

Unwind, Then Rewind – Keys to a good Postgame

When the final whistle or buzzer sounds or the last out is recorded, you're not done yet. Here are five postgame discussion strategies to follow.

It's been a long day. There was the travel to the event, the pregame meeting, a long grueling contest, some testy coaches, an opinionated crowd and some challenging rulebook interpretations. Now the game is over and you're sweaty and hungry and all you can think of is the condensation running down the side of a cold refreshment.

Not so fast.

If your focus is on slipping out of the locker room door before a postgame debriefing critique, you're robbing yourself and interfering with a chance to improve your career.

"I spend a lot of my time mentoring new referees," Eric Proctor said. Proctor is an NCAA Division I soccer official and MLS official.

"The postgame critique is a great learning tool. The best referees are the ones who are open to what you have to say and those that are willing to learn new things," he said.

Organizing and participating in an effective postgame critique doesn't just happen. Like all things in officiating, they take knowledge, preparation, sensitivity and, perhaps most importantly, good social skills. Fall short on any of those components and you can count on a meeting that not only is unproductive but may even leave the officials involved less prepared and more confused the next time they head out on an assignment.

Whether you're the head official, an evaluator or a referee or umpire who worked the game, you can make the most out of a critique by keeping a few important things in mind.

1 – Know What to Cover

It may seem like stating the obvious, but knowing what you're going to talk about after the game when you address the team is crucial. It isn't the time to work off the cuff. Make sure you have something relevant to say and that you can convey it in a way that the team will understand.

"As a crew chief you have to know what you want to say and have a strategy for drawing each official out. You always have to have a plan for what you're going to talk about," said Barb Smith, an NCAA Division I women's basketball official.

For many officials who conduct postgame critiques having a routine assures them that they cover the things that are important to each game. Having a structure with some flexibility built in is one of the keys to making it work. It's a mistake to count on total recall after working, particularly a stressful game and in a situation where everyone involved is exhausted. Instead, rely on your structure to make sure that you cover everything that needs to be addressed.

"When it's time for our postgame we look at the things that were most important," Proctor said. "We examine any major decisions the team made that affected the game. We talk about how we communicated and ways we could've done it better. We talk about all red cards or anything that involves a misconduct and why the red cards were issued. We evaluate any critical match incidents and we take a good look at any game-winning goal controversies."

By covering the same points at the end of the game with room to be flexible you can make sure that each member of the team can learn and improve their game. Taking the time to plan your meeting in advance will pay dividends and make it more productive for everyone involved.

2 – Prepare Your Message

You may have more knowledge than any other official on the planet but if you can't express it in a way that others can hear it, understand it and receive it, all your knowledge may be for naught. First of all, it is important to realize that this isn't the time to go over every tick of the clock and every play of the game. There's simply no way you can do it and even if you did, it wouldn't be digested. If your drive is to be comprehensive, you may need to check your own motivation and neediness and question what you're trying to fulfill by keeping everyone for an hour after the game.

The best crew chiefs and supervisors focus on a few pointed and important items to cover at the end of the game.

"I don't think they have to be long but they do have to be focused," Smith said. "I like to start out by saying something like, 'Give me three to five minutes of your time. Let's look at two or three things we did well and two or three things we didn't do so well.'"

Don't mistake Smith's approach for giving the topic short shrift. She knows where she wants to go after the game and structures her meetings in such a way that the important messages are conveyed and, even more importantly, received.

"I always prepare how I'm going to address the crew and I have a strategy for how to draw them out so we can talk about the game. They aren't allowed to get by on yes or no answers."

Some situations call for more detail and more formal review. In those cases the meetings go on longer, not so everyone can hear themselves talk, but because there's important material to cover. When you're in the role of evaluating others you may feel the pressure to go deeper in detail than an average crew chief, but remember to be focused on what needs to be said and not just taking up time so that you can feel good about going on for the longest.

"When I evaluate a basketball game from the stands I take copious notes of what I see and I use a Dictaphone to make sure I get everything recorded that I want to address," said George Drouches. He's a Division III baseball national coordinator and a supervisor of men's and women's basketball for the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and the Upper Midwest Athletic Association.

"I don't rely on my memory nor do I want to improvise," he added. "I want to be able to present my material clearly and be able to structure my points in an organized fashion."

Drouches' preparation means that when he enters a locker room, his words carry not only the weight of his title but they also instantly have credence because they are factually dead on. When an official knows an evaluator has prepared and studied the game, they pay attention to the feedback they receive.

Crew chiefs and officials can't prepare quite as much as evaluators, but they can still have a sense for what should be covered and a strategy going in.

3 – Take a Positive Approach

If you're leading the postgame meeting, your goal is to help everyone improve from analyzing the team's performance. Undoubtedly, there were mistakes and those mistakes provide everyone with teachable moments. That is where your greatest opportunities lie, but the message has to be received for it to be worth anything. The messages must be delivered in a way that the team members can process them.

"I start out by asking the group what we did well," Smith said. "I want them to tell me two or three positive things to get the meeting off on the right foot. It might be something as simple as dealing with an angry coach or that we rotated well."

The practice of starting off with the positive sets a tone and lets the officials relax their defenses. It lets the participants know they aren't getting ready for an inquisition where everything they did for the last three hours will be called into question. It also gives them a chance to feel good about themselves.

"All of it needs to be presented in a positive manner," Drouches said. "You should not be negative and should

never be demeaning. I try to employ some of the same strategies I used as a coach and present everything as a challenge to get better.”

That balance of presenting the positive along with the challenge to improve is the crucial focus point. There are always errors, even from the most experienced and skilled officials, and avoiding the discussion of those errors is a huge mistake. Even though some officials can be extremely sensitive, don't make the mistake of not talking about what needs to be covered.

“I let them know during a critique that we're here to get better not to feel better. I ask them about what calls they'd like to have back and we review the plays in question. It is kept positive but the mistakes need to be covered,” Drouches said.

It is not enough just to have postgame critiques so you can check it off your list as another completed task. Though they may need to be tactful, they still need to be meaningful, even if that means making some officials a little uncomfortable.

“I think the most useless meetings are the ones where everyone gets together and congratulates each other for being wonderful. Some officials don't like to give anything up, but there's always something, and not discussing things doesn't help anyone,” Smith said.

4 – Exercise Sensitivity

Those meetings can be particularly anxiety-provoking for the young officials who are so eagerly trying to improve. They may not be overtly defensive but their drive to excel can actually get in their way and they may get crushed with criticism, constructive or otherwise. You may not be in there to make everyone feel good, but breaking down a sensitive official focused on self-improvement isn't your goal, either. It takes some thought in how to approach officials with that mind-set.

“I think you start out by being open,” Proctor said. “I try to draw a young official out and ask them how they thought they did. Then I move on to what they think they could improve on. I use what they bring up as a lead-in to a discussion.”

For Proctor it's about getting to the important points so someone can improve and not about showing who is boss and establishing a power structure. The goal isn't about ego; it is about helping someone become the best official he or she can be.

“I try to stay away from a lot of 'shoulds' because it doesn't help. Instead I think the critiques need to be an exchange of ideas,” he said.

5 – Know Your Audience

Officiating is one part knowing and executing rules and another part understanding people. Our people skills help us handle the irate coach, the frustrated players and the angry crowd, but they are equally or more important when it comes to working within the officiating team. When you're leading a team, just like in any other leadership position, you need to be part boss, counselor and friend to those who you are charged with leading.

Perhaps the most challenging officials encountered are the ones who believe they haven't made any mistakes during a game and who resist any criticism at all. They may be good officials, but with that attitude they will never meet their full potential.

“The most difficult personal attitude without question is the one held by the officials who think they know it all, that they are already great and the only thing they're really interested in hearing is that they are great,” Proctor said. “It's a real problem because I know I improved by listening to senior mentors in difficult situations. You have to realize you're never going to experience everything.”

You may want to blast an arrogant official across the room, but resist the urge to serve up some humble pie. Their arrogance is often a cover for insecurity. Using a little psychology may be the best move and a way into someone who seems a bit closed off to feedback.

"I use open-ended questions to get people discussing things even if they don't want to. It doesn't have to be harsh, and by using open-ended questions you can draw someone out who may be resistant," Smith said.

Open-ended questions are inquiries that require a full answer and are impossible to answer with one word.

Try structuring a question like, "Could you tell me what we could've done better in that situation?" Rather than, "Did we do anything wrong in this situation?" or even "Is there anything we could've done better in that situation?"

The open-ended questions begin a dialogue in a non-threatening manner. Starting a sentence off with "Could" will elicit the least defensive responses. Be careful when using questions that start with "Why" because they are the questions most likely to be perceived as accusations.

Even with your best communication skills in place you may have to address some officials directly on their attitude and response to criticism. It's not about showing who is the boss or looking for a fight, but it is about doing your job as a leader. Confrontation can be a tough but necessary part of the job.

"I have to let them know this is not a debate. When you start getting into debating it stops being about getting better and becomes more about feeling better and as I said that's not why we're here," Drouches said. "The officials who are going to be the best are the good listeners. Let's face it, this isn't easy ... so it is all about improving."

If you're a part of a postgame critique, it is important to not only soak up the feedback from more experienced officials, it's also important to demonstrate that you bring an open attitude and that you want to improve. Even if you've had an awful game, the postgame meeting is a chance to impress.

"Situations reveal character," Drouches said. "The officials who really take advice to heart are the ones who will get better. I make sure the next time I see an official I point out their improvements they've made since the critique and it means a lot to them."

Don't forget how you are perceived when you're a leader. The group will take its cue from not only what you say, but how you say it and how you behave. Treat a postgame meeting like a presentation and be aware of the messages you are conveying with your words, your intonation and your body language.

"I'm very aware of my body language," Smith said. "It depends on the locker room but if there's a chair, I'll sit down and lean forward and talk directly to the officials with good eye contact. I don't like to do it standing or while I'm getting dressed. I make sure I'm not slouching. I look folks in the eye and I use a strong voice. I give it my full attention and keep it short."

Smith's postgame meeting may only run three to five minutes but she makes the most of the time and gets respect because she gives it by being serious, prepared and sensitive to her audience.

By Tom Schreck, a writer and a professional boxing judge with the World Boxing Association and the New York State Athletic Commission from Albany, N.Y.