

Wing Officials Are Coach Conduits For Crew



Positive communication skills are necessary to work the wings. High school official Allan Glenn, Bellevue, Wash., displays patience and poise while a coach registers a complaint. Reasonable questions asked in a respectful manner deserve a polite and professional response. (Photo Credit: Dale Garvey)

Wing officials face the constant challenge of the game in front of them and having to communicate with coaches who are behind them.

Control of the sideline is important for safety and the flow of the game. Rules knowledge and rapport building, using “soft power,” will help curb emotions on the field as well as the sideline.

I attended a game last year and watched the officials. Each time an official approached a complaining coach, the official did so with positive body language. His facial expression reflected an interest in what the coach had to say well before reaching the sideline. On arrival, the official subtly tilted his head forward, looking the coach in the eye. He listened, giving positive nods, showing genuine interest. I didn’t hear what was said, but it was obvious the official had control.

Wing officials are the ambassadors of the crew, balancing diplomacy and enforcing the rules of the game. Here are a few tips to aid the process.

Pregame communication

Establish rapport. Introduce yourself to the head coach before the game. The coach is judging you and the crew. Are you arrogant? Defensive? Approachable? A smile with a firm handshake will set the tone.

Address him as Coach. Sir will also work. Show respect, which reflects the professionalism of the crew. Professional courtesy does not include back slapping and overly friendly gestures. Remember, the other sideline is watching. Don’t be chatty.

Clearly set the expectations regarding sideline management. Let the coach know you will keep him informed, whether you have to deliver “good news” or “bad news.”

Communication during the game

Hustle to the coach to report a foul, and describe it exactly. "Number 79 grabbed the player and pulled him down." Give penalty yardage and spot of enforcement. State the facts.

Body language speaks before you say a word. As you approach a coach, he may be upset. Remember, what happens next is in your control. You can escalate the conflict or become an ambassador.

Approach the coach with a look of interest in what he has to say. Look him in the eye and speak in a normal tone of voice. You may begin with, "Coach, what did you see?" Turn the conversation around so that you are asking rather than answering questions.

Listen without interrupting. Avoid an adversarial posture and avoid face to face confrontations. Shouting often occurs when noses are inches apart. The better position for the official is to slide sideways, keeping the coach at an angle or side by side.

Remain calm. If the coach screams, talk softly. If the coach talks rapidly, speak slowly.

Pause before responding. Guard the first retort from crossing your lips. Avoid such provocative statements as, "You coach and I'll officiate." Witty comments are best saved for the postgame with the crew. Don't be the aggressor. Be discreet without embarrassing or challenging the coach in front of his team.

After the discussion, explain the call using common terms. Avoid "referee speak" such as DPI or PSK or other rulebook terms. Speak in a firm, even tone and be brief. The coach may have a legitimate beef. If so, allow more time. Cut him off when he begins to repeat. Back away, letting the coach know the discussion is over. Leave with a positive. For example, if the coach is asking for a call, state, "I'll watch for it, Coach."

Should they persist or become profane and a flag is necessary, don't display anger and put on a show with an extra-high toss followed by words you may regret later.

Don't have "rabbit ears." Give the game your attention. Coaches, players and fans are biased, so don't react to taunts.

Communication with players

Address players as, "Sir," or by their jersey number. Avoid calling them "Son" or similar patronizing and condescending terms. They deserve our respect.

When moving players back on the sideline, don't order; ask. The wing official is responsible for safety along the sideline and the two-yard zone. Once they cooperate, thank the coach and players.

Body language

Look alert and give clear, crisp signals and be consistent. During dead balls and timeouts, handle duties and then stand at your assigned position, arms crossed behind your back or at your sides.

Avoid crossing your arms in front of your chest or stuffing hands into pockets. Always use good posture.

Restraint

Each official's ability to show restraint will differ. Wing officials must learn to steer our personalities into balancing diplomacy and enforcing rules.

Professionalism, communication skills and managing game tensions flow from our attitude. Watch top-tier officials, at all levels, as models of desired behavior. Also ask for feedback from peers and crewmates to help improve diplomatic skills.