



PSYCHOLOGY OF BASKETBALL OFFICIATING

Dr. José María Buceta

INTRODUCTION

Mental functions are a key factor for high performance sport. Top performers in any sport, besides their athletic skills, show high levels of mental function most of the time, and in fact, many times, mental function is the difference between a good performance and an outstanding performance, between not achieving or, achieving athletic goals. Referees are also athletes and therefore their performance is also related to mental functioning.

As with other athletes such as the basketball players, international referees as well as having good officiating technique, good physical condition and enough experience, have developed throughout their career good psychological skills and so their mental functioning is probably very good most of the time. However, this is an area in which they can still improve, as it happens in the technical and the physical areas. Improving their psychological skills will help referees to enhance their performance, especially in those critical situations in which they might be overwhelmed.

During the clinics held in Spain and Italy in August and September, 2007, just before the EuroBasket and EuroBasket Women, a lecture on psychological functioning was included for the basketball referees who officiated in these events. The aim was to discuss some issues related to mental functioning that would help referees during and after the championships. Furthermore, during the last three days of the EuroBasket Women, a short follow-up took place to observe which aspects of the lecture had been more useful for the referees and also to obtain some practical feedback from the officials for the future.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE

Many psychological aspects may have an influence on performance. However, it is important to select and to organise those which are closely related. In general, motivation, stress, self-confidence, level of arousal, concentration, self-control and teamwork are the most important. Behind them, self-esteem, perfectionism and conformism, may be also relevant. These aspects were briefly discussed during the clinic lectures and will be widely developed through the FIBA Europe web site for referees and in future lectures.



WHAT DOES DEPEND ON ME, AND WHAT DOES NOT

A key aspect to strength motivation and self-confidence, and to prevent stress, is to distinguish between things which depend on me, and things which do not. It is a common mistake to waste energy thinking or blaming about things that do not depend on me, such as, for example, the nominations for the games or the evaluations made by the instructors. This creates an extra stress which is not good for our mental health and performance. Instead, it is much more worthwhile to focus on things that depend on me, such as being in good shape, resting properly and being ready for next game. Being able to distinguish between both categories (depends on me? yes/no) and to focus on things which depend on me, is a very important psychological skill to develop.

PLANNING THE CHAMPIONSHIP

Another important skill to strength motivation and self-confidence, and prevent excessive stress, is to make a personal plan for the championship (or for the whole season) focusing on things that depend on me.

A simple but very useful tool has three fields to be completed.

1. Main goals. Here, the referee needs to think carefully and to establish realistic goals. Everybody may like to be in the championship final, but is it realistic for me? Does it depend on me? If it is not realistic, I should find another goal. If it is, because it does not depend on me, I should focus on things that I might do (which depend on me) to have better chances to be in the final and these things should be my goals. During the follow-up made in Italy, some referees said that to establish realistic goals helped them a lot.
2. Main difficulties. Here, the referees should anticipate possible difficulties. This will help them to prevent any surprise if these difficulties finally arise.
3. Plan in the case of the difficulties. In this field, the purpose is to be ready in the case that the difficulties of the previous field appear. The referees will feel more self-confident by knowing that they have the tools to manage the difficulties if they arise.

Referees may acquire the habit of using this tool before the season, before a specific championship, and even before every game. This will help their psychological preparation.



VISUALIZATION

During these clinics we did a short visualization drill. One of the purposes of visualisation may be to help the individual preparation for a game. The referee may close his/her eyes and imagine the scene of his/her next game (court, players, etc.). Then, he/she may imagine him/herself on that scene officiating, focusing on specific key actions for that specific game. Rehearsing these actions through visualization will help some referees to centre their attention on the key aspects of the game, and to strengthen their self-confidence.

For some people, it is easy to visualize simple images. But for others, it is difficult, and the proper use of visualization requires some specific training. You may try to use visualization to rehearse the key actions for the next game on the previous day, but if you find difficult to have clear images, or you feel lack of control over the images, it is better no to use this strategy until you have had the appropriate training.

OPTIMUM LEVEL OF AROUSAL

The best performance is more likely to appear when the athlete experiences his/her optimum level of arousal. Arousal refers to the level of general activation of the organism (physical and mental activation). The optimum level of arousal is a state of flow in which the athlete is able to perform at his/her best, without conscious effort. In such a state, he/she perceives, decides and reacts with accuracy, confidence and the proper amount of physical energy. Athletes' best performances have been made in their state of optimum arousal. Under and over this optimum level, performance diminish. Lack of arousal impairs concentration and mobilization of energy. Excess of arousal narrows concentration too much, and provokes either impulsivity or inhibition. Both negatively affect perception, decision-making, reaction-timing and physical execution, so impairing performance. Referees on their optimum level of arousal will officiate at their best, whereas referees underaroused or overaroused will officiate worse.

Each referee, should look for, and find out, his/her optimum level of arousal. Then he/she should assess if he/she is at that level. And if he/she is not, he/she should use some strategy to reach it. In this case, if he/she is underaroused, he/she should do something to increase his/her deficient level of arousal. But if he/she is overaroused, he/she should do something to decrease his/her excessive level of arousal.

As a practical drill to improve in this aspect, first think about your best performances and try to identify your level of arousal on those occasions (try to remember your sensations of arousal). Then determine your optimum level of arousal by using a scale of 1-10 points, in which 1 is the minimum and 10 is the maximum arousal. Some referees may find that, for example, their optimum level of arousal is between 7 and 8, or somewhere around 8.5. Others may find their optimum level about 6. This is an individual subjective measure and therefore, the level of arousal of one referee can not be compared with the



International Basketball
Federation

FIBA
EUROPE

We Are Basketball

European
Zone

arousal of another. What is important is that every referee learns to identify, assess and modify his/her own level of arousal. The second step is to think about strategies that in the past may have helped you to self-regulate your level of arousal, either increasing a too low level or decreasing a too high level. Most international referees will find strategies that have successfully functioned for them in the past.

The concept of optimum level of arousal was very well received for many referees who attended the clinics held in Spain and Italy. In the follow-up, many highlighted this aspect as one of the most useful.

PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES RELATED TO AROUSAL

For some referees it was also interesting to identify their level of arousal with specific psychological states. This helped them to assess their arousal and to decide if they needed to increase it, decreased it, or maintained it. Two 'stairs' of adjectives referring to psychological states were proposed, from the lowest to the highest arousal (see the tables attached). Some referees identified their optimum level of arousal somewhere between 'comfortable' and 'anxious'. Many agreed that too much comfortable was under the optimum level, and too much anxious was over. Many recognised occasions in which they had been 'over relaxed' or, at the other extreme, 'worry' or even 'panicky'. Some also recognised the state of 'angry' or 'embittered', showing an excessive level of arousal that impaired their performance.

The drill here, consists on establishing your own optimum level of arousal around the different adjectives, so when a specific psychological state appear, it be easier to recognise if the associated arousal is the optimum level, or it is under or over the optimum.

DURING THE GAME

The psychological preparation should aim to begin the game with the optimum level of arousal. Furthermore, it is necessary to accept that during the game, things will occur that might affect the optimum level of arousal and therefore, interfere with good officiating. To anticipate these interferences and planning a strategy to control them are very useful psychological skills.

Among these possible interferences, the referees highlighted their own mistakes. For many of them, making a mistake may negatively affect their level of arousal and their concentration, impairing their officiating performance. Some commented that some mistakes provoke from them, negative thoughts during the course of the game, distracting their concentration from the present play. It is obvious that mistakes should be properly managed, so they do not adversely affect good officiating.



International Basketball
Federation

FIBA
EUROPE

We Are Basketball

European
Zone

In order to control the negative impact of mistakes, it is important, in first place, to accept that own mistakes are part of the game, as they are for the players and the coaches. So, it is not realistic to think that 'I may officiate without mistakes'. When a mistake arises, the referee should be ready to accept it as a normal part of his/her job. Thus, the mistake will be less stressful and will have a lesser impact on arousal and concentration.

Further, it may be very useful to have a strategy that can be applied quickly, to break immediately the link between the mistake and the negative impact, and instead, to favour the referee's attention on the present play. Some international referees attending these clinics, mentioned successful strategies that they have sometimes used, such as hitting their thigh with one hand, or using appropriate self-talk. We widely discussed about self-talk, since this is a very valuable tool to gain self-control. In the case of mistakes, referees should prepare energetic key words to direct their attention immediately to the present play (for example: 'position!', 'focus!', 'run!', etc.), and key constructive sentences for the periods in which the game is stopped, such as time outs and so (for example: 'relax!, it was only a mistake!, they are part of the game, what is important now is the rest of the game, focus on technique!'). Key quick words are excellent for periods in which the game is on, and key sentences for periods in which the game is stopped. A very good drill is to think about this issue and to select the key words and sentences that may be more useful for you.

ASSESSMENT AFTER THE GAME

Another aspect discussed during these lectures, was the self-assessment of the game. Very often, athletes spend hours to think and think about their performance without a useful method. Instead, it is more appropriate to use a simple tool as the one presented in these clinics. After-game self-evaluation should cover two fields:

1. 'Constructive analysis of the officiating', in which the referee should think about 'good' and 'deficient' things, always in a constructive way to improve (Self-blame or blaming others is not constructive. It is important to accept mistakes and good things as a way to keep improving).
2. 'Lessons learned', in which he/she should adopt some useful conclusions, both for the next game and for his/her whole career.

Self-assessment is a very important aspect for a referee to grow. In a European championship it is a key factor to 'close' the last game and be ready for the next. In any championship it is very relevant for experience. Good self-assessment will enrich experience and will help the referee's growth.



TEAM WORK

The importance of team work in officiating was highlighted during these clinics, and many referees said that this was a very interesting part of the lecture. Referees are individual athletes when they practice, but they must work as a team when they officiate games. As in any other team focused on high performance, the first step is to accept that you are not on your own, that you need your team mates and they need you, that regardless your personal preferences, you have to coordinate your effort with the effort of your team mates.

As a member of the officiating team, you do not select your team mates (this does not depend on you), so it is worthless to waste time thinking on your preferences. The best team mates are the ones who have been nominated for that particular game (since other candidates finally are not in the team for that occasion), and your job is to collaborate with them to facilitate their job, so, reciprocally, you may get the best from them to help yours.

Informal knowledge of your team mates will help to create the appropriate team building before the game. Talk with them about issues aside basketball, try to build a good relationship based on respect. It is not necessary to be good friends, but a minimum polite closed relationship is essential to make the team mates comfortable and to develop positive feelings. A second step is to discuss about officiating, mentioning personal aspects, preferences and, perhaps, weak points, including pre-game and half-time routines and any other aspect that you find relevant. This will help team work on court. Of course, it is a key factor to prepare together for the game, discussing the specific characteristics of that particular game, and also to understand the kind of support that your team mates may need after making mistakes or under critical situations (some may prefer a positive comment from team mates, others just a friendly signal, others just nothing, etc.).

CONCLUSIONS

These two experiences show the importance of psychological aspects in the preparation of basketball referees. Although most of them mentally function at a high level most of the time, there are aspects in which it is still possible to improve by adding new knowledge and specific skills. Therefore, this is an area to care about in order to help the whole preparation of basketball referees. Further, as it was shown during informal meetings at the end of the championship in Italy, psychological support and advice from a sport psychologist may be an interesting option in this kind of intensive competition, in which referees live together for a period of time. Many psychological needs may arise throughout the championship, and referees may benefit from appropriate professional help to keep strong their motivation and self-confidence, to manage stress, to prepare properly for every game, and to obtain the best from the experience.