

## Media Matters

### How to Use the Press to Your Group's Advantage

By Doug Day

Sports fans normally only see officials during a game, an atmosphere that doesn't give much opportunity for them to understand our role or appreciate what we do. Seeing officials in a different light is one outcome of getting some media attention for your association and its members.

Do you publicize your meeting dates, new officers, scholarship program or awards that your association presents to members? Obviously, the smaller your media market, the more likely you are to get media attention. But even in large markets, there are small community newspapers and broadcast stations that may be open to the idea, especially those that do play-by-play or cover the leagues in which you work.

Where do you start? Simply call the sports department and let them know that you are interested in working with them. It helps if you have a specific person in mind, of course. The sports

director is a good place to start, but learn the name of the person before calling. Your conversation will give you a better idea of the information they might use, how they prefer to receive it, etc.

There is not much involved in sending a news release; keep it simple, stick to the facts, include the key information (who, what, when, where) and provide a contact number in case the media has any questions of you. For a photo news release, make sure you have a good, high resolution picture and include information for the caption, including the names (in order) of all people in the picture. Check with the newspaper about their policy; some do not accept submitted photos and will require you to schedule a photo shoot with their photographer.

These days, most media prefer to receive such things electronically. They may have specific needs or preferences, so check with them first to increase your chances.

You can use photo news releases to newspapers to announce award and scholarship winners, new officers, new members, etc. You could send pictures of your members who get tournament assignments (follow your state association's guidelines on that).

One goal of increasing your media presence is to get fans thinking of your members as something other than the people making calls against their son or daughter. Another is to draw the attention of people who may have some interest in joining the officiating ranks. Over time, the strategy will help you become a trusted resource to the media and perhaps help build some trust in the fan base, as well.

Beyond the basic news releases, your local media may also be interested in other stories with broad fan appeal such as rule changes or a behind-the-scenes look at a clinic or a crew preparing for  
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a game. Remember, your role is to offer stories that are interesting to *their* audience, not yours. My local association's roster includes one of the youngest mayors in the country — that's a good story.

Officials have a perspective on sports that is very different from everyone else. Is there a sports talk show or columnist that could use your insight? The play-by-play people will certainly appreciate your expertise and may even invite you to record a halftime feature they can use, or even join them in the press box on one of your rare nights off. Those are the people who perhaps have more impact on fan perception than anyone else.

The more they understand about our role, the less likely they will be to criticize on the close calls, and that's better for all of us. While they're not likely to give us a pass on stinker calls, they might at least put it into a little perspective for the audience or tone down the language.

The more your media gets to know your group, the more opportunities the two of you can find. Don't be afraid to invite a reporter to your next association meeting, let them see how much work and study goes into this avocation.

One caution about building familiarity is the possibility that you'll be asked to comment on officiating controversies like the NFL replacement referees or a bad call in a local game. With preparation, it is possible to provide comment without throwing anyone under the bus — but you can also make it clear as you develop the relationship that there are things you can't talk about, such as judgment calls.

Chances are you have someone in your organization with a media, PR or marketing background who has experience working with the media and can get you going in the right direction. As much as we get around, it's also possible that you have members who personally know the right media people. If you're lucky, you might even have a member who works with a local media outlet.

As a former radio reporter and announcer in the market where I officiate, I was interviewed about the NFL replacement referees by my former radio station. Being just south of Green Bay, you can probably guess which play prompted the call! The story actually

came out as a positive one about the challenges of making tough calls and the fact that the play would have been controversial no matter which way they called it (interception/touchback or simultaneous catch/TD) — and may have been just as controversial with the regular referees on the field.

I have also appeared on their sports talk show, and am interviewed about rule changes before football and basketball seasons. A local newspaper sportswriter also followed my football crew for a game, sitting in on our pregame and postgame activities. One of our local association members is a reporter for the local paper, which really helps us get our items in print, and another who just retired from varsity officiating provides color commentary on radio broadcasts of local high school basketball games.

Maybe your local paper would be interested in a regular column about sports rules. That may be stretching it, but a columnist might like to write about some of the common myths concerning the rules of a particular sport. The shortage of officials is always a popular story, especially if you present it as part of a recruitment drive or an upcoming clinic.

So, get to know your media people. You might be surprised by their level of interest. After all, officiating is a key part of athletics, and most sports reporters get into the field because they love the game just as much as we do.

*Doug Day is a former reporter and corporate spokesperson who now owns a PR consulting firm in Two Rivers, Wis. He has officiated basketball and football for more than 30 years and has held several board positions with the Manitowoc County Sports Officials Association, including three terms as president and several years as the group's football chairman.* □

**ON ... Community Recruitment**

Many officials associations host tournaments in their communities. While that is good community outreach, groups should use that event to promote their associations and recruit new members. It's a great way to get the word out about officiating and how to become an official.

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