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Five Simple Rules

By Martin W. Spencer

Each morning before work, I grab a cup of coffee and read something. This morning routine started for me amid the pandemic when friend and fellow official Alex Landis suggested the book *The Daily Dominator* by Brian Cain. *The Daily Dominator* provides readers with short, motivational excerpts each day for an entire year to help people develop habits towards success. Inspired by this book, I then started reading *The Daily Stoic* by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman, which employs a similar format of short, daily reads. Recently, I read a passage in *The Daily Stoic* titled, *Some Simple Rules*. In the passage, Holiday & Hanselman (2016) cite five rules identified by Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations*, 8.51.

Marcus Aurelius says, “In your actions, don’t procrastinate. In your conversations, don’t confuse. In your thoughts, don’t wander. In your soul, don’t be passive or aggressive. In your life, don’t be all about business.” Rephrased, the five simple rules are (Holiday & Hanselman, 2016):

1. Do not procrastinate.
2. Do not be passive or aggressive.
3. Do not confuse others in conversation.
4. Do not allow your thoughts to wander.
5. Do not be all business.

These rules resonate with me as I reflect on this past basketball season. It amazes me how five simple rules developed by a philosopher thousands of years ago apply to basketball officiating and life today. In the following article, I explain how these five simple rules relate to basketball officiating. These rules apply to areas of the game that I strive improve in, and that is why I write about these rules. I believe that other officials can also improve by following these five simple rules.

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Do Not Procrastinate

We may think of procrastination as putting something off until the last minute, or apathetically waiting to complete an undesirable task. Like when we were in college and waited until the night before to cram for an exam, or putting off that work assignment or home improvement project. Think of procrastination in relation to our call selectivity in a basketball game. The Points of Emphasis (POE's) are POE's for a reason. What happens to our game when we allow defenders to re-route ball handlers all the way up the court, or if we allow post displacement and/or ward-offs? Instead of procrastinating on these types of plays, we must call obvious freedom of movement fouls from the very beginning of the game, or else physicality will continue and eventually escalate. That does not mean an official should call an incidental touch-foul with five seconds left on the shot clock, or a legal screen that looks awkward and sends a starter to the bench with two fouls in the first five minutes.

Remember, there is incidental contact and legal contact. We must decipher between the two from the get-go and adjudicate incidental vs. illegal consistently throughout the game. Procrastinating on illegal contact leads to rough play, which makes it extremely difficult for officials to control the game.

When it comes to management of players and benches, do we procrastinate, or do we address unsporting conduct early? If a competitive matchup exists and players are trash-talking, we must address this early instead of thinking the trash-talk will "fizzle-out" on its own. You can verbally communicate a "problem matchup" with your partners so that everyone in the game knows that the crew is aware of the matchup. Taunting is not an infraction that requires a warning. As soon as it occurs, it must be addressed, because otherwise it will escalate. Do we allow bench personnel to consistently stand? Do we allow head coaches to comment on each play or disregard the coaching box? Or do we firmly, but fairly address the behavior. Al Battista, long-time official, mentor, and current NBA scout always says that officials cannot have the attribute of avoidance. This leads to the next simple rule.

Do Not be Passive or Aggressive

The information in the previous section does not suggest that we immediately administer technical fouls as a reprimand or form of punishment. But when a coach or player breaks our concentration, we must address this behavior instead of ignoring it. This does not require us to act as drill sergeants. We can respond to reasonable questions without raising our voice or using sarcasm. Look the individual in the eye, and use a calm, neutral tone. This diffuses situations. If a coach or player excessively complains on each possession, we can professionally remind the coach or player that he or she must allow us to referee. Keep hands at waste level if using hand signals as a diffusion technique. We should not give an emphatic stop sign directly in an individual's face.

If we provide a warning, the coach or player must know that the next infraction will result in the appropriate penalty, and then we as officials must have the courage to assess the proper penalty thereafter. It is important for everyone involved in a basketball game to understand that technical fouls are not personal. A technical foul is another rule in the rulebook.

After we administer a technical foul, do we then become passive and fail to call the rules as written? Envision this scenario: We just assessed a technical foul to the head coach of team A for excessive complaining, so the next trip down the court we no-call an obvious foul against team A to appease the coach who we just gave the technical foul. All this does is reinforce the coach's belief that if he or she tries to coerce us, he or she will get calls or non-calls that he or she wants. What do we think this says to the other coach? The coach of team B may believe that he or she must complain to receive favorable calls or non-calls. Now, you may have both coaches engaging unwanted behavior instead of one coach. Officials must build rapport to avoid communicating passively or aggressively. Ed T. Rush Sr., former NBA Referee and Supervisor of Officials, and co-founder of Court Club Elite reminds us to find the voice of reason. If we can find a player on a team that we have built, or can build a rapport with, it can help our games. Ask the voice of reason to positively influence his or her aggressive teammates during intense situations. Also remember, we can speak to players in positive terms. We don't always have to tell players to "stop" doing something. For example, during a loose ball scrum, we can get in the play and say, "great hustle guys," instead of "stop, stop, get off each other." Rob Rorke, current NCAA Division 1 official, and Director of Court Club says, "rules without relationship equals rebellion."

Aggressive behavior in officials often comes from feeling defensive. We may miss a play which brings doubt into our minds. When we receive push back, our natural reaction is to immediately and defensively respond because we don't want to be wrong. Remember, we can admit a mistake to a coach or player. It humanizes us and helps us build rapport. In other situations, we can find something to agree on with a coach or player. "Coach, I agree your defender's hands were straight up, but I saw him walk under the airborne shooter." Never undermine the importance of listening. If we can listen first, without interrupting or thinking about what to say next, we can then respond with empathy, improving our communication with coaches and players.

Do Not Confuse Others in Conversation

In his book, the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey discusses *empathic listening*, which encourages people to seek to understand and then seek to be understood. As basketball officials, if we truly listen with the intent to understand a coach or player's perspective, we can respond more effectively. When we engage in dialogue, we must not confuse coaches or players. This is when rules knowledge becomes paramount. How can we expect coaches and players to trust us if we spew out confusing verbiage? Once we empathically listen, we must respond using clear and concise rulebook terminology. A coach may ask, "Why is that a travel?" A good response may be, "Coach, your player lifted his/her pivot foot before he/she released the ball to start the dribble." We may also hear, "How is that a blocking foul?" "Coach, the

defender did not establish legal guarding position before the offensive player left the floor.” Speak in basketball terms. A language that coaches, players, and officials all understand. “I didn’t move on that screen?! “You are right, but your feet were wider than shoulder width which tripped the defender.” These are only a few examples of many, but rule of thumb is to use rulebook language, because it becomes more difficult to question or challenge rule-based responses. If we try to argue our point by making things up or trying to justify a clearly incorrect call, we lose trust and we lose credibility. Again, if we are wrong, we can admit a mistake.

Do Not Allow Your Thoughts to Wander

Imagine how much better we would be as officials if our thoughts never wandered. Over the years I have come to realize how much of basketball refereeing is more mental than physical. So many times, I have been in the proper position, looking in the right spot, and I have still missed an obvious play. Maybe I was thinking about the dinner I wanted after the game, or what I dealt with at work earlier in the day. I could have been thinking about the message I received on my phone earlier. Why do we miss plays when we’re in the right position, with our eyes are in the right spot, and with accurate knowledge of the rule? A lack of focus or concentration. We must bring focus, awareness, concentration, and energy/effort to literally, every possession. So how do we keep this focus and concentration instead of allowing our thoughts to wander? While I am certainly no mental training expert, there are some strategies I learned that may help officials.

We can self-talk. This self-talk must be positive, present, and process driven (Cain, 2013). What does positive-present-process mean? Instead of, “Wow that was awful how I just kicked that play,” acknowledge that you missed the play, but self-talk, “Next possession. Referee this primary defender all the way to the basket from trail.” You can say to yourself, “I am a really good referee during end of game scenarios, because I’ve prepared myself for these situations.” When we continue to think about the plays that we missed into the next possession, it has a snowball effect, and we miss more plays. Another mantra I like to use is “recognize, release, re-focus” (Cain, 2013). We can recognize that we made a mistake, we then let go of the mistake, and then focus on the next play at hand. Another self-talk phrase that Ed and Rob reiterate through Court Club is, “clocks, fouls, players.” As we run up the floor, this self-talk reminds us to check the clocks, team fouls, and the formulation of the defense. This keeps us focused and reminds us of our process. Another strategy is to ref in segments and find physical points in the arena or gymnasium to help reset. If we are working games with media timeouts, we only need to focus on officiating in four-minute segments. We ref four minutes, and once we get to a timeout, we can pick an item in the gym such as the shot clock or the American flag, look at that item, and take a deep breath to prepare ourselves for the next four minutes. Breathing seems simple, but it can be overlooked even though it is such a vital tool to help us stay focused. Whenever we feel like the game is moving too fast, we are losing focus, or external factors are distracting us, it helps to take a deep breath. Pay attention to the inhale and exhale. This puts us in the present moment in preparation for the next play.

Do Not be All Business

Officials may receive criticism that they look unapproachable, need to communicate, or need to show personality. This type of criticism certainly has value, but I do not believe most officials are truly

unapproachable, do not want to communicate, or do not enjoy the craft. I believe this criticism stems from officials' desire to be right as often as possible and service the game the best they can. What we must constantly remind ourselves is that perfection in basketball officiating and in life is unattainable. We must strive for perfection but accept excellence with the understanding that we will never call every single play correctly. As Al says, "be your own worst critic, but not your own worst enemy." We must remind ourselves that the game comes first, the crew comes second, and ourselves last. Family, friends, and career come before basketball officiating. We must also remind ourselves to have fun with the craft and smile. Otherwise, why would we all commit the time, effort, and energy that so many of us commit to this craft. Many of us desire to become top-level officials, but too often with the primary focus on reaching a certain status or officiating a certain game. These goals involve aspects out of our control and prioritize an outcome focus. Process goals keep us humble and allow us to focus on what we can control. Officials should enjoy the process of rules study, video breakdown, proper fitness, proper nutrition, and the games we ref; but we should also enjoy our interactions with players, coaches, and school personnel. Most importantly, we must remember to enjoy the journey and the camaraderie with our brothers and sisters in officiating.

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