

A Model for Understanding and Dealing With Misconduct and Preventing Mass Confrontation

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The legendary Pat Smith (former USSF National Instructor/Assessor and USSF Director of Assessment) once said that refereeing is as much about “man management” as it is about recognizing fouls and penalizing them correctly. Although Smith made this observation more than 30 years ago, there are still referees running around the pitch, calling fouls and issuing cards like robots. When things go badly, these officials invariably claim they never saw it coming. Coaches, players, and even spectators usually have a different view of what transpired and can cite numerous examples of where the game officials failed to effectively manage players and how this led to trouble.

Sometimes the best way to understand a concept is to examine it in a different context. For example, when a particular training exercise proves ineffective, experienced coaches often use a different training activity to teach the same skill. In this article, I use the undisputed facts of the events that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri to foster a better understanding of human behavior and explain a strategy for dealing with misconduct on the soccer field. The undisputed facts are: (1) The Ferguson police department had a poor relationship with the community it served and race was a factor; (2) When the perceived injustice occurred, the police department was slow to publically address the incident, (3) The perceived injustice resulted in a strong emotional response from members of the Ferguson community, and (4) People from outside the community – that is, people not directly involved in the incident – intentionally interjected themselves into the situation. [Author’s comment: I make no judgment as to whether the officer’s or the police department’s actions were justified or criminal, as such a determination is not germane to this discussion. Nor do I intend to minimize the tragic loss of life that ultimately led to the riots. This is a learning exercise and nothing more.]

Sociologists have long known that people are quicker to forgive mistakes (real or imagined) and criticisms from people we have positive relationships with than those we have negative relationships with or do not know. Just as the Ferguson community reacted strongly to the purported injustice perpetrated by a Ferguson police officer, soccer players with whom the referee has poor rapport will react more negatively to a mistake or a bad situation than they would if they had a positive relationship with the referee. This leads to **Rule #1: *The more negative the relationship between the officiating crew and the teams (players, substitutes, and coaches), the more negative the latter’s reaction to a perceived error or bad situation.*** So how should game officials develop a positive relationship with the players? Following are my suggestions.

Before the Game

1. **Be professional from the very beginning.**

Just as people form impressions about others in business and social situations based upon their time of arrival and general appearance, coaches, players, and staff form impressions

Arrive dressed as prescribed.



about officials the minute they arrive - long before the first whistle is blown. Therefore, it is vitally important that all members of the officiating team make a good first impression at every game by arriving at the appropriate time and dressed in the manner prescribed by the league or organization for which they are working. Officials should avoid talking about the game they had last night or the big game they have at the end of the month. Their actions should show that they are glad to be there and that this game is important. One never gets a second chance to make a first impression.

2. **Seek to develop a positive relationship with everyone.** It is amazing that some officials still walk onto soccer fields like they own the place and give threatening speeches at the coin toss. Before the game, officials should ask for what they need (i.e. locker rooms, towels, markings corrected, etc.) if such items are expected rather than issue demands. At the coin toss, be pleasant and professional. Avoid negative comments of any kind and be as brief as possible. Always act polite and friendly to coaches and staff, but not overly conversant or phony. Never attempt to ingratiate oneself to a coach.

During the Game

1. **Show empathy.** When a player is injured, show some concern. If the player can return to his feet and you feel comfortable doing so, offer the player a helping hand. The 1980's management film "In Charge" advised managers to be "Strong enough to be gentle." "Old school" referees, instructors, and assessors may advise officials to never touch a player because "If you touch, they touch." This approach is outdated. A more modern – and more effective – approach is for the referee to read the emotions of the players and to touch (offer a hand up or give a pat on the back) when appropriate, and to accept the same. Never initiate touch with a player of the opposite sex as this can be misinterpreted as sexual in nature.

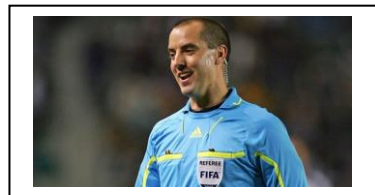


2. **Be a good actor.** Good referees are good actors and can deliver the appropriate facial expressions at the appropriate time, while always remaining calm. In my first job as a teacher, I observed an experienced teacher read the riot-act to his class. As I stood there, he turned to me and with his back to his class, smiled and winked. Then he turned back to the class and began lecturing them again with a facial expression that could kill. He was in complete control of his emotions and the entire diatribe was an act. A good referee should be able to deliver the appropriate performance on demand, while always remaining in complete control of his emotions

Successful Officials know when to touch and accept a touch.



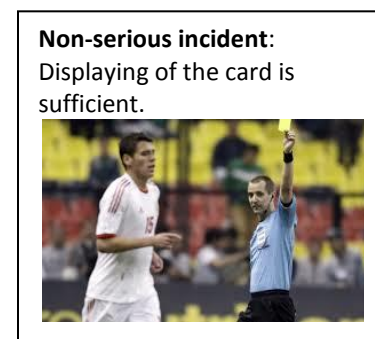
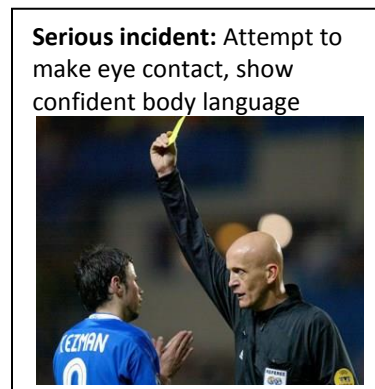
- 3. Smile and have a sense of humor.** Anyone who officiates should do so because it satisfies something inside of them. Referees should not hesitate to smile on the field to let everyone know they are enjoying the game. Don't be a sour-puss.



Humans tend to react negatively to perceived injustice, though the magnitude of the reaction varies with the personality of the individual and his emotional state that day. The protests in Ferguson were a prime example of this reaction. The same response can occur on the soccer field. This leads to **Rule #2: A delay in identifying and punishing the perpetrator of a serious act may lead to strong emotions and negative reactions from players.** Let us consider the implication of this rule by examining two scenarios in which a player is fouled in a way that demands *at least* a caution.

Scenario 1: The referee has a good view of incident; is certain of what action to take; there is no injury or the injury is not serious.

- 1. Immediately identify and isolate the guilty player.** Use non-threatening, non-demeaning hand gestures and the strong whistle to isolate the guilty player from other players, especially players of the opposing team.
- 2. Display the appropriate card (if yellow, talk to the player).** If the card to be displayed is yellow (caution), the referee should make eye contact with the guilty player and use confident but non-threatening body language so that he (and everyone else) knows that he views this as a serious matter. In these situations, it is not appropriate for the referee to display the yellow card to a player as he walks away. If the card to be displayed is red (send-off), sometimes it may be necessary to display the card early, as doing so can have a calming and preventative effect on players, substitutes and coaching personnel, but this is rare.
- 3. Deal with retaliation and/or injuries as needed.** After the guilty player has been disciplined, now is the appropriate time to deal with retaliation and/or to show empathy by checking on the injured player.



This sequence insures that everyone sees an immediate, just response to the guilty player's unacceptable conduct.

Scenario 2: The referee has a poor view of incident; is uncertain of what action to take; notes a possible serious injury.

- 1. Quickly identify and isolate the guilty player and indicate where he is to go.** “#4 blue, over here please.” As before, take 1 or 2 seconds to safely isolate the guilty player.
- 2. Take time to obtain additional information.** If the injured player appears to have a serious injury, the referee must motion for the team trainer or physician to enter the field so that the health of the injured player is not compromised. Once the referee has ensured that the injured player will receive treatment, he should leave him and return to the guilty player. If the referee did not have a good view of the incident, he should avoid guessing; rather, he should use this time to obtain additional information. For example, examine the part of the injured player where contact was made (if practical and appropriate), observe the injured player’s behavior (Is he/she grabbing his/her face but contact was made in the chest?), and obtain information from the nearest AR and/or fourth official. To illustrate this, consider how former U.S. FIFA referee, Raul Dominguez, handled a situation during a 1990’s U.S. vs. Russia international friendly in Miami. After a hard challenge by a Russian defender, Raul raised his profile dramatically and quickly moved between the injured US player and Russian defender several times before correctly deciding the US player was embellishing and that the Russian player deserved a caution rather than being sent-off. The best referees take the steps necessary to arrive at a correct decision. It is better to be slow and correct than quick and wrong.
- 3. Display the appropriate card to the guilty player.** Once the referee has all the information he needs (and, if necessary, trainers or physicians have been beckoned to enter the field), the referee can display the appropriate card to the isolated player. If the isolated player is also injured, many referees find it helpful to pull the card out and hold it by their sides to let everyone, including the player about to be cautioned, what disciplinary action is being taken. Once it becomes time to display the card in a formal way, the referee should face the player and make eye contact as he displays the card. In this situation, merely displaying the card, especially to the player’s back as he walks away, is not appropriate. Never display a card to a player while he is on the ground or being treated. In situations such as these, referees must raise their profile to ensure that everyone knows the behavior leading to the card is not acceptable and will be dealt.
- 4. Deal with retaliation or other issues as needed.** After the guilty player has been punished, the referee should, as in the previous scenario, turn his attention to dealing with any retaliation or other misconduct that occurred after the initial foul.

It is important to note that in both scenarios, the referee deals with events in the order in which they occurred on the pitch: the player committing the first foul is handled first and subsequent transgressions are dealt with as they occurred. No procedure works in all situations but experience teaches us that isolating the guilty player first, signaling to everyone that he will be

dealt with, is the best way to minimize retaliation and prevent the behaviors that lead to mass confrontation.

Mass Confrontation can be defined as the display of psychologically and/or physically threatening behavior by multiple players and/or substitutes on the field, most of whom were not directly involved in the causal event. Unfortunately, officials regularly working highly competitive games are likely to encounter a mass confrontation at some point in their career. In Ferguson, outsiders flooded into the community and turned protest into riots, likely not inspired by the shooting that occurred there, but by their own experiences and motivations. This leads me to the next rule. **Rule #3: *Players not directly involved in a serious incident who enter the area to create a mass confrontation are in a highly emotional state and may not be rational.*** This rule has strong implications for referee and AR safety. In physics, there is a concept of critical mass – the quantity of mass that, when reached, ensures a reaction cannot be reversed. It is equivalent to a “tipping point.” In a game, once this point is reached, the officiating team must shift its focus from prevention to observation, de-escalation, and most of all, safety. Thus, once mass confrontation occurs, officials should assume the following roles:

Referee: Step back to get a good view of the incident as it unfolds and use simple commands such as “stay back,” or “calm down.” Avoid touching players in this scenario.

Assistant Referees: The AR nearest the incident should enter the field to help ensure the safety of the referee and should attempt to prevent other players from entering the event by using voice and physical presence. The other AR should enter the field to a position where he has a good view of the incident AND can assist the referee if it becomes necessary to do so. The general positioning pattern in this instance is referred to as the “Triangle of Control.”

Fourth Official: Observe and take notes from the technical area while using appropriate, safe measures to prevent substitutes and other bench personnel from leaving the bench.

The techniques discussed in this article are not new. Highly successful, experienced referees have been employing them for many years. At a recent advanced referee training function, one participant was quickly able to implement the strategies he was taught while another referee in the group had difficulty changing what he did on the field. At the end of the event, the former official received great praise from the leaders while the other did not. Which referee will you be?

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