



you have **Seven**
Discretionary Powers
how many do you use
Effectively?

► According to longtime soccer official Bob Sumpter, one of the keys to successfully officiating high school soccer is to have a clear grasp of the seven discretionary powers officials have, and more importantly, when and how to use them.

By Bob Sumpter

Improving the ability of high school soccer referees to control player and participant behavior during interscholastic games is a continuing priority of both the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and of the National Intercollegiate Soccer Officials Association (NISOA). This notion of encouraging referees to understand the scope and impact on game control of their discretionary powers under the NFHS soccer rules can be a great help to all high school soccer referees.

How many high school soccer referees become serious-enough students of the game to be able to name the seven discretionary powers they have available to them to manage the games they officiate? Anyone who truly wants to achieve personal excellence at officiating high school games should have a clear grasp of these powers. Achieving excellence involves

knowing what your powers are, and more importantly, when and how best to use each to successfully manage a game. You have got to know and use all the "tools of your trade."

My way of listing those referee powers is in their order of increasing power and effect on the behavior of the players involved in the game. The seven in order are: Talk, Whistle, Advantage, Caution, Disqualify, Suspend and Terminate. As you can see, all except the first are clearly stated in the NFHS Soccer Rules Book.

Each can have a powerful effect on player behavior, and when used correctly, can assure a well-managed game for the referee.

1. TALK!

The right thing said to a player at the appropriate time can help avoid a problem later on.

We often advise each other to talk to players throughout the game to keep their behavior at an acceptable level. This power implies that we should consider talking to a player as a way of giving counsel, advice or verbal warning on how to control or improve behavior of the fields.

The first tip for a referee is to realize whether or not your past efforts in talking to players have yielded good results. If you analyze your experience and find that you are not very adept at what and how to say the right thing to help a player, then hold off until you discuss the technique with other fellow referees and think out how you might improve this skill.

Next, let me share a couple of examples of some things that have been used by successful referees which have worked.

The oldest example I can remember is one that I heard when I "ran the line" for Larry King. Larry was an NISOA ex-president, a top referee, a police lieutenant, and about as imposing of a 6-foot-4 figure on a soccer field as you can imagine. In one particular pro game, Larry decided to caution the star player about five minutes into it. When Larry approached the player, the star player began the customary dispute about the call, the caution and Larry's judgment. Larry calmly wrote up the caution in his notebook and when finished, looked at his watch and then said to the player, "Mr. 'X', you've just been cautioned, and according to my watch we're only a few minutes into the game. That means you have a long time to go on your good behavior if you want to stay in this game." With that, Larry restarted play and ran off, leaving the player to think over what he had just said. The player, a bit startled at the response, went on with play, and didn't cause any behavioral problems for the rest of the game. The result: the right advice, at the right time, and done effectively.

Another example is the general response to complaints from players of other team personnel when they have been whistled or penalized for particular fouls or misbehavior. Dissent is frequent in these potentially heated instances. More often than not, when a player complained about my penalizing his or her behavior, I often responded by saying, "If I allow you to do that, then I have to allow all of the other players on

the field to do the same and not be penalized, and in this game, I am not about to let that happen.” Again, more often than not, the player involved thought about the response and then “settled into the game” without further trouble.

One thing to remember about your discretionary power to talk to any player or team personnel is that no one expression or statement is a surefire cure for a control problem with a player. However, it will very often make the difference in helping a player to improve behavior and stay in the game.

2. WHISTLE!

When and how we use the whistle to stop play for rule infringements can have a real effect, either good or bad, on player behavior.

The judgment of when and what to whistle for is the first problem. In most cases, judging a foul, offense or misconduct is entirely subject to your discretion. It may seem that the words describing unfair play are equally well understood by all referees, but that is often not the case. Once you accept the fact that it's up to you to make the decision on each and every act, you then need to observe, discuss and practice recognizing the type of play that needs to be penalized for the sake of behavior control.

Another thought to mull over is that you have an obligation to call fouls and infringements as they occur. Many referees make the mistake of trying to avoid stopping the game for violations, because they fear too much whistling will interfere with the “flow” and “enjoyment” of the game. However, if you allow unfair play to take place without interceding by penalizing, you in effect encourage unfair play. That certainly also works against your game control.

One good way to develop a strong approach to handling fouls, offenses and misconduct is to realize that they all involve unfair play. In the end, the recognition of unfair play will boil down to a sense that you develop that tells you that this is an act that violates the rules, violates the sense of fair play and sportsmanship around which soccer is built, and also requires correction if a fair game is to be played out.

When you see an act and your senses tell you that it's unfair, that's your signal to whistle without hesitation, and to try to correct the behavior by the proper penalty.

As to the matter of whether to artificially limit the number of times you whistle in a game so as to not interfere too often, it's mostly up to how the players conduct themselves and whether you are also able to use your other discretionary powers to appropriately control behavior.

You have an obligation to enforce the rules and to ensure fair play. So long as you use your whistle to do so in a fair, objective, firm and consistent manner, you will be successful in using this discretionary power.

3. ADVANTAGE!

The application of advantage by the referee has always been a tricky technique. In recent years, it has become a bit

easier to use since the rules were changed to allow the referee to stop play in the event the advantage did not materialize. In the years prior to that change, once the referee had allowed advantage, the decision could not be nullified even if the advantage had not been realized.

There are a few suggestions about using advantage that make sense.

First, understand that once you allow advantage, you are essentially allowing unfair play to occur without penalizing it at that moment. If that happens too often in a game, the possibility of negative reactions by players who have been unfairly played against becomes probable. If the act allowed requires a subsequent caution or disqualification after the act, make sure that you penalize at the appropriate time.

A second thought is that when you allow an advantage, make absolutely sure that as many of the players as possible hear and see your call and indication of the advantage. That will avoid the feeling among players that you have either not seen the act, or that you did not recognize unfair play.

Another bit of advice is to remind you of the advice coined by Ken Aston, an international referee instructor of some renown. “Advantage should never become a license for foul play.” He wanted referees to recognize that if players got a sense that we would allow serious or violent unfair play without immediate penalty, there would be an inevitable breakdown in player behavior.

Learning to use this discretionary power properly can certainly help improve your ability to control player behavior.

4. CAUTION!

This is a fairly strong power for the high school referee to use. It essentially lets you not only penalize a player for unfair behavior, but more importantly, lets you advise the player that on a re-occurrence, the player will be sent out of the game and not allowed to participate.

Make sure that when you issue a caution, the player clearly understands that he or she is halfway out of the game, and that one more such act will complete the process. In getting this across to the player, be firm and clear about your action. Avoid using confrontational, threatening language or expressions, and keep the procedure and warning as short as possible. Be very clear that it is up to the player's future conduct whether or not he or she remains in the game afterward.

The power to caution is a formal power in that it requires you to use a specific procedure in cautioning the player involved (do so to the letter!). Also, be sure to prepare and submit the required postgame report. The postgame report is essential to help ensure that the appropriate school and/or game authority will not only be aware of the game problem, but will be able to consider whether or not follow-up administrative action is needed to correct long-term behavior.

Finally, what you say and how you say it is important. Once you get and record the player's name, number, team, time of occurrence, and type of misconduct, the only requirement is to inform the player that he or she is being cautioned,

the reason, and the fact that a recurrence will result in disqualification. It's best if the conversation stops at that point, and you get the game restarted as soon as possible.

5. DISQUALIFY!

This is the strongest power you have to use in disciplining individual players. As you know, it allows you to penalize a player by preventing that player from taking further part in the balance of the game.

The objective of a disqualification is to order the player off and see that the player leaves the field as quickly as possible.

Ejection requires that you follow a formal procedure in ordering the player off. Again, follow the procedure to the letter. Just as importantly, make sure that you prepare and submit the necessary postgame report.

The primary advice to the referee is to keep any conversation with the player involved to a minimum. Once you decide to disqualify, there is little need or value in any conversation.

The next important point is to make sure that the player does indeed leave the field so that no further problem is experienced. You indeed should not restart play until you see that the player has left.

6. SUSPEND!

This refers to your discretionary power to suspend play for any cause you decide justifies a delay.

In the context of this article on referee advice, we view the use of the power to suspend as it relates to player and team behavioral problems.

Should a game get to the point where poor player or team behavior have made the game dangerous to the participants, or it becomes obvious that your efforts at controlling player and team behavior at an acceptable level are not succeeding, you may decide to try to use a temporary suspension of play to restore the level of conduct and fair play to a satisfactory level.

The use of a temporary game suspension for conduct adjustment is a power not often employed. Consider carefully whether you believe that player conduct could really be improved by the use of this power. The overall conduct of both teams up to that point in the game will help you make a sensible decision.

A decision to suspend play might be taken after a number of cautions and disqualifications have not seemed to work.

Make clear to the team leadership that this is a last resort before considering a decision to terminate the game. Make equally sure they understand that in the interests of the game and the players involved, you will not hesitate to end the game. By explaining this clearly, there will be no misunderstanding on their part if you do have to decide to end the game prematurely because of unacceptable behavior.

No other conversation or warning is needed or advised.

7. TERMINATE!

This is the most powerful discretionary power you can exercise in a game. Essentially, you consider that the only course of action left in dealing with player or team misbehavior is to not allow the game to proceed to its normal end. In short, you send everybody home.

While an extreme action, it may be that in your refereeing career, you will have to decide to do so in a particular game because of coaches' lack of control over their players' and teams' behavior.

If that ever occurs, do not hesitate to terminate a game. If you judge that the players' and teams' safety is compromised beyond repair because of unacceptable behavior, then you should take immediate action. Your judgment is the best for all concerned, because you are the sole objective authority in the game. You are also responsible for player and team safety insofar as the level of behavior affects them.

If that point is reached, stop the play, clearly and briefly inform both coaches of your action, then leave the field and game site. No further conversation is needed or suggested as useful.

Of course, make sure to prepare and submit a written report. This is an ultimate responsibility for taking any required follow-up corrective action, which then rests with that authority.

SUMMARY

The seven methods of controlling player and team behavior discussed in this article are really the major powers that you are able to exercise. While some of these seven may be described in other terms, these cover the whole scope of your discretionary powers to control behavior.

The seven do require a good bit of discretion in their use. The advice given in this article is meant to encourage you to consider your role as referee in controlling behavior by considering and using these powers in order to get the best officiating result in your games.

It is hoped that as you reflect on these seven powers, and as you begin to share your perceptions and experiences with other qualified referees on their optimum use, the effort will help you achieve the level of officiating excellence that you have set as your personal goal in this avocation. **□□**

Soccer official photo provided by 20/20 Photographic, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

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