

# Seven Qualities of a Great Sport Official

By Dave Libbey from *Excel Sports Officiating* ([eofficials.com](http://eofficials.com))

Sports officials, like any other vocation or avocation, come in many different packages. Some "get by"; some are "good"; a select few can be considered "great" in their field.

During my 35 years of officiating I've worked and talked with colleagues who fit into each of those categories. I've seen and learned from many I consider great sports officials. They shared common traits which ultimately set them apart from the rest. I'd like to try to explain these qualities.

**INTEGRITY.** A great sports official is the last guardian of honesty in athletics. He must maintain a complete absence of bias. We can read almost daily of coaches, players and boosters engaging in illegal activities. Referees and umpires are rarely accused of any kind of dishonest or deceitful conduct. An official holds a position in the world of sports not unlike a judge in a court of law. If you aspire to be a great official, you must never put yourself in a position where your integrity could be questioned. Simple advice: If there is any possibility of a conflict of interest, don't work the game.

**HUSTLE.** Since officiating is a game of angles and positioning, officiating hustle describes movement and court position. There is no connection to speed and meaningless motion. Every great official moves efficiently to be in the right place at the right time. It's the only way to see the entire play and make the correct call.

**JUDGMENT.** Great judgment is a by-product of effort and experience. It goes beyond the rulebook and includes an almost instinctive ability to apply the critical principal of "advantage/disadvantage." When you see a play, in virtually every circumstance, if there is no advantage gained and if no player has been put at a disadvantage there should be no call. Simply put: No harm, no foul.

**COMMUNICATION.** Basically, communication means, "Can you deal with people?" Can you deal with coaches and players during the game? Communication can be accomplished in many ways and in most cases the situation will dictate your appropriate response. Sometimes a simple response to the question, a one word answer or a look can communicate what is needed at a particular time. Saying the right thing to the right person at the right time can help one avoid potential problems in a game. Communication is also the knowledge of when it's best not to say anything.

**CONSISTENCY.** Young officials have more difficulty with consistency than any other quality, mainly because they lack the experience to realize when their decisions are inconsistent. Everyone has some difficulty in this regard, but the great officials are unrelenting in their judgment. They see and call a game better than their colleagues. The key is to make the same call on the same kind of play whether it's the first minute of the game or the score is tied with one minute left to play. If they believe an official is consistent, coaches and players will adjust accordingly. Inconsistent decisions on similar plays trigger negative behaviour and poor sportsmanship among players, and invite criticism from coaches.

**COURAGE.** Regardless of the situation, personalities involved, pressures from the crowd or possible repercussions, great officials place fairness above all other concerns. They act courageously and according to the dictates of that value.

**COMMON SENSE.** I've saved the best for last. Of the qualities discussed, common sense is the most important. That which is fair and right must take precedence throughout each game. Common sense ensures that fairness, understanding, and the best interests of the game are foremost in the mind of a great official. If you truly understand the spirit and intent of the rules, common sense will guide you well.

Plenty of game situations develop that are not specifically covered by rules or mechanics. That's when common sense must take over. What is fair or what is right is what should be done. Common sense goes hand in hand with communication and dealing with coaches and players. It helps determine how to handle a tough situation and whether a technical foul should or should not be called.

In a sense, all the things you've just read are no more than my opinions about the key elements that make a great sports official. There are plenty of other basic requirements that cannot be overlooked such as physical appearance, knowledge of the rules, mechanics, reliability, and professionalism. However, the seven qualities above are those which I feel set great sports officials apart from the rest.

I wonder: How many of the seven are part of your personality?

*Dave Libbey is a high school teacher in San Diego. A basketball referee since 1970, he has worked eight NCAA Division I Final Four assignments. He is a member of the ESO Basketball Education Panel.*