

## **Pregame is More than Coverage**

*“If you’ve got one team playing a zone and another playing 94-feet of man-to-man the officials have to talk about the contrast.” - Ed Hightower*

When do you begin focusing on your next game? Chances are, not soon enough. Your amount of advance time will vary based on some fairly standard factors including travel, personalities, and league policies, but in general I begin the “pregame” for each of my games one to two weeks before the game.

My work starts with crew communication, and because there is a great deal of travel at the Division I level it takes more time to coordinate with my partners that it did when I worked a lot of high school games. Yet we cover the same fundamentals. First, confirming the partners I expect to work with are still assigned to the game; second, confirming the date, time and game location; third, insuring transportation is set; we also work out hotel arrangements. All pretty routine – until you skip over something that has changed.

Even if your games do not force you to jump on an airplane you really should follow a similar checklist. Drive to your game with your partner(s) whenever possible because that adds to the camaraderie of the crew. Check with your assigner or the home school AD so you know game time has not changed. Consider working out a restaurant instead of a hotel –a meal and a postgame conversation can solidify your night’s work.

Once we get to the game site (at least 90 minutes before game time), I’ve always been a stickler on pregame conferences. I believe in the mental preparation you can accomplish in the dressing room. When I've got a younger crew with me, it's my responsibility to have that crew mentally and physically prepared to walk out onto the floor and work a game.

Early in the season this night could be one partner’s first Division I game. As a crew you try to make that person feel as comfortable as possible. A new official can’t help but be excited, even hyper, so you try to get him to settle down and don't be so concerned about jumping on that whistle the first time down the floor. Call what you see, see what you call.

Of course, if you are that rookie you're first call has to be 100 percent right because you're not going to get the latitude that a veteran gets. Even when you're 100 percent right you're going to still get a lot of criticism if you're just starting out. So I’m really trying to make that first year person feel comfortable, and reassure that person that he belongs. Then it's up to that person to go out there and convince you, me, everyone else, that he belongs. If you make that person understand that he belongs, if you’re successful, then it's just a matter of going out there and working the game.

Before every game we talk about conditions and situations that could occur. A game takes on a different personality when it matches two teams fighting for first place, or for the last slot in the conference tournament, or to stay out of last place. We’ll also talk about crazy, unusual plays that have occurred recently, and how we’ll adjudicate the situation if something similar happens in our game that night.

We talk about personnel and team tendencies. If you’ve got one team playing a zone and another playing 94-feet of man-to-man the officials have to talk about the contrast. When one team’s offense includes a lot of motion, screens and illegal screens have to be a major part of our pregame. Does one team have a 6’9” center? Chances are they’re going to do everything they can

think of to get the ball to him – and the opponents will be doubling down on that center. We better be talking about that, too.

I'm fortunate because when you've been around as long as I have you know the various tendencies of each team and each coach. It's rare that I go into a game knowing nothing about one of the teams. That's why I should be talking with the crew about those tendencies – no trying to infect a partner's mind with my own expectations, but to insure we're all aware of things we can reasonably expect during the game.

If we've got two particularly talented post players, the game is going to be played in the post. Sagging defenses, lob passes, defensive help from the weak side are likely to happen over and over again. If we visualize these kinds of plays and discuss the contact we know is going to occur, we've got a better chance to handle the plays consistently from the first possession.

If we've got two three-point shooters, chances are the game is going to be played around the perimeter. Make sure that young man comes back to the floor before you take your eyes off the play. Understand that even if you've got a great defensive team, an offensive player may get around the first line of defense – there's going to be secondary help. Be ready to referee the defensive play. Perimeter shooting leads to long rebounds, and that leads to the possibility of a very fast transition game. The trail has to support in the frontcourt, but be ready to react in a fast break scenario.

The whole pregame conversation changes some when you've got a crew of veterans who have years of experience. You don't have to be as in-depth as you would with a younger crew. Being personally mentally ready is the veteran's responsibility. That's why he's so well respected.

A solid pregame before every contest is a tremendously important mental exercise. Physical preparation, other than careful stretching, has to be accomplished long before you arrive at the game site. But mental preparation can be focused during that critical 90 minutes. If you focus well, you've already gotten your first call right!

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