

How to NOT Argue

Tips for avoiding the nose-to-nose arguments and disagreements that show up on TV highlight shows.



It takes a minimum of two people to have an argument. If one person chooses not to participate, that leaves the second party blustering in the wind.

It's not an easy thing to not argue. In fact, it takes more mental toughness, emotional control and good old-fashioned restraint than it does to go on the offensive and fire when fired upon. But if you can train yourself to remain above the fray when a player or coach desperately wants to go nose-to-nose with you, you'll be a better, more confident and more respected official.

Before we get into how to not argue, let's make it perfectly clear that nothing said or recommended from this point forward is intended as a substitute for dealing with a problem head-on and using any and all tools in your arsenal to manage that problem. When a participant clearly steps over the line when trying to goad you into an argument, that's another animal and you should deal with that appropriately.

To sidestep an oncoming argument, you should deal with the aggressor in a positive, assertive manner. Letting people know they are valued, respected and that their opinions matter sets up a situation for positive conflict resolution. Here are some suggestions for taking control of a conflict before it turns into an argument:

1. Let the other person talk – and don't interrupt.

In other words, have the courtesy to listen before you say anything. You may have made up your mind and there's no way you're changing anything, but by fully listening to what the coach or player has to say, you can at least empathize with the other person's viewpoint.

2. Using your own words, repeat the problem back to the coach or player.

That lets the aggressor know you heard him or her and that you understood the message. It also gives that person a moment to calm down. In some cases it might help players or coaches see how ridiculous their points are. For example, saying, "Coach, what I hear you saying is that even though you and I both saw number seven clothesline his opponent, I should ignore it because we've already blown the whistle on you four times and we haven't called a foul on the other team yet. Is that right?"

3. Don't debate judgments.

You should always remain objective and not try to justify judgment calls once you have made up your mind.

4. Limit discussion only to the most recent call.

When the coach or player brings up a play from earlier in the game, it's time to shut down the conversation. Make it clear that you're only willing to consider the current conflict; the past is history.

5. Remain assertive and decisive.

Avoid being wishy-washy with agreements. You're free to change your mind about a call, but it should never appear that you were talked into that change. And if you do change your mind, do it in a strong, decisive manner. The worst thing you can do is look like you're going back and forth with your decisions.

6. If you can help it, don't engage in any discussion when you're very angry.

Officials are human and you may see or hear something that really sets you off for whatever reason. You make your call and now the coach wants to "discuss" it with you. If possible, walk away until you've regained your composure.

You've probably seen a game or heard stories in which a player gets ejected, followed shortly by the head coach, then an assistant, maybe a couple of other bench personnel follow. It's easy to see how a person's tolerance level would get shorter and shorter with each successive verbal assault. Situations like that call for an alert partner to step in, giving you a moment to cool your jets and let the adrenaline drain.

7. When discussing problems, focus on solutions.

For officials, that doesn't mean changing your call, but you might acquiesce to a coach's request to consult a crewmate or you might say something like, "It was a good no-call, Coach, but I understand your frustration and I'll keep an eye out for the sort of contact you're talking about."