

Our Team, The Best Team Tonight

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If you asked a 100 people the following question: “How many teams are on the court during a basketball game?” Almost every one of them would reply “2 of course!” And if someone happened to answer “3”, you would probably guess correctly that they are a referee! As referees we consider ourselves a team when we walk onto the floor, just as the two other teams. We seek excellence just like they do, the difference being that the two teams made up of players are trying to “outperform” each other to win the game while the third team is trying to make sure the game is played correctly while trying to “beat” the videotape. For this third team, also known as the referees, the goal is to be the best team on the court every night. What does the referee's job consist of? Is it merely just walking out on the court for two hours of work? Not even close. I have been officiating for a few years now. I know the pregame preparation and the time commitment involved with refereeing. However, even I was surprised with the experience I had one night during this year's NBA pre-season.

I recently had an opportunity to experience a National Basketball Association (NBA) game like I never had before. I got to participate in a unique apprenticeship experience. On October 10, 2002 the Chicago Bulls played the Boston Celtics at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Connecticut. The game was officiated by Joe Forte', Tony Brothers, and Matt Boland.

Preparation for the game began at the time we arrived to the arena, about an hour and a half prior to the start of the game. When we arrived we were escorted to the locker room by security guards. I noticed just how tight security is at an NBA game. Normally no one is allowed in the official's locker room but I was granted access because Ed Rush, the NBA Director of Officiating Staff, gave the crew chief the permission for me to do so. The pre-game conference, which proved later to be the basis for a successfully officiated game, consisted of an open dialogue, under the direction of the crew chief. All of the team members contributed to the discussion. This discussion included talk about specific game plays, new season directives, positioning, and the answers to particular pre-season exam questions. Prior to the pre-season all the officials attend a week long training camp in which they take a number of rules exams that are very useful to the official's say in keeping them sharp with their knowledge of the rules. At the end of the meeting, the crew chief even asked me; “Are we missing something? Do you want to add something?” I thought that was great. It made me feel like part of the team, like I was working that night. It just goes to show that official's can gain something from any other official, no matter what level they officiate.

As the game began, the observer that night, Jim Capers Sr., asked me to sit next to

him. Another great educational experience! I got to see all sides of an NBA game from an officiating aspect that night. As the game progressed through the first half, the observer began to talk to me about the game. He would say, "Watch this player, he's suspect for three defensive seconds", "That call is a secondary purpose call", "That is a tempo call", or "That is a message sending call". Those were some of the game situations/plays that were observed. I realized just how in depth they analyze each call in a game. It made me realize that each call does indeed have a large impact on the game and it is important for referees on all levels to take the time to critique themselves and their calls in such a detailed manner.

During half-time, the observer and referees spoke about the plays that occurred in the first half, with the following statements being heard: "This play was good", "The angle with this one was not the best", " We need to watch this match-up more closely", " I felt we missed that play", etc. There were no egos in the locker room at that time. There can't be in this job of officiating. We are humans, and it is human to commit errors, but our goal is to get as many plays correct as we can. We can only reach this goal by being open to criticism and having the ability to adapt and change what we need to too get better.

The officials took all the discussion in and went out and worked another good half. The game went smoothly. As the final horn sounded though there was still work to be done. The post game conference was another important part of my experience. Some of the following items were discussed: game styles of both teams, key match-ups, team fouls, specific game plays, etc. After each game all three officials must discuss these topics and submit a game report via a laptop to the league office. The reports are accessible to the other officials on staff and are very valuable as a guide to what to look for from a particular team in a game further along in the season. Although officials such as myself do not have access to reports like these, it made me realize that it is important to do as much research before a game that I can. You can read the local paper or check out a team's internet site to get some key information on the team, their players, win/losses, and playing style.

While the fans were leaving to go back home after the game had ended, we were back to the hotel because our work was still not yet finished! During the next hour and a half or so we watched the videotape of the game in an effort to see if the ultimate goal of "beating the tape" was reached.

What individual or collective errors were committed? What could we have done to positively affect the game? Could we have gotten a better angle on that play? Could we have handled that situation in a better way? These were some of the questions that were asked during the tape session. Later that evening I went home as my colleagues went to sleep. They had to rise early to take the first flight the next morning to do it all over again later that night!

In summary, this apprenticeship consisted of approximately hours of intense work for my colleagues. In summary I learned as officials we are going to make mistakes, but

our goal is to always prepare as best we can and work intensely to make sure we get as many plays as we can right. We need to be the best team on the court every night!