

A Proactive Philosophy of Wrestling Officiating

*By Duane Morgan
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Developing a philosophy as a wrestling official is just as essential as a teacher developing a good classroom environment, a coach having a certain method to present his style of wrestling, or a parent raising his/her child. All of these elements have a common educational goal — the positive development of our youth through a philosophy to which they are exposed. Athletes will adopt philosophies or traits from persons they are surrounded by and will emulate those traits, both good and bad. In the pure and perfect world, we would hope that the student-athlete is surrounded by positive nurturing traits in which they select those who help them develop their own philosophy. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and as educators, we have tremendous influence on young people. We need to direct a proactive positive philosophy toward student-athletes.

As officials, we need to continue this positive philosophy not just when dealing with the athletes, but also with the coaches and fans who will also influence the ideals and perception of what the official is all about. Sometimes officials are their own worst enemies, especially those who walk into arenas with the attitude that "I am the boss and you had better listen to me." This officiating approach is not at all acceptable and will make your job a lot tougher when you have to make the difficult call on the mat. By its nature, the wrestling community is very close-knit and the reputation of an official spreads quickly — both positive and negative. When you enter a gym, you would like people to say, there is "so-and-so" and have them feel confident and comfortable that you will call a fair match. Paul Keyshaw, an NCAA Division I national champion from Bakersfield, California, commented that when he saw Pat Lovell step on the mat for his semifinal match at the national championships, he breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Pat was competent and would call a fair match — he could then concentrate on his wrestling. What a great compliment for an official to receive.

So ... how do we develop this philosophy and how do we communicate this proactive approach to the people that we immediately affect?

Developing a philosophy begins with knowing, observing and working with officials who have reputations of being excellent wrestling officials. Try to emulate those characteristics that make them great. I am more fortunate than most in knowing wrestling officials who are and continue to be outstanding role models. The following are some of the officials who have taught me many positive traits that I attempt to bring to the mat. They have also been a positive influence on my personal life.

- Lynn Dyche, my high school coach, is one of the founders of the California Wrestling Association and the head evaluator at the NCAA Division I wrestling championships. From Lynn, I acquired a great love for the sport of wrestling and the passion to be the best that I could be in the sport. As officials, we should always strive to be the best we can be. We owe it to the athletes, the coaches and the fans and to the sport of wrestling to officiate every match as if it was our last one. Remember that you are only as good as your last performance.
- Pat Lovell has refereed the NCAA Division I championships for 20 years and is a very accomplished international official. He has shared with me his ability to be in the right place all the time. Pat's ability to position himself in the correct place to observe the action was always confusing to me until he shared many of his officiating techniques. Use crisp, clean mechanics at all times and always ask yourself where the movement is going to take the wrestlers. Anticipate and get there before they do. We can all learn to anticipate so we are in the correct position to see and make the correct call.
- Charlie Douglas has worked 16 NCAA Division I and 10 Division II championships. He is a compassionate man who loves to officiate wrestling, always showing his deep concern for the athletes. He would carefully observe the competitors during the match and communicate to the athletes and coaches to ensure the match was called correctly. His dealings with coaches were positive in nature and he never raised his voice in anger or disrespect. His calm approach in dealing with people gave me the inspiration to be patient and to deal with people honestly and with complete integrity — he was a great listener. I learned that winning is not the most important thing; the most important thing in officiating is the ability to deal effectively with people. These attributes are ones that make a person succeed in every aspect of his life.
- Leroy Evans is one of five officials with an International Category FILA 1E rating. Leroy inspired me to develop an officiating philosophy that worked for me. Leroy's mentoring has helped me develop the philosophy to view the entire match and take into account all aspects of the action. The lesson of never going into a match with a predetermined winner in your mind reminds us of what a disservice it would be to the wrestlers. Never try to speculate who is going to stall or commit an infraction — if you look for it you will find it. He is constantly reminding me that the athletes are the most important people out there and that

you are there to facilitate their actions, not to be antagonistic — a lesson we should not overlook.

Again, it has been my good fortune to have learned some vital lessons from these outstanding officials and human beings. Because the wrestling community is much smaller than other sports, a young official could do no greater service for himself than to find out who the movers and shakers are in their local association and OBSERVE, LISTEN and WORK HARD to follow their lead.

Communication is another key to projecting a proactive philosophy to the athletes, coaches and fans. Here are a few suggestions that may help you when you walk into the wrestling arena filled with fans:

1) Use a smile and shake the hand of coaches when enter the floor. Use discretion on time spent with each side and remember you are being watched by a grandmother in the top row who doesn't know who you are and just wants a fair match called. You would not want to taint this by being too friendly.

2) When you introduce yourself to the timer and scorekeeper, smile and be positive about having a good match and explain the them, that if there are any problems, let's call time-out and solve them. Remember that you need to "team" with the head table personnel. They will be a tremendous assistance to you.

3) When you have your conference in the middle of the mat with the captains, introduce yourself, shake their hands and have them introduce themselves and also shake hands. Sportsmanship needs to be of paramount importance. The athletes need to know who you are and that you are a regular guy who wants to his best job of officiating for them. Review the rules and any questions they may have, then direct them back to their benches to inform their coaches of the odd or even selection and any specific instructions you gave.

4) Always use book mechanics and signals. There is nothing worse than an official making up signals and confusing everyone in the gym. Sell your calls, be firm and clear, use a good solid voice, but not overwhelming — just enough to get your point across and the job done. During the match, verbalize the important commands such as "contact-action-center."

5) Other officiating tools can be used when there is dead time. For example, during an out-of-bounds situation, remind the wrestlers what position they will take when they return to the center of the mat. When wrestlers are returning to the center of the mat, keep an eye on them, preferably following them so that they are in your view at all times. If stalling is called during the match, it is a good idea to remind the wrestlers that there was a call for stalling.

6) Communicate with the coaches during time-outs. If a wrestler is injured, inform the scorekeeper and both coaches of the time-out status and the time used for

the time-out. This will be appreciated by the coaches and will keep open the lines of communication with them. When a coach gets excited, the worst thing an official can do is to react to his outbursts. If a coach begins to get out of line, telling the coach to "sit down and shut up" is not the correct approach. Remind the coach if he has a question to go to the scoring table and request a time-out. At the conference, do not try to read his mind and guess what he is questioning before he asks a question. Listen to him, explain what you saw and why you made the call and go on from there. If the coach is questioning judgment, you must give him the warning according to the penalty chart — that usually deters any further unnecessary conferences. Be courteous and have the proper officiating demeanor to demonstrate that you are trying to work with him and his athletes — this will help you avoid penalties and warnings and especially any abuse from the coach. Don't misunderstand me — sometimes there are situations in which an official must assert his authority to control the match and the situation. Don't abuse the authority and don't flaunt it.

As a coach, it is always important to explain to the wrestlers that the sport is not that difficult. As a supervisor of wrestling officials, the same approach will be successful — don't make the sport more difficult than it is. Study your book, know the casebook backwards and forwards, and never call what you think should happen, but what actually happens.

Developing a proactive philosophy to officiating wrestling takes many years of practice, mat time and studying of the sport to be the best you can be. Continually observe good officials. Once you develop confidence in your officiating, you will find it to be an enjoyable experience and your association with the athletes and coaches will be positive for all. Find an officiating mentor and stick to him like glue — be a sponge for information and keep the lines of communication open at all times.

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