

# Assigner in the Middle

## What Officials Expect From Assigners

By Tim Sloan

An assigner I work with was telling me about a great idea he heard during his annual meeting with his league's basketball coaches. They wanted him to assign crews of officials to each day of the schedule but wait until the actual week of the games to tell them which one they would work. That way, the coaches could look over the list of officials for a given night and come up with who would work what game based on the importance of the game, the crew's ability, previous encounters and, we would assume, the current position of the planet Saturn in the Zodiac.

My friend kept waiting for them to burst out laughing and say, "Just kidding," but they were apparently as serious as a heart attack. He explained that, despite the generous game fees they were paying, he would be able to find few officials to participate in that strategy. Seems that officials have

standards, too. He patiently spelled out that the "best" officials had options of where to work and that lining them up to *maybe* work a big game wasn't as sweet a deal for them as it was the coaches. While nothing came of the idea, the episode does illustrate the catbird position that assigners occupy in our sports; they have to make the most of the conflicting agendas of the teams and the officials in coming up with an assignment list that is the best possible.

Let's face the fact that most assigners are cognizant of two things: who their best officials are and what schools will make their jobs most miserable if they don't get the officials they want for a big game. As much as the assigner might love to foster warm, personal relationships with all of officials who work for him or her, officials must accept the fact that they

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can't — and, in some cases, will never — get every great game on the schedule. Some officials have it and some don't. Officials need to live with that. As officials wait for assignments, there is a list of things that it is reasonable to expect from assigners:

### 1. Candor

As much as some officials like their egos stroked at every opportunity, it's important for assigners to give officials a frank statement on what to expect from assigners. How many games and what level of difficulty is a nice start. But also add what you're hearing from coaches, administrators and trusted observers about an official's ability or lack of it. If there are things the consensus says need improving, tell the official. Maybe — just maybe — he or she can work on those things and

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## Watch What You Say to Members (and Others)

By Todd Korth

Officiating leaders as well as officials within a local association should always remember that what they say to others outside of the association can come back to haunt them. That's easy to say, but not always easy to remember when coaches, athletic directors and even fellow officials are involved in the conversation.

Todd Stordahl of the Washington Officials Association (WOA) had to learn the hard way. Early in his tenure as commissioner of the WOA, Stordahl tried to be as open as possible with officials within the

association, but he quickly found out that it's better to carefully select his words when communicating with others within the association.

"They (the officials) can be our worst enemy," said Stordahl, in his 11th year as commissioner. "Let's say you're sitting down with them after a game and you say something, then suddenly word is spread around, 'This is what Todd said when we were sitting down.' It could be completely out of context, so that's why I'm more guarded in what I talk about. These guys are working a

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make a better tool for the assigner somewhere down the road. Honesty can help everyone.

**2. Organization**

It seems to be a given that more games are assigned two or more years in advance than there used to be. It's an inevitable product of the law of supply and demand. Most officials understand that once crews are assigned, schedules change, crews retire or get fired, locations get swapped ... they know the drill. If officials are to hold the dates they receive open in good faith, is it too much to ask to keep them up-to-date on developments? If changes result in officials losing a date, then the sooner they know, the sooner they can open themselves up to somebody else who might need them. Keep officials in the loop.

**3. Support**

Most assigners get the job because they know officiating and many of the

officials working for them. Assigners also have enough rapport with the teams they work for to be trusted to sort things out and give everyone a piece of the pie. On balance, they then get far more calls and e-mails from coaches complaining about officials than *vice versa*. Assigners should then have the inner strength to know when to stand up to coaches and when to concede they might have a point. If it does come to changing their working relationship with officials, assigners should get with officials and tell them so that officials may respond accordingly. Don't treat officials as pawns.

**4. Availability**

Most officials accept that assigners have a life in the offseason. During the season, however, officials need them to be reachable on very short notice: Officials get hurt, get trapped at work, or are notified they forgot the school play that Precious is in tomorrow and

need a quick response from the assigner about what help they're going to get. As much as officials owe it to assigners and schools to assure them in advance that we will be at Tech on Thursday night, officials need to be assured that important information they're passing on is being dealt with promptly, too. The best assigners are a phone call or e-mail away and can work quickly through the inevitable emergencies to everyone's satisfaction.

Whatever most assigners get paid for making assignments, it usually isn't worth it from a strictly economic standpoint. They do it through some sense of duty and, often, the chance to return what they once received. Making assigners proud of the officials when they go out and work a game successfully is what both sides ask for. Officials can help hold up their end of the bargain by assigners holding up theirs.

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couple nights a week. I have to remember that I'm the only one in the officiating community that does this nine-to-five, sometimes seven days a week."

Leaders of local associations may only speak in front of their membership, whether at meetings or clinics, a few times a month. Therefore, they need to be extra careful when choosing their words before association members. Many of those same leaders also are active officials and trainers of officials, so they have to continue to be careful when outside of the meeting room and in a game or clinic situation. Those leaders may have more influence than they think, especially when they have to be critical.

"Silence can't be repeated, so if you are going to say something bad, you might as well not say it," said Brian Ryken of the Lewis and Clark Basketball Officials Association in Gayville, S.D. "I'm trying to help people get better, but as far as saying things ... we observe games and stuff

like that. If you say the wrong thing, they're just going to shut down and you can't have that, either. It's a pretty fine line and I'm certainly not a master."

Knowing those ramifications of misspeaking is part of the territory for association leaders, but it's also important for leaders to let their officials know that they have to be just as guarded when speaking to others outside of the association, like coaches and athletic directors.

Stordahl has come across cases where an official will talk with an athletic director or coach before he learns of a situation or hears from the coach or athletic director. That often results in a no-win situation for all involved from the officials' standpoint.

"The thing I always have to remember is the person on the other end has a vested interest," said Stordahl. "They're not necessarily interested in the truth. They're interested in the truth as it pertains to them. They're not our friends. They

called with a reason to call and sometimes I think the local association guys will get themselves in trouble because they look at it as they're on a level plain with that athletic director or that coach. In reality whatever they say will be used against them.

"They want to know what it was done, but they're going to try to find a loophole in (the incident) and they'll call me and say, 'Well, he said that it should have been this ...' I'm, like, I'm sorry he told you that," Stordahl said.

Bruce Hook, secretary of the St. Louis Officials Association, says that leaders within the association try to be as open as possible, yet it's important for officials and leaders of the association to follow guidelines established by the association.

"Any organization is only as good as their leaders, so you need to walk the walk and talk the talk. You try to do things the right way and we want our members to do the same thing."

*Todd Korth is a Referee associate editor.* □