

Communication Begins with the Right Signals.

By Bob Whitaker, 2008

Wrestling referees must have the ability to instantly and properly recognize the action taking place on and off the mat. Equally important is the ability to inform everyone about your interpretation of what just occurred. Using authorized signals, you must tell scorers, timers, coaches and spectators how many points were scored or what action you penalized. Practice your signals until they are clear, mechanically perfect and automatic.

Use the authorized signals as described and pictured in the NFHS Wrestling Rules Book. Non-standard signals should not be used for obvious reasons they cause confusion. For example, using your thumb to signal a point is an international signal. However, using your index finger is the only acceptable way to signal one point by NFHS rules.

Your position on the mat enhances your ability to communicate properly. Poor positioning inhibits clear signaling. That creates confusion for the scorer and timer. That is especially true when multiple points are scored. During a flurry of intense action, you must be in control of your emotions and display all points in the proper manner. It is also important for you to control your emotions when withholding a signal until the correct time.

Visualize the exceptional referees. Those referees rarely have major problems, discrepancies or conferences with coaches. Is it by accident? No, it is their confidence that makes their signals clearly understood. Those referees don't attract attention to themselves and therefore doesn't become the attraction. The information that they supply with their signals allows the attraction and attention to stay with the wrestlers and the action on the mat.

Common complaints.

Timers and scorers commonly complain about a few things: points missed because referees unintentionally hide their signals with their own body or face, that referees' fingers are held too close together and questions about whether the wrestler scored two or three points.

Fall points are probably the most abused signal. I use the term "abused" because most referees count much too fast in near-fall situations. The most common error is the perception that the wrestler has a five-count when barely three seconds have registered on the clock. That is especially frustrating for coaches and spectators who can clearly see the clock and the referee making the count. I'll cover one tip to help correct that problem later in the article.

Too often, referees feel that they must turn to face the scorer to signal points earned. That is especially true when awarding near-fall points. True, there are times you can get away with turning your back on the action and nothing happens. However, that small void in attention has probably caused a problem in most referees' careers. They quickly became aware that they were the only person in the gym that didn't see what just happened and it wasn't good!

Flamboyant referees create different problems when they get excited during a flurry of action. Their loss of control and excessive displays of emotion cause the wrong signal to be shown. When that occurs, it creates larger problems. Already flustered, they have to respond to the criticism and have to take the point away and correct the mistake. Maybe they have to give the point to the opposite wrestler.

To do that, referees must stop the match, sort out their mistake and explain their call. That causes unnecessary swings of emotion with the participants, coaches and spectators. All that is done in a tense atmosphere, often accompanied by hurtful comments.

Some suggestions might help you achieve the common goal of referees signaling consistently throughout the match. During your training years, learn to communicate signals clearly by using the pictorial pages in the *NFHS Wrestling Rules Book*. Make your signals crisp and clear. Get your arm up so that it is visible to the scorer's table. Lock your elbow when counting seconds. Hold your fingers apart when signaling points. Slowly rotate your wrist once or twice it's easier for scorers, timers and coaches to differentiate the called signal as they see it from the proper angle.

You already know that when near-fall situations occur, sometimes it's almost impossible to make a visual hand count. As mentioned above, try locking your elbow on each count. You'll be surprised that it actually takes a full second to extend your arm, lock your elbow and return your hand to your chest. Repeat that sequence until the near-fall situation ends or you reach a five second count. That's the tip needed to prevent you from getting to five while the clock shows three seconds elapsed.

Keep the number of points earned (two or three), on your fingers on the mat until the near-fall situation ends. Then, without turning away from the wrestlers, hold the scoring arm up and over your head. Using that procedure helps cut down the common error of counting too quickly. To help you break the habit of turning toward the scorer's table, do some self-talk. Choose an object on one wrestler and focus on it while you signal the points to the table. Say to yourself as you prepare to signal, "I'm going to watch the defensive wrestler's headgear until I bring my arm down." It may take several matches to break the habit, but soon you will gain the confidence that the scorer's table will see your signals without you having to look at the scorer.

Practice in front of a mirror. That's the low-tech version. See how you appear each time you use a hand signal. Are your signals crisp and clear? Go through each sequence of signals as they might occur in a match. Stop the match. Start injury clock. Start blood

clock. Start recovery clock. Those are four distinct signals. Pause between each one to allow the scorer's table to clearly understand what you are trying to convey.

Anticipate a flurry of points and practice how you would show points scored by both wrestlers. Green near fall, three points. Red reversal, two points. Out of bounds. Neutral position restart. Those are four distinct signals. One-handed signal with the left hand. One-handed signal with the right hand. Two handed signal to show out of bounds. Another two handed signal to show the neutral restart position. As you practice in the mirror, ask yourself, "Do I look professional? Am I sloppy?"

If you have the availability of a friend and a video camera, ask the friend to film a match or two. You might be surprised to see how others perceive you because now you see yourself as others see you. To make that filming more effective, have the friend do it at random intervals throughout an all-day tournament. That way, you'll never know when the camera is on you.