

ARTICLE 11

Communicating and Dealing With Coaches {Opening up the lines of communication}

Barry Roberts

Barry Roberts is an NCAA official working women's games in the Big XII, SEC, Conference USA, Big Sky, Sunbelt, Southland, A-Sun and others. Barry has worked in numerous NCAA and conference tournaments.

Have you ever been to a foreign country where they didn't speak English as their national language, and *you* could not speak theirs? If so, you know how difficult communicating can be. Yet, I am sure you can still imagine the nightmare of not being able to ask or understand directions, not being able to order off the menu, or many other things critical to living normally. In many ways basketball games are similar, and may make it difficult for coaches and officials to communicate.

Two separate languages

Coaches try to do their thing: Run offenses and defenses to give their team a chance to win. An opposing coach is doing essentially the same thing, but usually with a different style and approach that often entails different words and meanings. Two coaches with two separate languages. Ever thought of that? Then, officials make it worse by throwing in a third "foreign" language spoken by referees. We try to make sure the game runs smoothly and is played by the rules — according to words *and intent* set forth in the rule book (some would consider that to be the most foreign language of all). Frustration sometimes results from people using the "three" languages while trying to communicate in a competitive environment.

Here are some helpful ideas in dealing with, if not fixing, communication problems on the court

Gimme some respect

Officials truthfully say things like, "All I want is a little respect." Remember the golden rule. Treat others (coaches) the way you want to be treated. When coaches question a call or ruling, make sure you listen to — and *hear* — what they are saying. Differentiate a coach's actions and words. Is what they are saying "venting," or is it a legitimate complaint? Sometimes coaches may approach you about a play. Listen to what they are saying because they might be right.

Coaches want to be heard . . .

. . . and they don't want you to appease them with your responses. You shouldn't just say things you think they want to hear. Be honest and open. Let them know you hear them; and if you don't understand what they are saying, be sure to let them know. Remember, they are speaking a different language. If a coach asks you to watch a particular play or situation and you know what he is talking about, take a look at it. Let the coach know what you saw. That is not hard to do and should not delay the game or break your concentration.

Please listen, Coach

Improve the lines of communication by getting a coach to listen to you. That ensures you have a part in the communication process. If we can do it successfully, we'll defuse a hostile situation and have it under control. A successful way to get coaches to listen to you is to let *them* know they have *your* attention. Say things to calm them.

Defusing an SEC coach

I remember in a Southeastern Conference Tournament game a few years back my partner had a no-call near the basket. I was very near the coach, who immediately began to complain and wave arms and hands in the air. I knew I had to get the lines of communication open quickly or someone would have to issue a technical foul. I said to the coach in a calm voice, "Coach, put your hands down and talk to me, I am listening." The coach did his part and put his hands in his pocket. I knew then he was listening to me and that the situation was under control. More importantly, I knew that no technical foul would happen. The coach said his piece to me and respected the fact that I would listen.

When officials control themselves

We should attempt to defuse hostility with calmness first. We can only do that if we are under control *first*. If a coach is yelling and screaming and we yell and scream back, all that we have is an argument and neither of us knows what the other is trying to say. At any level of competition, we don't want to create — or contribute to — anything that even looks like an episode of Jerry Springer. Try something like, "Coach, I don't understand what you want. I only hear you screaming. Talk to me and let me know what you are seeing out here." If a coach says something like, "They are killing our post player," then you might respond with, "Which player, Coach? I will try to get a look at it."

If a coach *then* says, "All of them" or "The big player," you may as well go on about your business. In that instance, the coach is venting and doesn't know — hasn't personally observed — *who* it is they want you to watch. But if a coach says something like, "On the roll to the basket, #35 is holding my cutter," you

better take a look because they definitely see something! Plus, it is probably going to be on tape. Take a look at any play that a coach describes in detail. If it is there, call it. If you think it is a legal play or a no call, give the coach a brief explanation and move on.

No running dialogue

Understand, I am not advocating a running dialogue or things that delay the game. Most of these situations can be handled with your back to the coach during live play or on free throw situations. Try not to make the coach have to come out on the floor and yell to communicate with you. This only draws attention to the situation. If you know they need to say something to you, get in a position where they can talk to you discretely. If you have already heard something and responded to it, then it is no longer a communication problem. *You* have a different situation. You need to get away from the coach because you have done all you can do to let them know what you saw on the play in question — and you responded. In order for officials and coaches to be able to successfully communicate we have to understand that each may be speaking a different language. Officials, for their part, we must make communication encounters positive and do what we can to calm situations. When we can't get ourselves or a coach calmed down, we have to leave the situation alone and get away. Let it run its course. Don't debate plays, calls, or rules. Explain if necessary and move on. In a basketball game, did you ever see a debate not end up in an argument?