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# Watching the whistle men

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# Watching The

## Basketball...

A sports buff had barely introduced a colleague to professional basketball when an opportunity arose to prove his expertise. The Atlanta Hawks skillfully passed the ball across the court only to hear a referee yell "three seconds" and hand the ball to the opposing New York Knicks. What's this? It's simple: An offensive player stood longer than the permissible three seconds in the "pivot" — the shaded 19 x 16-foot lane around his basket.

No longer considering himself a novice on this rule, the new fan went on to watch one of the Knicks stand in his lane for about three seconds, then, *after* receiving the ball, definitely remain there another second or two to fake, spin and shoot. But, he pointed out, both referees ignored that violation. Even the buff didn't know why. The three-second rule is waived if the player standing in the "pivot" is trying to shoot during the third second.

For both avid and casual fans, there are innumerable chances to disagree with the decisions of the men who officiate either basketball or hockey games. Officials for both sports must make so many controversial and complex rulings — while sprinting alongside the younger players — that they usually feel a need to retire at an age (45 or so) when officials only begin their careers in professional football. The two referees in each basketball game call so many fouls that one team may score more field goals (two points)

yet lose the game because the opponent made a far greater number of foul shots (one point). These decisions are questioned so frequently and passionately that, in many games, a coach or player argues until a referee awards the other team a "technical foul," which enables its best foul shooter to attempt an unhindered shot.

To excel in this unappreciated, oft-hectic job, referees need a lifelong commitment to the sport. It is particularly strong with the twenty men who spent years officiating high school and college games on a part-time basis before obtaining full-time seasonal jobs with the National Basketball Association. Many of them have never wanted any job other than to play, coach or officiate basketball. And one, Mendy Rudolph, is a second generation referee.

All referees, moreover, need the instinct to stay near the ball no matter how cleverly it is passed. To simplify this, one referee stands behind the basket of the team trying to score while the other is near midcourt. When that team either loses the ball or scores, the referee at midcourt can then run ahead of the players to position himself underneath the other basket. His partner, meanwhile, shifts from under the goal to midcourt.

The referee underneath the basket must scrutinize so much scuffling that he rarely even sees the ball go through the goal. Theorizing "no harm, then no

foul" during most contact, he particularly watches for spirited "picks," which bump a defenseman out of a play, and jarring collisions that are caused by either blocking by a defenseman or charging by the player with the ball. When the ball is near the basket, this referee determines if the offensive man's arms were struck or anyone else pushed or elbowed. When players leap for a ball rebounding off the basket fastened ten feet above the floor, the referee also knows where to watch for a player immobilizing an opponent by stepping on his toes or pushing off his shoulder for leverage.

The referee at midcourt also rules on collisions within his area. But he is largely responsible for determining both "loose ball fouls" during scrambles and "backcourt fouls" when a team is trying to seize the ball; or deciding whether a team loses possession of the ball because a player moved both feet without dribbling, touched a boundary or knocked a ball out of bounds. (When the referees disagree on who last touched a ball, they have two opposing players jump for it.) The midcourt referee signals perfunctorily when a field goal is obviously scored and authoritatively when someone misses a shot but is still awarded two points because a leaping opponent "goal tended" by either deflecting the ball as it descended or touched the ball or basket when the ball was on the rim of the basket.

**Bill Surface**, contributor to *Sports Illustrated* and other magazines, wrote this article especially for *H&S Reports*. He wrote on football officials in the Autumn 1971 issue.

# Whistle Men

Ironically, basketball teams often find it advantageous to be penalized. Professional teams go beyond the strategy used by high school and college teams of deliberately fouling in the last minutes of a game that they are losing in the hope that they can recover the missed free throw.

Blatant fouls are a visible part of a pro team's strategy near the end of any 12-minute quarter in which it is not "over the limit" of four team fouls and, for most subsequent fouls committed, must give the offended team an extra shot. A coach may then choose to "give one" by fouling an opponent on the logic that all he can score is one point while his team could make a two-point field goal. The strategy is costly, though, if it causes an outstanding player to accumulate six personal fouls for which he would be put out of the game. So an expendable substitute enters the game expressly to grab someone before he is in the act of shooting. As simple as the job seems, the substitute often annoys his coach by fouling the opponent's best—instead of the poorest—free throw shooter. Even if a team is "over the limit" it has sound reason to intentionally foul Wilt Chamberlain, the 7-foot-1-inch center for the Los Angeles Lakers, any time that he receives the ball near his basket. He is perhaps the sport's most accurate field goal shooter but worst free throw shooter—even though he has attempted more than 11,000 foul shots in regular games.

## ...and Hockey

An even higher percentage of hockey games are decided by the rulings of the referee (who calls penalties on players) and the two linesmen (who determine other infractions which cost a team possession of the puck)—in spite of a noticeably liberal interpretation of the rules.

Apart from the goalies, most of the players on each team savagely bump, collide, elbow or swing at each other throughout the game. Still the offending team's fans groan each time the referee signals that a penalty will be called. For example:

A "charging" penalty—after all the thumping collisions? To have "charged," a player must deliberately take at least two full steps to crash into an oncoming skater with the puck. A "high sticking" penalty after all the times that handles of sticks have been jabbed into an opponent's chin during brutal scrambles for a puck? A player is guilty of "high sticking" if he raises his stick above his shoulders to hit someone.

By contrast, it is obvious why these penalties are so beneficial to the other team. (Some even employ a "penalty drawer" who can land a punch on an opponent's jaw precisely as the referee glances elsewhere but usually turns around just in time to see the enraged player retaliate—and be penalized.) All such "minor penalties" send the accused player to a partitioned "penalty box" for two minutes (though more severe violations can bring penalties of up to ten minutes or even expulsion from the game). Since substitutions aren't permitted for a penalized player, unless players on both teams are penalized simultaneously, the offending team must temporarily play

without one or sometimes even two players on the ice. Virtually forfeiting any chances for scoring in the next two minutes, the penalized team calls upon its tenacious "penalty killers" to stall or do anything possible to keep the puck away from its goal. To exploit this all-important manpower advantage, the other team employs its "power play" specialists to try to score a goal. When the opponent does score, the penalized player may return to the game before his two-minute penalty expires.

As they skate, officials also must rule on such unpredictable situations as a fan tossing a puck onto the ice. According to the rules, the referee tells the teams to keep playing with the first puck until the other team gains possession of it—then stops the game to remove the second puck.

Some of the more common violations hockey officials rule on include:

### **Offside.**

A team is offside when a player starts toward the opponents' goal with the puck and an eager teammate skates ahead of him across the blue line that marks the defensive team's zone: To be considered offside, the player in question must have both of his skates across the line.

### **Icing the puck.**

Except when a team has fewer players on the ice than the opponent, it is guilty of "icing the puck" (stalling) any time one of its men knocks the puck all the way from his own zone to the other team's zone without it sliding close enough to the net for the goalie to touch it. A linesman moves his hands laterally when he doesn't intend to call "icing."

After "icing" is called, an official needs poise and agility for the ensuing "faceoff" near the offending team's goal. The two players who face each other study the official's eyes or hands for clues to when he will suddenly drop the puck between their waiting sticks. Concealing his intentions, a prudent linesman simultaneously flips the puck and skates backward through the encircled, stick-swinging players.

Officials are often suspected of wanting some players to injure each other by their inconsistency in stopping fights. Officials do end many scuffles before a penalty needs to be called. Yet the same officials are shrewd enough not to step in too quickly in a fight between two self-appointed "enforcers" who will feel that they have played poorly unless they engage in at least one nasty brawl. By letting these ruffians whack each other, the officials often prevent future fights.

Whether they're working on a slick hockey rink or hardwood basketball court, officials must prove that they're as rare a breed as the gifted players. They must remain in superb physical condition, demonstrate an icy calmness during hotly contested decisions, and conceal their emotion—or even pain—as spectators cheer after they are spilled. Above all, the job doesn't permit even one "bad night" that is routinely expected of star players.

As a basketball coach once told an errant player who blamed his poor showing on the officials: "I hate to admit it, but if the players were as consistent as the officials nobody would finish last." □