

Liability Checklist

By Alan Goldberger

Stepping out on the field or court to officiate brings with it the risk of liability exposure. But there are things officials can do to mitigate the risk.

Before the Game

- Pregame conference of officials conducted in private.
- With entire crew, review recent rules/mechanics changes, applicable rules modifications and authorized accommodations regarding uniforms/equipment/religious and medical devices, taunting, bench conduct, injury mechanics, dead-ball/end-of-period/end-of-game mechanics, ejection situations and concussion rule. Be sure concussion mechanics to be used comply with local law and playing rules.
- Perform all pregame responsibilities.
- Identify site manager or person in charge of venue.
- If required by playing rules or association policies, conduct pregame meeting with site manager regarding security, crowd control, etc.
- Meet with scorers, timers, chain crew, ball runners and other venue personnel to review expectations and protocols.
- Be on the field or court when your jurisdiction begins.
- Maintain the appearance of impartiality.
- Deliver all rule-mandated pregame instructions and initiate appropriate dialogues with coaches and captains.
- Confirm with each team availability of appropriate healthcare providers.

Facilities and Equipment

- Inspect the field or court and surroundings for hazards.
- Is the equipment illegal by rule, or just plain unsafe?
 - Don't allow jewelry if rules prohibit it.
 - Check the fit and appropriateness of uniforms.
 - Retain association/medical/conference permission slips in permanent file.

Game Control

- Always keep a set of eyes on athletes and benches.
- When an infraction occurs, penalize; don't "warn" unless the rule so provides.
- Penalize taunting and baiting without hesitation.
- Be aware of rules modifications increasing penalties for specific conduct, i.e. taunting remarks directed at a participant's race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, etc.
- Penalize unsporting and other illegal contact by rule.
- Don't permit players to fight.
- Don't threaten participants with impending suspension.
- Don't engage in discussion concerning prior actions of a player or coach involved in an ejection.
- Don't discuss the consequences of a disqualification or render interpretations of a suspension/DQ rule.
- Don't police suspensions in subsequent games.
- Don't converse with or address spectators directly. Deal with disruptive spectators by deploying the site manager/security.

Postgame Mechanics

- Follow specific end-of-game procedures as outlined in the officials' manual.
- Locate partners, leave together as a crew, don't seek out coaches or be detained for conversation.
- Don't remain on the court after the game to make any notations in the scorebook.
- Lock dressing room door.
- Don't give media statements or interviews. Discuss game or events only with assigner, association secretary or commissioner.
- Prepare game reports stating only facts — not opinions or commentary.
- Don't author any online posts about any game you officiated or will officiate — or any athlete, coach, team functionary or administrator involved.

Alan Goldberger is an attorney and official from Fairfield, N.J. He authored Sports Officiating: A Legal Guide. This column is for informational purposes and is not legal advice. □

Liability Checklist for Injury Mechanics

If an injury occurs during a game, officials should be mindful of the following to reduce the liability exposure:

- Determine if player needs help.
- Don't render first aid or move a player. Let medical/team personnel attend to the player.
- Don't talk about the cause.
- Separate the teams but maintain sight lines.
- Communicate with partner(s) as to player collisions or fall-downs followed by observing signs, symptoms or behavior consistent with a concussion.
- Always require a substitute for a student-athlete who, in the judgment of any official, team coach or healthcare professional, exhibits any signs, symptoms or behavior consistent with a concussion. No debate. No consensus. No exceptions. Advise head coach of reason for substitution. Require substitution in above situation and apprise coach of reason using the language of the rule.
- Always verify return-to-play thereafter with "appropriate healthcare professional" as defined by law/state association regulations. Be prepared to refuse "return-to-play" in appropriate circumstances under the rules and state and/or local law.
- Follow blood/communicable disease indicator rules.

General Tips

Here are a few more general tips to reduce liability exposure while officiating:

- Consider the welfare of players your first responsibility.
- Enforce all safety rules, regardless of the level.
- Don't discuss skills or abilities of athletes and coaches.
- Have a plan for emergency situations.
- Remember the "first rule" of game control: "Don't turn your back."
- Never engage with spectators before, during or after the game or match.

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