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"Becoming a good official is not a destination; it's a journey."

How to Become a Better Official

By: Jack Beard

Why would anyone want to be a wrestling official? It certainly isn't because you look forward to being yelled at by irate fans, parents, wrestlers, and coaches. It can't be because you enjoy the late night drives in winter-storm conditions. I doubt it's the time you spend away from your family through the week and on weekends, though my wife might say that's a good thing. It probably isn't even the trips you make to the doctor's office for sprains and pulls, cuts and bruises, and cold and flu medicines to keep you officiating the next match.

Listed below are possible reasons someone might want to become a wrestling referee:

1. You love the sport and want to keep involved.
2. You want to give back to the sport that taught you so many valuable life lessons.
3. You are or were a wrestling coach and you feel that you have an expertise in understanding the rules that would make you a good official.
4. You wanted to earn a little extra money.
5. Or any other reason that you might have to validate your decision.

I would imagine that many of the reasons above would fit most wrestling officials in Ohio.

Once you have made the decision to become an official, how do you become a good official? What makes a good wrestling official? Who helps you become the best official that you can be?

In order to become a new wrestling official in Ohio you must take an approved officiating class that involves classroom instruction and practical applications of officiating on the wrestling mat. You must then pass a test on the mechanics of officiating, including the use of proper signals, and a rules interpretation test. Once you have passed the test you can begin your exiting journey on the road to becoming a good official.

The year after a new official successfully passes his or her officiating class and examination he or she must attend a state interpretation meeting given by a state interpreter and attend at least four local association meetings. These are important meetings as they build on the foundation laid by the knowledge you gained in your new official's class. A lot of hard work went into the development of the new officials' class, by the education committee, of the Ohio Wrestling Officials Association. Jim Vreeland and Gary Berkowitz, both veteran OHSAA State Tournament officials, worked many hours to put together an outstanding educational program for new officials.

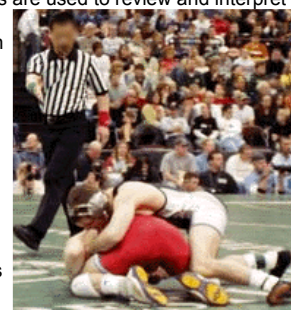
Local association meetings are a tremendous help to new officials. These meetings are used to review and interpret the rules of wrestling, to work with officials in order to help them understand the mechanics of officiating, to help officials learn how to work with coaches and fans in a professional manner, and to gain invaluable knowledge of the art of officiating wrestling based on the experiences of veteran officials.

Obviously, the new official must read the rules book and the casebook to understand the rules of wrestling as they are written. However, understanding the rules and how they are written is one thing, interpreting them in a live situation is a totally different animal.

Wrestling is such a unique sport in that almost every rule has seemingly endless *what-if situations*, and when you think you have seen it all, something else happens to prove you haven't.

One of the best ways to become an outstanding official is to observe veteran officials in action. Watching how they position themselves, how they handle coaches and fans, how they make their calls, how they enforce the rules, how they call stalling, and how they handle unique situations can be a valuable tool in becoming a better official.

Don't be afraid to approach veteran officials to discuss calls that they made in their match or situations that occurred during the match. Some official's associations have a mentoring program that pairs a new official with a veteran



official so that they can work together as the new official gains experience during the year.

Ultimately, in order to improve as an official, you must get more experience on the mat and work your way up the ladder from doing elementary matches, junior high school matches, junior-varsity matches, high school matches, and then on to the tough dual-meets or tournaments.

The techniques used by wrestlers today have become much more advanced, and in some cases, the wrestlers even use techniques based on the positioning and skill level of the official working the match. It is very important that the new official stay up-to-date on the techniques and variations of the techniques being used by the modern wrestler. The new official has to be in the proper position and very aware of what is happening on the mat. It is the official's job to ensure the safety of both wrestlers, which can only be done by understanding the rules, techniques being used, what constitutes potentially dangerous holds, illegal holds, and any acts that might be unsportsmanlike, too rough, or flagrant. As an official you need to have an understanding of what the wrestling holds feel like. As a former wrestler you would have a working knowledge, but if you have never wrestled you need to get on the mat and have someone put you in the holds to feel the pressure caused by the move.



As a new official it is very easy to be too quick when awarding points, especially at the younger levels where there is a lot of rolling around and not really having control established by either wrestler. In most cases you will want to make sure that points have been earned and that reaction time has been given to allow a wrestler to either establish control, or show that there was no control. We sometimes use the phrase, "let it burn", to remind each other that you don't have to award the points quickly.

Another helpful hint is to have criteria for what you called. When a coach questions a call, and believe me the coach will question a call, you want to be able to explain the criteria you used to make the call. The coach may not agree with you but he will know that you didn't just make the call because you felt like doing something. He will know, that based on your interpretation of the rule, you had a reason for making the call.

Becoming a good official is not a destination; it's a journey. When you stop trying to be the best official you can be you should stop officiating. Every match teaches me something about the art of refereeing a wrestling match. I have not worked a perfect match yet.



About the author, Jack Beard: Jack has been an active Ohio wrestling official for the past 23 years. He was a founding member and former President of the Mad River Wrestling Officials Association, where he is currently their Rules Interpreter. Jack is also a member of the Southwest Ohio Wrestling Officials Association and the Ohio Wrestling Officials Association and has twice been named the Greater Miami Valley Wrestling Coaches Association *Official of the Year*. Jack has worked 8 Ohio High School Association State wrestling championships. Jack and his wife reside in Urbana, Ohio.

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