relative of a Rulebook Charlie official. The Bookworm is usually an intelligent coach who studies the rules book religiously but who often misinterprets the spirit and intent of the rules. That type is often a literal-thinking person who doesn't understand or appreciate the nuances of the rules. A common argument will be, "Well, that's not what the rules book says."

Silent Coach

The Silent Coach is a brooding, scowling individual who doesn't like or trust officials. At the pregame meeting or when you introduce yourself, Silent Coaches shuffle their feet, look at the ground and nod or shake their head rather than fully participating in the meeting. They might speak to the opposing coach but avoid any unessential conversation with the officials. Do not let the silent treatment unnerve you and vow to do your best possible job. Also, don't be fooled. That silent act before the game could be a ploy for a torrent of rage once the action begins. ■

Get to the Game on Time — Every Time

**"Better late than never,
but never better late."
— Unknown**

If you've officiated for any length of time in your area, you likely know an official with a reputation for being late.

According to psychologist Eric Endlich, "There are large cultural differences in expectations around punctuality."

In some social circles, there is a phenomenon called "fashionably late." In officiating, that fashion is bound to cause problems.

In order to get officials to be on time, one must first understand why they are chronically late. The value of time varies by forum. In the military, time is nearly absolute as it is in most educational institutions. Most professional appointments (doctors, dentists, etc.) allow a little flex, but not much.

Timeliness is more critical for shift work than it is for back-office operations, but employers vary. Some bosses don't care as long as everything gets done when needed; others watch the clock like a hawk.

Almost every official has been and will be late to a game sometime.

In some cases, the only alternative is to turn back the game. For example, it's highly unlikely an official who gets off work at 5:15 on Friday night can get to any field by 5:30 for a 7 p.m. game. However, 6 p.m. is within the realm of possibility. Such an official should discuss the situation with their assigner before accepting the game. The choices are to work around the late-arriving official or get someone else to work the game.

Those who are perpetually late have a long list of excuses.

"I forgot my (insert uniform part here) and had to go back." "Traffic was bad." "I went to the wrong field." "I had to stop for gas." "The babysitter was late." One official offered, "My wife was in a car accident." It turned out she had pulled into the garage too fast and knocked a chunk of plaster out of the wall. Any of those can be true on a given day for just about anyone. That's just the way it goes sometimes.

The real problem lies in those who are late time after time. The first thing to note is to see if an apology is offered. If one is not voluntarily offered, it is a sign the official either thinks tardiness is not a big deal or simply doesn't care.

The underlying reasons for tardiness vary. One theory is planning and organizing are managed in the brain's frontal lobes, which are among the last to develop. That means the ability to be punctual doesn't peak until development is complete. The latest estimate of that is somewhere around age 25, so it doesn't apply to most officials.

People with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are often easily distracted and have difficulty being punctual, even though they may fully intend to be on time. Most often though, it's simply a matter of priorities — their time is more important than anyone else's. Rarely will they be confrontational and say

pregame discussions are a waste of time — the same stuff every time. Endlich also says tardiness could be part of a rebellious personality or a passive-aggressive streak that makes them feel they shouldn't have to conform to someone else's schedule.

The good news is tardiness, like any habit, can be changed. However, no change will occur unless Johnny Come Lately wants to change. Any effort to bring out change should begin with an explanation of the image the tardy official has created and the impact of that official's delayed arrival. "We enjoy having you on the crew. You do good work in the games, but we always get off to a bad start because you are late."

You can also appeal to that official's sense of pride. "When you're late it makes people think you are flaky or overwhelmed."

If those don't work, you might suggest technological reminders.

Most smart phones have appointment calendars. You might go so far as calling the person at about the time that official should be leaving for the game. Scolding said official is not likely to work. Success will be enhanced with a positive tone of encouragement.

If all else fails, you can jack up the arrival time by 15-30 minutes. Of course, that won't work for in-town games when there is a traditional arrival time, but it can work for road trips.

Benefits of early arrival

Getting to the venue early or at least on time has multiple benefits. The most obvious is the opportunity to conduct a pregame meeting. It's a chance to put the workday in the rearview mirror and start focusing on the job at hand.

When it's time to enter the field, do it as a crew. It indicates a united front and professionalism.

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During the pregame meeting with each head coach, be thorough but be brief. Don't spend more time with one coach than the other, which gives an impression of favoritism.

Meet with scorers and timers as appropriate. Make them feel a part of the officiating crew. If the stuff hits the fan,

they may be the only ones who can bail you out, so don't take them for granted.

Observe the players before play begins. If you see a player is missing required equipment or a part of her uniform is illegal, bring it to the coach's attention before it becomes an issue in the game.

Check the field or playing area for irregularities or potential dangers. Are equipment carts too close to the field? Are metal posts properly padded? Are the markings correct?

All of that can be accomplished if you're on time. Not to mention what you can do if you're early. ■

Let Your Whistle Do the Work

Officials who use whistles know how powerful a tool that apparatus can be. Because of its high pitch, shrill tone and ear-piercing decibel level, the whistle is the official's most noticeable way of communicating.

Blowing the whistle communicates two possible messages: "Stop" or "Start." Regardless of context, that's what the whistle is saying — simple, direct and unambiguous. Depending on the circumstances, players know they should either stop whatever they are doing or resume playing the game. But even something as simple as blowing a whistle can lead to complications.

There are officials whose whistling technique leaves much to be desired. Rather than communicating decisiveness and resolve by a strong, confident blast, some sound more like a wheezing horse on its way to the glue factory. Most of those problems are easily corrected and stem from improper technique — mostly from using the lips and throat to sound the whistle, rather than the diaphragm.

Musicians, especially singers and those who play wind instruments, quickly master the fundamentals of breath support. The diaphragm — the wall of muscle located under the front of the rib cage — is what musicians use to give power and substance to their sounds, and actors use to project their voices to the back of the theater. By supporting your tone with your diaphragm, which you do by breathing deeply and expanding your rib cage downward, you allow your entire torso to deliver air to your whistle. The result is a stronger, more easily controlled sound.

The whistle is more useful when used in a flexible, controlled manner to



Knowing not just when to blow the whistle, but how to blow it, will help Brian Mishler, Portland, Mich., maintain control of the game.

convey shadings of meaning beyond the simple commands of "stop" and "go."

Veteran officials learn to vary the tone of their whistle and convey a wide range of sentiments and commands, each with a subtle shade of meaning. The universal rule seems to be the louder the whistle, the greater the official's displeasure at whatever just happened. If you experiment with a variety of tones, you will hear the wide

range of messages that are possible.

With experience, you may come to appreciate the different meanings you can convey, especially when combined with the appropriate body language or facial expression.

There is, of course, no secret code or intricate musical vocabulary to use. You just need to be aware you can actually speak with your whistle, and then simply whistle whatever you mean. ■

Using the Right Words Can Calm Situations

Most of us have heard the phrase, “What you don’t say can’t hurt you.” While that is true at times, the following is also on point: “What you do say can help you.”

Good officials open their mouths when it’s needed and they use their voices to help manage players, coaches and situations in their officiating.

Following are 11 phrases every official should remember. Incorporate them into your officiating vocabulary at the right time and they will help you to say the right thing.

1. “The rule is ...”

When you’re dealing with coaches and players who don’t know the rules as well as you do (and that’s most of them), having that phrase ready is a must. It helps to educate participants and can prevent future arguments. Showing your confidence and knowledge will give participants more trust in you.

The key, of course, is you actually have to know the rule before you can rattle it off authoritatively. You don’t have to recite verbatim, but explaining it in a way that makes the player/coach understand you know the spirit and intent of the rule will earn you respect and end disputes.

2. “I’ll take a look at that play.”

Sometimes you will see it one way and the coach will see it another way. You’re confident in your call, but the coach is insistent.

Rather than continuing the back-and-forth banter, telling the coach you will review the play is a good alternative. It often quiets the coach and shows him or her you want to get better by reviewing video or the rule. A quick check of the rule can be accomplished at halftime. If you’re right, let the coach know but avoid an “I told you so” attitude. If you’re wrong, say something like, “I’m glad I got to check so I can get it right next time.”

If the review comes after the game, depending on local custom, you may need to contact the coach in the days following the contest to let him or her know what your review revealed. Working through an athletic director

or administrator of some sort is always good practice. Again, if you were right, be modest but thorough in your explanation. If you were wrong, own up to it.

3. “If it happened the way you said it did, I made a mistake.”

Another possible way to quiet a coach is by admitting a mistake or the possibility of a mistake. If you’re not sure if you got it right, it’s OK to admit it. Coaches and players will respect you for it — as long as you aren’t making and admitting mistakes too often.

4. “My partner had a better look at it.” Never throw your partner under the bus. One way to support a partner’s call is to tell the coach your partner had the best angle on the play. It’s the truth. You’re not judging your partner’s call by doing so and you’re acknowledging the

coach’s concern. Plus you’re not giving the coach a chance to cajole you into overturning the call. If the coach asks why you can’t make the call, you say, “I had different coverage on the play.” Do not say, “That’s not my call.”

5. “That’s enough.”

Sometimes enough is enough in regard to complaints, so officials need to say that. You may want to supplement the warning with the “stop sign,” an upraised hand that indicates you’ve heard enough. And if the coach doesn’t take the hint, the phrase should be followed by a penalty. Sometimes warnings and talk don’t cut it. Taking action is necessary.

6. “Let’s play.”

One good way to move forward is by getting the game going again as

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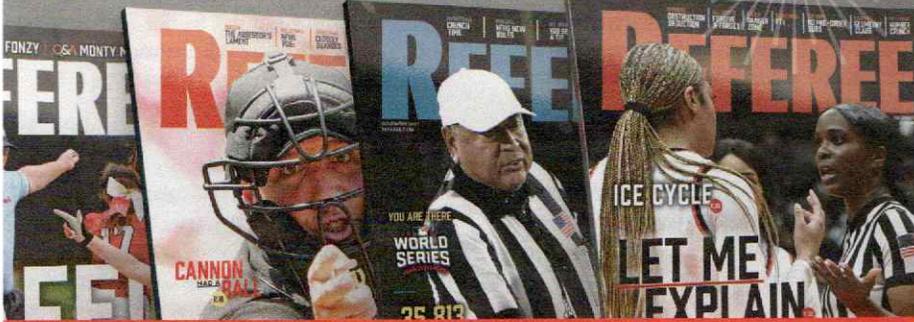
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When addressing players, there are several key phrases Justin Hayes, Redford, Mich., can rely on to get his point across and help the game.

quickly as allowed by rule. By telling the participants to self-start or resume play with a whistle, you can end further dialogue and help everyone move on. Once action resumes, attention will shift from the play in question to the current action.

7. "What did you see?"

There are times you will need to huddle up with officials after a call, if rules allow. After all, the goal is always to get it right. Collect information from your partners by asking them what they saw on the play. Use the information to stick with or reverse your call.

That is also a great question for a coach in a debate about a judgment situation. It often gets the coach focused on the play in question and can take a bit of the emotion out of the discussion.

8. "Take it easy."

Making your presence known and saying something as simple as that

to players when you sense a game is getting a little heated and tempers are beginning to flare are very important. You can prevent a fight with your voice, so use it.

9. "Nice job."

Officials don't need to be cheerleaders, but complimenting players on great plays or acts of sportsmanship is part of game management. It is part of being an active leader. If a player helps a fallen opponent get to her feet or goes out of her way to avoid unnecessary contact, acknowledge it. Positive reinforcement is a great tool.

10. "Keep your focus."

Say that to yourself and to your partners when necessary during a game. Maybe it's a blowout in which your mind can become easily distracted. Maybe it's a tight contest and you need to be focusing on specific things. A reminder can help.

The same phrase can be said to a player who is visibly upset and seems to be considering mayhem. By directing her attention back to the task at hand, you can maintain game control.

11. "Let's talk about the game."

Don't let your partners slip out after a game without telling them that you want to have a postgame. Talk about the play in which you had a double whistle. Ask about your judgment in regard to a close ruling. Your memory of the game is the sharpest right afterward, so don't let the educational opportunity pass you by.

Some officials talk because they like to hear the sound of their own voices. They ramble on and on. While talk can be taken to the extreme, that doesn't mean it's not important. The right phrases at the right time can see you through some critical situations in your career.

Is it time to open your mouth? ■