

How to Manage the Media

By Doug Day

“Never talk to a reporter” may seem to be a safe way to stay out of trouble, but “no comment” doesn’t mean the story won’t be printed or aired. Stories will be told with or without your input. If possible, it’s a good idea to make sure they include the officials’ side of the story told the right way.

We’re seeing more of that as professional and college leagues have done away with their gag rules. A former professional league director — Mike Pereira — has even moved into the broadcast booth! We might not always like what they say, but it is refreshing when the correct information gets out to the fans.

The media landscape has changed drastically in recent years with the growth of the Internet, social

networking sites and officiating forums and chat rooms. A couple clicks of a mouse, and your play from a fifth grade game can be seen across the world in a matter of minutes.

There are more games broadcast on local and even national TV, so more officials are being exposed to the media. Like their national brethren, local sports reporters expect more access to officials and league representatives to talk about calls and rules. Of course, the bigger the game, the more media interest there will be. But even one reporter for a small newspaper might write a story that garners statewide or national attention.

The environment may be different, but the rules haven’t changed.

Have a Policy

Does your officiating organization have a media policy — and do you know what it is? What about the state, league or conference for which you work? Such a policy will depend on the nature of your organization, such as whether it employs or assigns people, or is a training organization, etc. It should include guidelines about who is the official spokesperson for the group, guidelines on when it is permissible to speak to the media, who should be notified of events that may attract media attention, etc.

Be Courteous and Professional

Reporters are people too — they have a tough job and they know you have a tough job. Show them respect and you will get respect in return. Avoid sarcasm and humor — it can be misinterpreted. Never criticize someone else.

Get Help

First stop: your league or association. When something happens that may get media attention, call them first. They can advise you. There are also reporters and media experts in the officiating world. Find one to help you if you think it’s necessary.

Feed Them and They Won’t Eat You

Reporters are like sharks; they will find something to eat. If you don’t provide

the information, they will get it from someone — and it may be someone who doesn’t have your interests in mind.

You Have the Right to Remain Silent

Reporters aren’t cops. You don’t have to talk to them. The moments after a controversial ending are not a good time to talk; give yourself some time to go over the events in your mind. If something happened that the league will have to deal with, such as a brawl or serious injury, it is better to politely decline and refer the reporter to league officials.

Never Say, “No Comment”

There are ways of not answering questions, such as “I’m sorry but I wasn’t at the game and didn’t see the play.” If you can’t answer the question just say so, and explain the reason. “Sorry, league policy doesn’t allow me to comment on specific calls, but here is the rule.”

Never Speak Off the Record

There is no such thing as “off the record.” There are things like “background,” and “not for attribution.” It’s a risky game with complicated rules, and no officials. It should only be played by the pros.

Avoid the Ambush

A reporter may try to ambush you on your doorstep or in the locker room, firing question after question at you. Stay calm, offer to talk to them later and schedule an appointment. Reporters will understand if you need some time to prepare. Get the questions, find out their deadline and arrange a specific time for the interview. You can at least take a minute or two to think about your answers.

Tell the Truth

Like a running back, the truth runs for daylight. The truth will be found out, so don’t try to hide it. If you kicked the call, admit it. You will look like a fool saying, “It was the right call” when the whole world can see that the first baseman wasn’t on the bag or

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that the football hit a foot in front of the diving receiver. If a mistake was made, apologize. Many times, that's all the offended party wants to hear.

Tell Your Story

It's difficult to hold on to anger when a fan hears something like, "We aim for perfection and it's hard to achieve. Bad calls keep us up at night, and we remember them forever." It might also help to explain a rule without getting into the specific play, especially if you know you got the call right.

Plan Ahead

Professional media spokespeople can rattle off answers to almost any question because they anticipate them and rehearse the answers they give. "Didn't your call decide the game?" Your answer is something like, "Players decide the game. It's our job to make sure it is decided fairly within the rules."

Follow Up

Once you get the call, notify the officials involved and any appropriate supervisors from your association or the league. You don't want them to be surprised when they read your comments in the paper the next day.

Social networking sites are perhaps the newest of the "new" media. Just remember posting something online is like yelling it to the world. We've probably all been warned by our leagues or state associations, please heed their advice. All you have to do is look at the controversies that have erupted over tweets from politicians, athletes or some other famous people in recent months to realize that.

You don't want to be next. Simple comments like, "That coach was a real pain," or "That crew was terrible," may be seen by them or someone who knows them. It also hurts your credibility with your friends who know you are an official. Of all the people involved in athletics, we are the ones who are supposed to be above all that.

There is another good media rule for this situation — and any situation in officiating and life: If you wouldn't want to read about it on the front page, don't do it.

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