

From the Athletic Director's Desk

Arguing with Officials- it doesn't add up

By Danny Erickson

Originally published- Winter 2009-10

Earlier in the fall, I watched the clip of the Serena Williams outburst at the US Open. She was upset with a line judge over a foot fault call against her. She lost it. The expletive-laced tirade resulted in her forfeiture of the match and consequent elimination from the Grand Slam tournament. Serena's spectacle provides a perfect example of how not to act for all CHS sports athletes, coaches and fans.

There is no upside to players, coaches and fans challenging the decisions of officials. When a player argues a call with an official, it takes his/her focus off of his/her job and almost always results in a decrease in effective performance. When fans in the stands react with jeers and disdain when they don't agree with calls, it creates a hostile environment and takes the focus off of the players and the game. When a coach argues a call it almost NEVER results in changing the mind of the official. Perhaps most importantly, in all three cases (players, coaches & fans) arguing calls is simply not the sporting and classy way to approach the game. Arguing calls just doesn't add up.

Why our athletes shouldn't challenge decisions of officials-

Last fall, Canton High School's athletes were visited by Dr. Greg Dale- Duke University sports psychologist. His message to them was designed around focus and concentration. One of his major points was that when athletes let the official's decisions get in their heads, it is tough to get them out. He suggested that our athletes use the "three-second" rule when things go wrong in a game (ie. an official's decision that is questionable- or just plain wrong). When the official makes a "bad" call, you cannot let it bother you for more than three seconds. If you can't shake it in three seconds, you are not going to be able to perform your task at your highest level.

I'll turn to US Open Tennis again for another example. During the men's final this year, the greatest player of all-time- Roger Federer- was upset by Juan Martin del Potro in five sets. With a set already in the win column, Federer was looking to win the 2nd set tie-breaker and break the upset hopes of the Argentine. Early in the tie-breaker, Federer argued a line call that went against him. He was clearly agitated. Five points later- still in the midst of the tie-breaker- Federer kept staring down the official that made the call and talking about it under his breath. He couldn't let go of that official's decision- and it cost him. He never regained focus, lost the tie-breaker, and went on to lose in five sets. I point at that moment of the match as when Federer lost it.

It was just one point- one call- but it consumed Federer and cost him many more points and the match. Federer would have benefited from using Dr. Dale's "three-second" rule.

No athlete at Canton High School plays at the level of Roger Federer, and yet all of them can learn from his performance in that match.

Why our fans shouldn't challenge decisions of officials-

Home field advantage is a phenomenon that just about everyone agrees with to some degree. The idea that teams are going to perform at a higher level when they are in a familiar, comfortable environment with a supportive crowd makes a great deal of sense. However, how that “supportive crowd” behaves can have a huge impact on the athletic contest.

Although we ask our athletes to try to block out outside distractions on game day and simply focus on their jobs, it is not always an easy thing to do. When a student-athlete is on the field and hears the fans loudly objecting to a call that was just made against him/her, it makes it much more difficult for that student-athlete to let it go- in essence, it makes the “three second rule” even tougher to carry out. As a player, when your classmates or parents are screaming about a call that went against you, it will do one of two things: embarrass you or empower you to challenge the call yourself. Either outcome is not productive. Both outcomes create a greater roadblock to getting back to the task at hand.

From an administrative point of view, most serious problems at high school sporting events (fights, ejections, etc) start with fans questioning calls. It causes a hostile environment that simply has no place in educational athletics.

Why our coaches shouldn't challenge decisions of officials-

If we look at it simply in practical terms, coaches arguing the calls of officials doesn't help your team win. In all of my 18 years associated with athletics at CHS, I have NEVER seen a referee change a significant call because a coach argued it. Bulldog coaches arguing with the decisions of officials only hurts the chances of the team winning. One could argue that by arguing the bad call, the coach is simply posturing to get future calls. My observations have proven to show a different result. Arguing calls only get the officials defensive and leads to more calls against your team. I can't tell you how many times over the years I've watched CHS coaches argue calls only to get more questionable calls against them as the game wears on. As a coach, I have seen it happen to me countless times. It just doesn't pay to argue.

The 2008-09 Boys Basketball team might provide the best example I've ever seen. After a game at Fairhaven last winter, when coach Michael Devoll and his staff were “all over the officials” in the first half, things got bad. Every call the rest of the game went against the Bulldogs (including a bench technical and a player ejection). The plethora of calls against the 'dogs that second half was obviously in some way related to the way in which our coaching staff had questioned early calls by the officials.

The best part of this example comes next. After evaluating his part in letting that game get out of control with the officials, coach Devoll instituted a new rule for himself, coaching staff, players and players' parents- NO ARGUING CALLS. It worked. I was at all but a couple of those last half a dozen games of the season and there was no whining coming from the Green and White toward the refs...and we clearly benefited with the calls from the officials. The teams with the coaches who were riding the officials got fewer of the difficult calls than we did. Not arguing calls actually led to the Bulldogs being treated very well by the officials.

The Bottom Line-

I hope this column has laid out why it is not advantageous for Bulldog athletes, fans or coaches to argue with the decisions of officials. But more important than it being in our best interest to treat the questionable calls of officials with respect, it is simply the

classy, sporting thing to do. Officials- like athletes and coaches- make mistakes. Making the right call is not always as easy as it looks from the vantage point of the athlete, coach or fan. If we want to represent Canton well to the other communities we face, we need to show the officials the respect that their hard work deserves. Sportsmanship must guide all of our actions. Let's work together towards this goal.

Go 'Dogs!