

# CHAPTER 17 - PREGAME CONFERENCE

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The great importance placed on the pregame conference with officiating partners has made the concept almost cliché. Nearly everyone in officiating — camp directors, clinicians, book authors, columnists, veteran officials — all say a pregame conference is a significant ingredient of success. They're all right: If you can talk about it before it happens on the field, you're better prepared to deal with it.

There are as many different pregame conferences as there are officials. There is no magic formula for a "successful" pregame conference. There are a number of topics, however, that should be included:

## **Rule Changes/Major Differences**

Cover recent rule changes, especially in the beginning of the season when the rules and interpretations may still be a bit unclear. Cover major rule differences when you work different levels of play — for example, going from high school to small college games or high school to youth ball.

## **Special Coverage**

Discuss what to do in the event of hurry-up offense, obvious outside kick situation, etc. If the weather is threatening, discuss how the crew will handle a suspension of play due to lightning. The crew should also decide how it will handle fights or similar altercations.

## **Making the Call**

Go over signals between officials (receivers on or off the line, "two sticks" for a first down, etc.). Discuss which crew members are responsible for counting players and what signals will be used to indicate a team has enough, too many or too few players. Remind officials who are sharing coverage to make eye contact and to practice good dead-ball officiating.

## **Reporting Fouls to the Referee**

The referee should tell crew members how he wants fouls reported to him. Does he want the official to identify the offending team by uniform color or by referring to them as offense and defense? Remind officials to indicate the status of the ball at the time of the foul (loose ball, dead ball, etc.) and the result of the play (incomplete pass, scoring kick was good, etc.). Remind wing officials they are to tell the coach who committed the foul, the nature of the infraction and any special enforcement (loss of down, quarter extended for an untimed down, etc.).

## **Timeout Responsibilities**

Who's timing the timeout? Where are the officials positioned during the timeout? How are you going to inform the teams that the timeout is over? Who will tell the coach how many timeouts each team has remaining? Referee recommends the coach be told how many timeouts each team has left after every charged team timeout.

## **Bench Decorum**

This is a key element, often overlooked in pregame conferences. It is especially important if the crew does not work together often. Make sure that the officials involved have roughly the same idea about what conduct is out of line and what isn't. Remind wing officials to find the "get back" coach, the assistant who will help keep players and team personnel out of the coaching belt.

## **Injured Officials**

Discuss how the crew will adjust assignments if an official is injured or becomes too ill to work. Which officials will move where is up to the crew, but generally a four-man crew works without a line judge and a five-man crew works without a back judge when a crewmate is ill or injured. When a crew is reduced to two officials, Referee recommends that one official work as the referee and the other as a linesman.

## **Halftime**

Are you going to let the coaches and teams leave the field before heading off yourselves? Referee recommends that the officials meet at a designated place on the field, allow the teams to leave and have the referee signal the timer to start the clock. Also, someone needs to make sure the officials and teams are properly notified of the time

on the clock so they can return in time. The game manager should let the officials know if someone has been designated or if the officials will be responsible.

### **Leaving the Field**

Will the crew leave the field together or is each official to leave on his own?

### **Game Expectations**

If you know of some team history that may affect the game, discuss it. For example, if the two teams were involved in a fight the last time they met, you may want to talk about those ramifications on the game and the players' and coaches' attitudes.

## **PREGAME DUTIES**

### **Meeting with Coaches**

Whenever possible, the pregame meeting with the coaches should be conducted off the field. In that instance, the referee and the umpire should visit each lockerroom, then report back to the rest of the crew in the officials' lockerroom. If the meeting with the coaches occurs on the field, meet with the visiting coach first if possible. Either way, the meeting should begin with the referee introducing himself and giving the coach a card listing names of crew members.

With the umpire within earshot, ask the coach if all players are properly equipped. Have the umpire inspect any suspect equipment or tapings. Ask if the team plans on using any unique formations or trick plays. Foreknowledge helps the crew be prepared for such instances and increases the chances the play will be officiated correctly.

Get the captains' numbers. Some crews also obtain the captains' names. If an official wishes to speak to a captain during the game, perhaps to seek his help in calming an angry teammate, the captain will respond better if he is called by name rather than number.

Some crews also ask the coach what his choice would be if his team wins the coin toss. In the excitement that is felt before the game, captains sometimes blurt out something other than their coach's wishes. If you've asked the coach and the captain gives a different answer, a preventive officiating technique is to ask the captain, "Are you sure that's what you want?" Inform the coach when the coin flip is to take place (conference or association rules may dictate; "normal" is three minutes before game). Tell him he is responsible for having his team on the field for the mandatory three-minute warmup after halftime. Also, if there is a planned extended halftime, make sure the coach is aware of it.

The crew should take the field together. Unless conference or state association rules state otherwise, the crew should be on the field in uniform 30 minutes before kickoff.

Once on the field, the officials' duties are as follows:

### **Referee**

- Inspect the field. The referee should walk down both sidelines and along each endline at a brisk but unhurried pace. You don't need to inspect every blade of grass, but if you discover potholes, broken glass or other hazards, ask game management to have the problem taken care of immediately. If the field is marked for another sport (many football fields are also used for soccer), make sure the crew knows which lines are being used for football. Make sure the goalposts are straight and free of decoration and that the goalpost pads are securely fastened. Check the pylons to ensure they are properly placed.
- Spot-check players. Make a casual visual inspection of players as they warm up. Look for tinted eyeshields, knotted jerseys, towels with decorations and other uniform-related violations. Before the game, ask the head coach to have the players make the necessary corrections.
- Check with the crew. Verify that the umpire has inspected any tapings or protective equipment, that the linesman has met with the chain crew and that the line judge has met with the timer and the ball helpers. Discuss unusual plays or formations either team may have.

### **Umpire**

- Spot-check players. Make a casual visual inspection of players as they warm up. Look for tinted eyeshields, knotted jerseys, towels with decorations and other uniform-related violations. Before the game, ask the head coach to have the players make the necessary corrections.

## **Linesman**

- Inspect the box and chains. Make sure the chain is securely attached to the poles and is free of kinks. If there is no tape at the midway point of the chain (to facilitate the determination of whether a five-yard defensive penalty will result in a first down), ask a trainer for tape and mark the chain. The ends of the box and chain poles must be properly covered. If they are not, ask game management to remedy the situation.
- Meet with the chain crew.

## **Line Judge**

- Inspect the field. The line judge should walk down both sidelines and along each endline at a brisk but unhurried pace. You don't need to inspect every blade of grass, but if you discover potholes, broken glass or other hazards, ask game management to have the problem taken care of immediately. If the field is marked for another sport (many football fields are also used for soccer), make sure the crew knows which lines are being used for football. Make sure the goalposts are straight and free of decoration and that the goalpost pads are securely fastened. Check the pylons to ensure they are properly placed.
- Keep track of the game balls (four-man crew). Ensure that game balls are kept separate from practice balls; players are not allowed to warm up with the game balls. If the game balls are delivered to the officials' lockerroom before the game, the air pressure can be checked with a gauge. Air can be removed from balls that are over-inflated; balls that are under-inflated should be returned to game management and corrected or not used. If the game balls are given to the officials on the field, a visual and touch inspection should be used. Once approved, game balls should be marked (e.g. official's initials) so only approved balls are used in the game.
- Meet with the ball helpers and timer (four-man crew).
- Meet with the auxiliary down box operator (when applicable).

## **Back Judge (Crew of Five)**

- Keep track of the game balls. Ensure that game balls are kept separate from practice balls; players are not allowed to warm up with the game balls. If the game balls are delivered to the officials' lockerroom before the game, the air pressure can be checked with a gauge. Air can be removed from balls that are over-inflated; balls that are under-inflated should be returned to game management and corrected or not used. If the game balls are given to the officials on the field, a visual and touch inspection should be used. Once approved, game balls should be marked (e.g. official's initials) so only approved balls are used in the game.
- Meet with the ball helpers and timer.

## **When Duties are Completed**

After onfield pregame duties have been completed, the referee, linesman and back judge (five-man crew) move to midfield on the linesman's side of the field while the umpire and line judge move to midfield on the opposite side.

That is an ideal time to casually observe both teams for information that will be helpful during the game: Is the quarterback right-handed or left-handed? How strong are the punter's and kicker's legs? How is the wind affecting kicks? Watch both teams without giving the appearance they are being inspected. Before the kickoff, exchange information with other crew members.

Avoid using pregame time for nonessential chat with players, coaches, spectators or others, especially if it could give the appearance of favoritism.

## **A Note About Professionalism**

A portion of the Conduct for Officials adopted by the Officiating Development Alliance in 2006 reads, "Sports officiating is an honorable profession requiring those who engage in it to have strong moral character and integrity."

It goes without saying that officials should never bring alcohol, recreational drugs, tobacco, tobacco products or e-tobacco items to a game site. On the day of a game, officials are prohibited from using alcohol or any form of tobacco product (e-cigarette or similar item) beginning with the arrival at the competition site until departure following the completion of the contest.

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