

The Wrestling Referee and His Role in Contests

By Ira Fleckman

The National Federation of State High School Associations defines the wrestling referee and his role: "On matters of judgment, the referee shall have full control of the match and his decisions shall be final, based upon the NFHS wrestling rules and interpretations." This definition is specific and seems to leave no room for argument. However, there is also a rule that allows a coach to call for a conference when he wishes to dispute a judgment or question the application of a rule. This opens the door to the questioning of the referee and his decisions. In addition, the vast majority of wrestlers are high school wrestlers and it is a well-established fact that adolescence is a period for questioning authority and rules generally. Referee's judgments are subject to review by spectators, who have a vested interest in the outcome of each match. In these times the general public is less respectful of authority and not bound by accepted social restraints on behavior or

language. The results of the failure to respect the authority of the official has been noted in the media by increasing number of incidents including violent attacks at sporting events and in some cases assaults on individual referees.

The author has observed two incidents that offer another perspective. In one case a coach was reported by an official for removing his team from the match in progress after being charged with unsportsmanlike conduct. When the forfeit of matches in these circumstances is reported to the authority responsible for sanctioning high school sports a hefty fine is the usual result. The coach demanded to present videotapes which he insisted would prove that the referee in question had not controlled the match, had not applied the rules properly and had a complete disregard for the safety of the wrestlers. The coach went on to call several members of the executive board of the local official's association insisting that he would not

come and present the video tapes if the officials were going to "Circle the wagons to protect their fellow referee." The result was a very sympathetic viewing of the videotape with those viewing the scenes making every effort to see things from the coach's viewpoint. However, after discussion among the executive board it was apparent that there was no evidence at all to support the claim of the coach.

At a recent tournament a coach from out of state was exceptionally loud in questioning referee's calls and in making calls from the corner and in demonstrating his displeasure with calls to the spectators in the stands. During the course of the two-day tournament he and his assistant were both called for unsportsmanlike behavior and team points had been deducted. During the final matches, the coach called repeatedly for his wrestler to get more aggressive. He actually called out, "Hurt him!" After the referee called the wrestlers to the center after an exchange of blows to the back of the neck by both wrestlers, the coach continued to call from his corner for his wrestler to employ, "Heavy hands!" When his wrestler had the opponent in a pinning combination the coach repeatedly called for the fall from his corner. He left his seat and turned to the spectators and repeatedly waved both his arms with his palms to the spectators



John Bennett (black and red) of the Grizzlies, working on Aaron Anderson, Deer Park, in the 112 pound semi-finals at the Grizzly Den Classic in Newport, Washington. Bennett went on to win this match 6-2, and be the tournament's Outstanding Wrestler. Photo by Bill France.

clearly demonstrating his displeasure with the referee for not calling the pin sooner. After the fall was called, the head official called the coach to the head table. When the head official began to admonish the coach for specific acts that were not proper, the coach interrupted and went into a long complaint of the unfairness of the officiating and a complaint about all referees everywhere generally. He loudly told the head official of all his hours on the mats, the blood, sweat, tears, and emotional investment that he and his fellow coaches make everyday and lack of investment of the officials. The coach was ejected and his state sanctioning body will get a full report.

This author doesn't make any claim that these coaches are in any way typical of wrestling coaches. In fact, this author, who has been involved as a wrestler, coach, official and volunteer contributor since 1960, will state for the record that the vast majority of wrestling coaches know and observe the rules and are great examples of good sportsmanship in every respect. It is the contention of this author that in these times every coach and official must work together so that all involved in wrestling events abide by the highest standards of good sportsmanship and the few referees, coaches, wrestlers, parents and spectators who can't get it right either reform their behav-

ior or are removed.

The referee serves as an impartial arbitrator making judgments, awarding points, maintaining the proper decorum, enforcing the rules, following the procedures for order, safety and social standards. The coaches, wrestlers, parents and spectators should support the referees in their efforts to do their jobs properly. The referee who does his job perfectly isn't to be noticed. It has been said that referees see with their eyes and coaches, parents, and spectators see with their hearts. It is clear that the participants on each side have a partisan interest in each call. However, it is in everyone's interest that the official's judgments be respected so that fairness can be maintained. The coach who seeks to influence an official is undermining the entire process. Coaches must be very careful not to substitute their judgment for the judgment of the official.

Referees will be the first to admit that they sometimes make mistakes. However, if a coach is absolutely certain that an official has erred, he may request a conference and ask the referee to review his decision. Most experienced referees are very willing to change a call when they recognize their error. However, the coach who insists on giving his own interpretation of the actions that the referee has judged, the coach who

informs the referee that he has erred, the coach who challenges the authority of the referee and the coach who wishes to debate a decision of a referee is not apt to influence the official. In fact, when a coach aggressively confronts the official the official may become defensive. There is no question that when a coach becomes aggressive and loud the spectators, parents, and athletes are affected, too. These actions, no matter how justified the coach feels, limit the opportunity for resolution and increase the chances for conflict.

It is also the case that many rules have outlived their usefulness. Some rules were a knee-jerk reaction to social phenomena. An example would be the hair restrictions that were instituted after the Beatles visited the United States and the Hippie movement began. Other rules that prohibit techniques that have resulted in injuries are well meaning but certainly not the result of scientific study. Several rules have been rushed into the rules book as a result of a few incidents and they are largely unnecessary. While the referees have a very limited influence on the rules adopted by a rules committee made up mostly of coaches, the referees are bound to enforce rules until they are changed. When referees fail to enforce rules as they are written or allow for rules to be ignored by common practice they are the ones guilty of undermining the program. Wrestling coaches and referees should meet together and attempt to agree on rules changes that would improve the sport and reduce controversy and pass these suggestions to the rules committee.

Historically, referees were armed and their specific duties were to insure that the combatants were not armed and that no outsider interfered in the combat. Today's referee must enforce a plethora of rules that govern the uniform worn, the conduct of the participants (including coaches, team personnel and spectators), the stopping and starting of the bout, legal holds, illegal holds, and techniques and potentially dangerous situations. The concept of taunting is one that referees are supposed to know and recognize although the guidelines are not entirely clear. Even the procedures for the weigh-ins are specifically defined in the rules and don't allow consideration for possible exceptions. The referee is required to know and enforce all rules fairly. His has become a lonely job.

It seems that wrestling would be well served if coaches and officials would find ways to work together to improve the rules, make communication between them less confrontational and support each other in the conduct of man's oldest sport.

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