

How do referees know when it's time to stop and hang up the whistle?

This is one referees story.

He walked off the mat after making a mistake or two during a regular old match and then it happened. He felt a push. It was gentle, but it was defiantly a push. Where did it come from? No one was near. He turned and looked. No one physically pushed him. No one was near him. He shook his head and slowly walked away.

Where did that gentle push come from? It came from the hearts and souls of those around him. His fellow referees and coaches and family. Simply put...his friends, those who cared for him

Did that gentle push happen before his skills diminished to a point that he hears the quiet whispers? When he walks off a mat and he notices that he no longer gets the "atta boys" that use to be so common place when he use to do the tougher matches? No one asks his opinion about tough calls anymore, and where he used to do the best tournament and duals in the State, he now is regulated to the lesser ones.

Diminished skills...such a ugly words. Don't they understand how it used to be? He was the best or at least one of the best. He worked hard at his craft and was always in the right position. He remembers how he used to be able to slide across the mat on his belly to get those near fall points, jumping, backing , spinning, showing his Olympic level gymnastic skills! Today, well he sort of wanders to where the kids are and hopes they don't move too fast or move away from him. He is surprised no one hears his bones and knees creak and pop when he starts to get down on the mat and he wishes sometimes a crane was available to assist in getting him back to his feet.

In the day, his eyes missed nothing. Heck, he could look into a kids eyes and almost read the kids mind knowing in an instant when a move was going to go illegal or could cause harm. Like an eagle, he saw everything and knew instinctively how to react and better yet, he knew when not to over react. Now his eyes sometimes fool him. Was that toe really in bounds? That arm bar ok? Seems his attention span wanders a little. Did he miss those back points? Sometimes he even tells himself it doesn't really matter, no one said anything so all must be ok. Though, he still remembers when he was quicker and didn't miss those types of things, down deep he knows. He knows he isn't the referee he once was. He feels that kind of hurt that only someone who was once was on top, can feel, or know how it feels. It can't be described. It's a slow throbbing pain. A pain so real that if thought of for too long, it brings the wetness of salty tears to his eyes. If seen, he says merely says "oh, its allergies" and laughs it off. When he walks off the mat these days, his head is a bit lower and the proud strut of a once great referee who once had nothing but pure and unadulterated confidence, he knows it's gone, gone forever.

Today, it is the young guns turn. In the old days, the best part of the tournament was hanging out at the local watering hole afterwards, not only your fellow zebras but with the coaches you had just augured with earlier. The good natured ribbing and the jokes

flowed as much as the cold brew did. Back then it was about fellowship and camaraderie. Today it's about votes and moving up. He feels out of place and out of touch.

So driving home, he thinks about his career. The good times, the great matches, the excitement. It fills his tired heart with joy, remembering the way it used to be. It brings a long over due smile to his face.

As he lays his head on the pillow that night, after kissing his wife next to him, a wife who has put up with his being gone so much over the years, he understands its finally over. As the tears well up and start to trickle down his cheek, he knows that the fire that once was his heart has slowed to nothing but a warm ember. His chest heaves heavily as he tries to dig deep into himself to find the courage that's needed to be able to walk away from mat, the whistle, the dreams.

The following season, the Resolite smell isn't missed as much as he thought it would be. He has found another precious commodity...time. Time with family, time to do things he put off for 25 years. Time also to hold something else...memories. Great memories! Time can't ever take those precious gifts away.

You want to know something. Today his knees ache less, his back isn't as stiff and he tends to walk without that limp that he used to develop the day after being on the mat all day. He is ok. Better than ok in fact. He has made peace with himself and that my friend is the best we can do and ever hope for.

You see...all he needed was a gentle push.

“Few men of action have been able to make a graceful exit at the appropriate time.”

About the author, Fredrick Feeney. Fred, a long time Ohio wrestling official, is a member of the CDWOA, the CWOA and the NWOA, and is a moderator on several popular wrestling discussion forum. Fred's in-depth experience encompasses both scholastic and collegiate levels, having culminated with numerous assignments at the OHSAA State Tournament and NCAA Division II and III Championship finals. Fred and his wife reside in Dublin, Ohio

