

SHARP FOCUS AMID OUTSIDE DISTRACTIONS

We are often asked to officiate a game when the world around us is exploding. There is stress and turmoil at work. We are facing significant chaos in our personal lives. All of that can weigh heavy on our minds, providing a huge distraction as we try to settle into an officiating assignment. And while it is not always easy to put aside our outside lives when we officiate, that is what the job requires. Failing to overcome distractions off the field/court/mat can lead to missed calls and uncomfortable situations with players and coaches. Ultimately, it is not fair to participants and the games we serve when we let outside distractions prevent us from giving our all. What can we do to gather our composure and focus our mind on the game instead of outside troubles? Here are a few tips:

USE A PREGAME RITUAL

Do the things you always do to prepare for your assignment. For each person, that is probably something unique. It might be a particular way you don your uniform or gear. It can be a mental checklist you run through to make sure you are ready. It might be particular things you discuss with your partner, such as a review of mechanics. Those rituals or routines send an internal signal that can help our brains transition to the task at hand. According to Scientific America, there is even psychological research to suggest pre-performance routines improve attention and execution, and increase emotional stability and confidence.

TELL YOUR PARTNER(S) YOUR CONCERNS ABOUT BEING DISTRACTED

It may help you to focus just by acknowledging to someone else that you are concerned. And your partner(s) might be able to help you refocus if they sense you are losing focus during the contest.

TAKE EXTRA CARE WITH INTERACTIONS

When dealing with coaches and players, make sure off-field or off-court frustrations do not spill over. Peter Jaskulski, consultant with the Milwaukee-based Vistelar Group and a speaker on Verbal Defense

and Influence, trains officials on non-escalation and refers to a concept called “showtime.” “Showtime is a tactic that prepares you to put on the professional face,” Jaskulski said. “The professional face allows you to deal with the task at hand, officiating an athletic event. But there are other tasks that occur during the event. These can include pregame meetings with the coaches, making a call or handling a dispute. Each task may require a different professional face.”

Jaskulski outlined the tactic:

1. Stack up your blocks – ground your feet 4-6 inches apart. Drive them into the ground. Relax your knees, bending slightly. Tuck in your buttocks and drive your navel through your thoracic vertebrae. Take a deep breath and raise your ribcage off your pelvis to drive your scapula down.

2. Say “showtime” to yourself.
3. Breathe in, pause, breathe out, pause and repeat; each is usually a four-second count.
4. Put on your professional face.
5. Use the appropriate positive self-talk.
6. Step into the arena and handle it.
“Showtime allows you to be unbiased, open and flexible when dealing with players and coaches,” he said.

EMBRACE THE CHANCE TO ESCAPE

One of the oft-cited benefits of officiating is the chance to forget about work or life and focus on the contest. Take full advantage of that opportunity, recognizing that your need to focus does not have to be all-day – it is only required for that particular contest. But what happens when you have done all that and you find your mind wandering back to your woes during the game?

FIND A “RESET BUTTON”

If you find your attention waning during play, find a way to quickly refocus on the game. During a break in the action, glance at a particular pylon, foul pole, antenna or point on a scoreboard. Take a deep breath, and get yourself ready to focus on the next play.

GO BACK TO BASICS

Focus on your sport’s core officiating mechanics and go through that mental checklist of your play-by-play responsibilities. In baseball, for example, there are pre-pitch responsibilities that can become an extra focus. Rather than thinking about them generally, you can be more deliberate to regain your attention. Finally, if your outside issues are so pressing that they cannot be put aside for the time it takes to officiate, perhaps you really should not be accepting the assignment in fairness to the participants and coaches.

You have to be smart enough about your own capabilities to recognize when you should not be officiating – and when you should find a last-minute substitute and call your assigner to explain the situation.