

**Accountability in Officiating
Discussion Paper**

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by David Weicker

“Sports is life with the sound turned up!” (*Barry Mano, President NASO*)

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this discussion paper is to report back to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport and Sports Officials of Canada on the subject matter addressed and key issues covered at the conference of the National Association of Sports Officials.

The author, David Weicker is the Interim Vice-President of the Sports Officials of Canada, Chair of the National Officials' Committee for Athletics Canada and President of the Victoria International Running Society. The author, in his youth, won 7 national track and field championships, played competitive tennis, badminton and played on championship basketball teams.

The three key ethical issues/implications coming out of the conference and following materials are:

- In order for sport to be contested, all of the participants, including athletes, coaches, officials, administrators, parents and spectators must believe that the game is being officiated in a fair, objective and impartial manner. For this to occur there is a need for officials to subscribe to and live by a “code of ethics”.
- In order for officials to be able to provide the best possible service to athletes and coaches, they need to be competent and remain competent in their vocation. For this to occur there is a need for continual performance development and training.
- In order for officials to be able to perform at their best other participants must respect the rights of officials through adherence to a “covenant with sports officials”. For this to occur there is a need for a national communications strategy sponsored by Sports Canada or other major national body which stresses the importance of having such a covenant.

While many sports associations have what they call a “code of ethics” there is not a common national code specifically developed for officials. There is a lack of training and development for officials as there are problems with recruitment and retention of competent officials. Finally, more and more often, officials are being accused of being biased, incompetent or poor at their avocation.

While there are a few officials in Canada who are able to make a living as officials, by far the vast majority are volunteers or receive insignificant honorarium for their efforts. With such a large volunteer base it is difficult to have grandiose expectations of them. Therein lies the dilemma: we need more officials, we need better prepared officials but we can't afford to provide much more than a T-shirt and “pat on the back” at the end of a major event. When an official is not particularly good at their avocation, it is difficult to tell them so, in fear of losing another volunteer.

By not being able to have more volunteers and not being able to provide educational and professional development support, nor a reasonable honorarium, we are headed down the path of losing athletic volunteers to other opportunities.

Introduction:

The conference was held in Portland, Oregon between June 21 and 24, 2003. Concurrently, the Officials Development Alliance met and the writer was asked to participate in their meetings as well.

The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) represents officials throughout the United States. This includes officials in amateur and professional sports. NASO has been in the business of representing and supporting officials since 1980. The Sports Officials of Canada are attempting to emulate this approach and have partnered with NASO on numerous occasions.

NASO has a national conference annually on subjects of keen interest to their constituents. Originally these included the larger professional sports of basketball, football and baseball. They have a significantly larger scope of representation now including soccer, track and field, volleyball, etc.

The theme of the 2003 conference was built around two key questions:

- What responsibilities do officials have to the Game?
- What responsibilities does the Game have to officials?

There were seventeen (17) separate sessions with individuals or panellists discussing different elements related to these two questions. (See Appendix A for a session overview.)

The 2003 conference theme follows thematically on the 2002 conference theme of “evaluating officiating performance” from which a new model for evaluating performance of officials in the United States is being developed.

We live in a litigious society. An example given was of a referee crew at a high school basketball playoff game being sued by the parents of one of the players. This was because the result of their son’s team losing was that he no longer was going to be able to be scouted for college and therefore the potential to lose scholarships and opportunities to play in professional basketball.

The State of Louisiana recently passed a law indicating that because officials weren’t good enough they needed more training. The state was not going to provide the training, just mandate it.

These are two examples of the issues facing officials in the United States and we in Canada are not that far behind. These examples do help to point out that the cornerstone of any officiating system is based on training, evaluation, accountability and rewards.

“Excellent officiating is ensuring the game is being played by the rules while emphasizing fairness and safety and doing so in a manner that enhances the stature of sports officiating.”
(NASO)

Subject Matter - what went on at the conference:

The essential components of the conference were:

- (1) Principles of officiating
- (2) Code of conduct (How officials should act)
- (3) Covenant (what officials expect of how the rest of the world acts)
- (4) Rewards (monetary income or psychic income)
- (5) Role of the media
- (6) Disciplining officials

(1) Principles

Principles are important to:

- Elevate the profession of officiating
- Improve the image of officials in the eyes of the public
- Express expectations of officials
- Ensure a higher standard of behaviour
- Ensure consistency

The principles of accountability, not just for sports officiating, are:

- Focus on clear, measurable and significant goals
 - These tend to include ensuring that officials practice, study, have clinics, have standards for physical conditioning, understand the rules and demonstrate them through game performance
- Monitor progress
 - This includes having annual evaluations which focus on the goals as well as employing developmental tools (doing well, opportunities for improvement etc.). This also includes annual performance as compared to individual in previous year and comparison to other team members
- Concentrate on improvement of performance (not on punishing for mistakes)
 - To do this we must avoid intimidation tactics, accentuate the positive, provide examples of how the best officials perform, assign senior or more experienced officials as mentors for younger or newer officials, and demonstrate what you expect
- Have effective evaluation tools
 - In many sports, the use of videotape will help for reviewing performance, have peer reviews, coaches assessments, observers assessments, etc.
- Have appropriate incentives
 - In some sports the incentives relate to “post season” game opportunities, but in other instances, asking officials for their preferences to events to work at as well as using rankings to select them for major events or opportunities to travel, or special consideration
- Invest in results
 - Use the best officials for the toughest games or events

Athletes deserve the best officials. They and their coaches are those to whom officials are ultimately accountable.

(2) Code of Conduct

The National Association of Sports Officials (United States) has developed a “generic” Code of Conduct, which is available for all sports officials associations to use or customize. One of the immediate priorities for the Sports Officials of Canada is to develop a similar code.

The NASO Code of Conduct is reprinted in Appendix B, however highlights include that Officials shall:

- be responsible for engendering public confidence in sports
- be free from obligation to any interest other than the impartial and fair judging
- demonstrate integrity, neutrality, respect, sensitivity, professionalism, discretion and tactfulness
- master the rules and mechanics necessary to enforce the rules
- uphold the honour and dignity of the profession
- display superior communication skills
- avoid conflict of interest (real or perceived)
- prepare themselves, mentally and physically
- not restrict access to officiating
- be punctual
- work together in a constructive and co-operative manner
- not use one’s position to benefit oneself
- never participate in illegal gambling, in particular, events that they are directly or indirectly involved
- not make false or misleading statements about their qualifications or abilities
- accept responsibility for their actions

(3) Covenant

If sports officials are going to abide by a strict code of conduct, they should have some expectations of those who require their services. The National Association of Sports Officials also developed a parallel covenant with sports officials. The Sports Officials of Canada will also be focusing on development of a covenant.

A summary of the five points in the NASO covenant is:

- (1) That game assignments and career advancement be provided based on the ability to properly perform officiating duties...not age, sex, race etc.
- (2) That effective security be provided to protect officials.
- (3) That efforts be supported to limit the liability of sports officials.
- (4) That the obligations of sports officials are clearly communicated to them.
- (5) That sports officials who are subject to an inquiry are given fair treatment.

Who is the game for? The key components of who the game is for include:

- Participants/athletes
- Schools/administrators and coaches
- Fans and parents
- Officials

These are the individuals who need to “buy in” to a covenant.

Some advice for officials on how to deal with mistakes includes trying to make every officiating event or game your best one! Also, it’s ok to use officials’ “huddles” to discuss issues, because the primary objective is to get the “call right”. Finally, it’s important to have a feeling for the “spirit of the game” which essentially means to use common sense.

Another component of the covenant directly related to the code of conduct relates to standards of accountability. To what standard should officials be accountable?

- At a minimum perhaps annual fitness and written tests, perhaps observations at each event or game, perhaps self-assessments after each event or game, perhaps assessments by trained assessors.
- Anyone who jeopardises the safety of the game or event is not living up to a minimum standard.
- Any official whose actions change the outcome of the match, game or event is not living up to a minimum standard.

Team performance of the officiating team is more important than individual performance. This is relevant to any team environment, whether business or sports. Some of the other qualities relating to the “higher” end of accountability standards is that the better officials seem to have had some excellent mentoring, they tend to have a good sense of humour, well developed self-discipline, integrity and they are community minded.

When someone doesn’t live up to the minimum standards there is a range of opportunities to deal with the situation. The most drastic is to terminate them, which can be particularly dramatic if the official is earning a living at this profession. Demotions, not providing officials with the “better” assignments are other ways of “reprimanding” officials who are not living up to the minimum standards.

(4) Rewards

Rewarding officials is critical to one of the more common issues facing sports organizations today; that is retention and recruitment.

If you can show or demonstrate “respect” for officials you can solve a huge amount of this problem. A survey of officials was conducted with relevant questions. Of note, “Which is the biggest problem where you officiate?”

16% indicated that officials aren’t paid enough.

35% indicated that neither money nor respect was a significant issue.

49% indicated that officials aren’t shown enough respect.

“Do you feel officials generally are rewarded appropriately?” – another survey question.

42% said yes while 58% indicated no.

When asked to rank order the relative importance of the following method of rewarding officials, the results for best rewards were:

- Post-season assignments
- Better assignments
- More money
- More assignments
- Training opportunities
- Camp/clinic scholarships
- Recognition through wages

When asked to “classify” the impact that more or better rewards would have on officiating recruitment and retention programs the responses were:

- 3% No help
- 14% A little help
- 31% A big help
- 52% Some help

Other ideas from the participants at the conference for rewards for officials (in no particular order):

- Long service awards
- Tournament medallion for officials, as well as for the winning team
- Official of the year
- Banquet to acknowledge officials
- Hall of fame
- Rookie of the year
- Most improved
- Camps and clinics
- Public recognition of officials
- Mentoring by senior/veteran officials
- Thank you cards
- Post season assignments
- Free admissions to sporting events
- Gift certificates/tickets/cash for mentoring
- Life-time exemption from dues payment after 25 years

The keys are to:

- (1) Match the reward to the person
- (2) Match the reward to the achievement
- (3) Provide the reward in a timely and specific manner

(5) Role of the Media

Based on extreme pressure from the media, the Louisiana House of Representatives passed legislation so as to ensure that officials do a better job. The focus that there was a need to enforce or strengthen existing rules...train officials...retrain officials...correct errors in a timely way...so as to restore public confidence in officiating.

The fundamental question is “should officials be subjected to the same level of public accountability as coaches and players”? Do officials need to explain what they hear or say and what they did and why?

If they were subjected to similar standards of accountability, they certainly would need some form of training to deal with the press. An additional opportunity would be to have clinics for the media so that they would more fully understand officiating. Officials need to know what’s “on” and what’s “off” the record. Officials need to know that the media are generally closer to the officials in their reporting and objectivity.

A closer linkage between the media and officials is a must for the future. While officials need training to help them to better “control” the interview, the media need educating on the rules, how officials apply them and what the officials are looking for during the event.

(6) Disciplining Officials

Officials do make mistakes. Officials sometimes act inappropriately while “off the job”. Officials are sometimes accused of doing some things wrong.

In order to preserve the integrity of the game, whatever the “game” is, there needs to be a code of conduct for officials that considers actions, both on and off the surface of play. Standards of conduct need to be communicated clearly. Officials must constantly answer this question: How do my actions, both on and off the field of play, affect the business or image of the game?

In the survey of officials conducted, two questions on discipline were asked. The questions and responses were:

Should officials be subject to formal penalties for errors in officiating judgement?

4% said yes
28% said maybe
68% said no

Should officials be subject to formal penalties for errors caused by misapplication of a rule?

28% said yes
34% said no
38% said maybe

Bottom line, if mistakes in “judgement” are made they may be the result of not being able to “see the play” which seems less harmful to the game than when they “see the play” but call it incorrectly. The number one objective of all officials is to “get the call right”!

Generally, local associations are responsible for dealing with discipline issues. Having a code of conduct, which is clearly articulated to officials, is most important.

Similar to rewards, the “punishment” must fit the situation or crime! There should also be a form of “progressive” discipline involved. If it’s a single mistake then a certain form of discipline is required; a subsequent mistake may require a more significant penalty, etc. Finally, don’t deal with these issues in the press.

Officials need to have the opportunity to retrain so that they can “get it right”. Provide those opportunities whenever necessary.

Conclusion:

The preceding provides an overview of the subject matter addressed at the conference. The following highlights the key issues covered, with special attention to their impact on ethical sport.

Officials in Canada need to have a strong umbrella organization to assist them with their sports associations and other leaders or funders of sports in Canada. What I walked away from the conference with were three main key issues:

- Officials in Canada need to have a clearly articulated code of conduct.
- There should be a charter or covenant outlining how society should treat officials.
- There is a need to organize the training and development of officials at the national level, paying particular attention to the issues of code of conduct.

The National Association of Sports Officials and recent offspring, the Education Development Alliance has assisted sports officials tremendously over the past 23 years. The recent establishment of the Sports Officials of Canada (SOC) is in a position to provide similar support to the development of a comprehensive officials program for Canada.

It is clear that the Code of Conduct in the United States can be migrated with some modification to our officials program in Canada. This is one of the strategic activities within the SOC Strategic Plan tabled with Sports Canada in March.

It seems relevant for Canada to also develop a “covenant” with the sports community and community at large. The Code of Conduct and Covenant would both go a long way to impacting on ethical sport.

Pulling these three pieces together, the umbrella organization, which now exists in Canada, however without government or corporate funding or support at this time, development of a Code of Conduct, and development of a Covenant with Sports Officials will be difficult. A development plan for a national code of conduct and covenant (in partnership with media) will need to concentrate on broad training for officials. Technical training is a sport specific responsibility.

The combination of these elements will increase the “professionalism” of sports officiating which will in turn improve the ethical conduct of sporting events.

When most sports bodies talk about the development of their sport, they mention the key requirements of coaches, parents and administrators. The more often than not forget to mention officials, yet the officials are the key guardians of the sport. Officials are responsible for ensuring a fair competition, whereby all athletes can perform at their best.

When officials feel valued (psychic compensation) they have a renewed interest in ensuring fairness, being honest and professional, and preparing themselves both mentally and physically for the contest.

This issue does need to be addressed. Having a national code of conduct, a covenant and a strong developmental plan for officiating will go a long way to dealing with this issue. Officials are a key component of the sports development system in Canada.

Appendix A – Session Overviews

“Brave New World”

What has changed most in officiating? In a word, scrutiny. Virtually every game now played is being recorded and played back by someone.

“The Buck Stops Here: Principles of Accountability”

This was the dissection of “accountability.” What are the classic principles of accountability and how do they intersect our lives as officials?

“Code of Conduct: What Now?”

NASO and the Officiating Development Alliance developed a code of conduct that can help you and your organization maintain high standards. What are the practical challenges of implementing a code of conduct.

“It’s a Two-Way Street:”

Officials are often reminded of their responsibilities to “the game.” But what responsibilities does the game have to officials? Organizations and individuals that assign, evaluate or require the use of officials should commit to specific responsibilities.

“Game Accountability”

The importance of ensuring contests are played by the rules, while emphasizing fairness and safety, and doing so in a manner that enhances the stature of sports officiating. How is an official held accountability to that standard on the field?

“Great Ways to Reward Sports Officials”

Building a list of rewards that recognizes achievement at every level within an association and goes well beyond an assignment to the championship game.

“Let’s Take Another Look”

How the media plays a critical role in how officiating is perceived. This session will “instant replay” some of the key dynamics behind the media’s scrutiny of officiating performance.

“Keep up with the Pace of the Game”

How officiating performance variable can be measured and used to evaluate, train and test officials.

“Vision in Action”

How to implement NASO’s many programs to recruit and retain new officials, enhance the image of their association via community relations programs and, in general, put their associations on a glidepath for success.

“24/7/365”

Does an official’s private life affect the status of that official’s assignments as long as there has been no noticeable falloff in officiating performance? Who decides and what are the principles that apply?

“Disciplining Officials – a Guide”

Determining when it is appropriate to discipline an official. But what are the standards? And what about due process – who is the judge?

“A Better Way”

How can an association or league handle the fallout from an officiating error?

“What Officials Want”

A Covenant with sports officials?

“Your Legal Rights and Responsibilities”

Are sports officials employees of those for whom they work games or not?

“In Full View”

How can officials flourish and survive in today’s ultra-scrutinized world?

Appendix B – Code of Conduct for Sports Officials

1. **Officials shall** bear a great responsibility for engendering public confidence in sports.
2. **Officials shall** be free from obligation to any interest other than the impartial and fair judging of sports competitions.
3. **Officials shall** hold and maintain the basic tenets of officiating which include history, demonstrate integrity, neutrality, respect, sensitivity, professionalism, discretion and tactfulness.
4. **Officials shall** master the both the rules of the game and mechanics necessary to enforce the rules, and shall exercise authority in an impartial, firm and controlled manner.
5. **Officials shall** uphold the honour and dignity of the profession in all interactions with student-athletes, coaches, school administrators, colleagues, and the public.
6. **Officials shall** display and execute superior communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal.
7. **Officials shall** recognize that anything, which may lead to a conflict of interest, either real or apparent, must be avoided. Gifts, favours, special treatment, privileges, employment or a persona relationship with a school or team, which can compromise the perceived impartiality of officiating, must be avoided.
8. **Officials shall** prepare themselves, mentally and physically, shall dress neatly and appropriately, and shall comport themselves in a manner consistent with the high standards of the profession.
9. **Officials shall** not be party to actions designed to unfairly limit or restrain access to officiating, officiating assignments or to association membership. This includes selection for positions of leadership based upon economic factors, race, creed, colour, age, sex, physical handicap, country or national origin.
10. **Officials shall** be punctual and professional in the fulfilment of all contractual obligations.
11. **Officials shall** work with each other and their governing bodies in a constructive and co-operative manner.
12. **Officials shall** resist every temptation and outside pressure to use one's position as an official to benefit oneself.
13. **Officials shall** never participate in any form of illegal gambling on a sports contest, may never gamble on any sporting event in which they have either a direct or indirect involvement, and may never gamble on events involving high school athletics.
14. **Officials shall** not make false or misleading statements regarding their qualifications, ratings, credentials, experience, training or competence.
15. **Officials shall** accept responsibility for all actions taken.

Appendix C – A Covenant With Sports Officials

Sports' officiating is an honourable profession requiring those who engage in it to have strong moral character and integrity. Officials must be fair-minded and courageous. They are expected to embrace and adhere to the Code of Conduct for Officials, as adopted by the Officiating Development Alliance in January 2002.

It takes a special person to be an official. Sports officials bear great responsibility for engendering public confidence in sports. They are critical to the health of athletic competitions. Officials ensure games are played fairly, by the rules, within the spirit of the rules and in a safe manner. Officiating takes a great deal of preparation, continuing education and commitment of time. Much is asked of those who officiate.

Therefore those organizations and individuals that assign, evaluate or require the use of officiating services are hereby asked to resolve and affirm the following:

1. That game assignments and career advancement be provided without regard to age, sex, race, national origin, religion or other factors unrelated to the ability to properly perform officiating duties.
2. That effective security be provided to protect sports officials from physical assaults, unseemly verbal abuse and the loss of, or damage to personal property, from the time of arrival at the game site through the time of departure.
3. That efforts be supported to limit the liability sports officials can incur as a result of the reasonable and customary decisions they make in fulfilling their officiating duties.
4. That the obligations sports officials are expected or required to fulfil be clearly communicated, preferably in writing, in advance of when those obligations are to be carried out.
5. That sports officials who are subject to an inquiry concerning alleged improper or inadequate fulfilment of their responsibilities, be given fair treatment and an opportunity to respond to the findings through a prescribed appeal process before disciplinary measures are taken.