

The Fiery and Fickle Relationship Between College Basketball Coaches and Refs

One of the greatest March college basketball games of all time may not have gone down in history had it ended on a buzzer beater.

Ten years ago, Syracuse's Eric Devendorf sank a desperation three-pointer as time expired on regulation to beat UConn in the 2009 Big East tournament quarterfinal in Madison Square Garden. But when officials John Cahill and Bob Donato went to the monitor to review the play, they saw the ball hadn't left Devendorf's fingertips as the clock hit zero. Once the shot was called off, the quarterfinal descended into an unforgettable six-overtime saga. Syracuse won, 127–117, but only after players, coaches and officials had spent three hours and 46 minutes in close proximity.

“I'll never forget that Bob Donato volunteered to go down to Coach [Jim] Calhoun, who was the beneficiary of me waving the last basket off, to tell him that we were going overtime,” Cahill says. “I had to go down to Coach [Jim] Boeheim. And I said, ‘Coach, that basket is no good.’ And he replied something similar to, ‘You better be right.’ And there were a few expletives interspersed in that.”

Cahill, who officiated for 40 years in multiple conferences before becoming the Big East's director of officiating, was confident he made the right call that night and didn't get much of an earful from either coach during the extra periods. Recently though, the more fiery side of the interplay between coaches and officials has made headlines. Iowa coach Fran McCaffery was suspended two games and fined \$10,000 after he lashed out at an official following a loss to Ohio State; Tennessee coach Rick Barnes was caught on a hot mic telling an assistant before a game officiated by Teddy Valentine about the time Valentine ejected him during the Sweet 16 in 2004.

All coaches, in all sports, get mad and yell—at players, at officials, at reporters. Nowhere, though, is that behavior more widespread than in college hoops. The game is a symphony of screaming and whistles and squeaky sneakers, and the speed of play can be enhanced by the tight quarters of small arenas. Add to that chaos the stress invested in making the tournament, inconsistent officiating and the freedom of movement coaches enjoy within shouting distance of every ref on the floor, and tensions often run high.

This can easily lead to show-stopping outbursts, specifically directed at officials. Sometimes coaches are working the refs, testing them to see if they can build equity. Hall of Fame coaches are known masters at this.

"It doesn't happen as often as people think, but for anybody to say that it doesn't happen, that's not necessarily true either," Georgia coach Tom Crean says of the game's biggest names holding extra sway on the sideline. "I don't think about that nearly as much as I did as when I was young, but that's part of it. Anybody who says it's not doesn't have a stake in the game and hasn't been in the game long enough to know the difference. And that's the way it is."

Other times a coach may be aggravated after losing a 50–50 call and wants to vent. Crean doesn't remember what he was mad about during his first NCAA tournament appearance as a head coach in 2002 when Marquette played Tulsa, but it caused the lead official to walk across the floor and scold him. "He said, 'I've done a lot more NCAA tournaments than you have and you're not going to talk like that,'" Crean recalls. "I didn't like it, but it got my attention. You realize right away they're trying to establish boundaries."

Maybe a coach just wants clarification. Crean, who has been a head coach for two decades, knows his natural demeanor is intense. He moves around a lot and is demonstrative and expressive, so it's easy to label him as loud.

"But it's not like that," he says. Most of the time, he's not trying to challenge an official, he says, but rather understand a call so he can correct mistakes.



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“The best thing you can hear from a referee is, ‘Hey, tell No. 10 that he’s got to clean up his screen,’” Crean says. “The worst you can hear is, ‘That’s not my call, that wasn’t my area.’ And that happens more than people want to admit.

“You want to get yourself to a point where you haven’t upset officials enough, because there will be anywhere from eight to 10 to 13 50–50 calls in a game and you don’t want to lose those calls because you were so hard on a guy. But you also don’t want the other coach getting those calls because he was so hard on a guy and got his

attention and got him to a point where maybe he was wearing on him so much that they end up getting those calls to appease him. So you really got to find that balance.”

Believe it or not, sometimes coaches take aim at officials purposefully to get a technical, just like Gene Hackman did in *Hoosiers* when he told the referee to “Kick me out of the game or I’ll start screaming like a mad fool!” Hackman did this in order to give Dennis Hopper’s character, Shooter, a chance to coach. Marist College coach John Dunne has pulled a similar stunt.

“I rarely in my career have gotten a technical when the game has been in balance, so if I feel that the game is out of reach and I don’t like the way it’s going, I’ll go ahead and get a tech,” Dunne says. “If the game is in balance, I’m very aware of not crossing the line. It has happened, but very seldom. That would be a situation that I would regret.

“That being said, sometimes it’s not even about being mad at the referee, it’s about motivating the team and your fans if you’re home. So it can be strategic as well.”

Outbursts also come out of frustration for officiating inconsistencies. All coaches at some point get irritated about the disparity between officials affiliated with various conferences and consortiums that may have different ways of evaluating plays.

“Sometimes your game could be really physical and the next game is called differently, and sometimes that confuses the players,” Dunne says. “We could have three games in a week all called differently. My guy might have been getting away with something and then two days later they’re calling a ticky-tack foul and he’s on the bench for next 12 minutes. I think there could be more consistency with how games are called under a national umbrella.”

J.D. Collins, a referee of nearly two decades who is now the NCAA’s national coordinator of men’s basketball officiating, says there’s interest in a national officiating program, but not every coach and commissioner is convinced that’s the right thing to do. The discrepancy in calls doesn’t often happen in the NCAA tournament, where the 100 best officials are hand picked by Collins based on performance.

Most coaches and officials just want a clean game decided by the players, and agree the best way to do that is through open lines of professional communication. That’s why the directors and supervisors of each consortium encourage their referees—via

offseason workshops and in mid-season conference calls or memos—to engage in small talk with coaches before games or during timeouts to form a relationship. Something quick and harmless like, “Hey coach, how we doing out here tonight?” can make a difference.

“That way the coach will realize the official is a human being and there’s an ability to have a conversation at an unemotional level about certain plays,” Cahill says. “When you get to January and February and you don’t have some type of relationship where we understand each other, then the coach is going to feel that it’s necessary for him to become emotional and aggravated to get his point across.”



Coaches appreciate these gestures because then they feel more comfortable. “I have to be able to say to the crew, ‘It’s just too physical out there,’ ‘You’re allowing way too many bumps on the perimeter,’ or whatever the situation is,” Dunne says. “And they in turn have to be able to tell me what they’re seeing and why they didn’t make the call.”

According to Dunne, the good officials *want* to communicate—and the experienced ones have learned over time how to remain poised and prevent a coach from losing his cool.

“I’ve had a referee who’s done a Final Four say, ‘John, I missed that one.’ And what do you say to that?” Dunne says. “If you keep going on and on after they say that, you know that’s being foolish. I feel like it just depends on how the referee handles things and who the referee is. A younger referee may not be as quick to recognize a mistake and apologize.”

Then at some point, coaches get so familiar with the referees they see every week that they can start throwing out one-liners.

“Once I joked with an official and asked him if he needed contacts,” says Baylor coach Scott Drew. “He joked back, ‘No, I just had Lasik.’”

Even though fans get riled up when coaches yell at officials, those inside college hoops mostly shrug these things off as part of the game. It’s not often personal—even though coaches feel otherwise at times. “It’s happened,” Crean says. “But I know officials are really working to not have it be that way. The whole key is, can you move on quickly?”

There’s a period of forgive and forget once the intensity of a game has subsided. But as Barnes and Valentine may attest, missed calls are one area coaches struggle to move on from.

“I can go as far back as Dean Smith, who’d say to me after he was retired, ‘John, that night we played Clemson, you called that block/charge and that was the wrong call,’” says John Clougherty, a referee for 30 years who later spent 11 years as the ACC’s

director of officiating. Smith was referencing a game from the 1980s. “And I’m thinking, I’ve only had 15,000 block/charges since then. But he remembers that.”

The conversation never ends.