

The Coach and Official **by Don Hart, Officials Chair**

The roles of the coach and official have the potential to cause conflict on the pool deck. Many people think about that interaction when they think of these two roles. There are instances where a difference of opinion, particularly with respect to judgement calls, comes into play. However, the opportunity exists for many more positive relationships in the interactions of coaches and officials. Promoting positive communication is an absolute key to generating the healthy environment needed to avoid problems and to reinforce coaching observations?

In USA Swimming, the predominant population of officials are volunteers who find officiating a rewarding and valuable way to contribute to the development of the young people in athletics. Their approach is to be professional in executing the job of an official. Officiating is necessary in the sport to provide the consistency for fairness in competition. Training programs are provided by the LSC's for their officials. Progression through certification levels is established to test rule knowledge and understanding. These are typically combined with deck observation by qualified officials and the provision of specialized training clinics. The national officials committee provides materials, leadership training and focused direction for the LSC's officials' chairman.

Sound officiating provides positive feedback and a feeling of accomplishment. Encouragement in developing the LSC officials cadre by the coaching community is essential to ensure the competence needed is continually being developed. It takes time and practice to develop the skills and consistently apply those skills.

At most meets there are four general types of officiating positions. These are the referee, the starters, the stroke and turn judges and the timers. Sometimes these responsibilities are assigned to other positions depending on the size and complexity of the meet. These positions could include an administrative referee, deck referee, chief judge, clerk of course, announcer, marshal and timing system operator. The referee should explain the pertinent roles of these positions at a "coach's" or general meeting prior to the competition. If a coach has any question on the assigned responsibilities he should ask the referee.

The starters, stroke and turn judges and timers execute specific duties as defined by the rules and assigned to them by the referee. For instance, the starter determines if the start is fair or if there is a false start. The determination of a false start requires confirmation by the referee, or designated assistant referee, so this critical call requires two people to independently agree. A similar approach is typically used for relay take off where there is dual confirmation. The stroke and turn judge, within their assigned jurisdiction, observes the swimmers and reports any non-conformance to the rules as a disqualification.

Because of the seriousness of a disqualification to the swimmer each official is trained to two critical principles.

“Every swimmer receives the benefit of the doubt – the judge must be certain the observation is a violation of the rules.”

“ The rules of swimming define fairness so it is the responsibility of each official to protect all swimmers from the competitor who does not comply with the rules.”

The exercise of these two principles ensures fairness, balance and competence in officiating.

So what happens when a coach finds that one of their swimmers has been disqualified or a circumstance has occurred requiring some additional review or action? The meet referee should have covered the basics in the general meeting for how to handle these situations and who to direct them to. If a deck referee is utilized that referee is charged with the conduct of that specific swim. The deck referee has full authority to address the application of a rule. The administrative referee is responsible for various administrative matters such as entries, seeding, scoring, and results. The meet referee is responsible for the conduct of the entire competition. The referees are the appropriate individuals to address coaching questions that arise in their area. Directing questions to a stroke and turn judge or a starter is not appropriate unless the request is coming through the referee. From a coaching perspective it is desirable to direct the request to an individual who can decide; that is the referee. Secondly the starter or stroke and turn judge must direct their attention to the next event which is in competition.

When the coach interacts with a referee what should the coach expect and what are the critical issues to address? First the referee is looking for a way to not penalize the swimmer and yet treat all swimmers fairly within the rules. Even when emotions run high because a disappointing result occurs, the referee will listen carefully to a case made, investigate to determine the facts and decide based on what the rules allow. The referee will recognize that in many instances that they are often the “court of last resort” and will be objective in their decisions. This capability is based on the referee’s authority specified in the rules as follows:

- Shall have full authority over all officials
- Shall enforce all applicable rules
- Shall decide all questions relating to the meet
- Can overrule any meet official on a point of rule interpretation
- Can overrule on a judgement decision which the referee personally observes
- Shall disqualify a swimmer for an violation of the rules the referee personally observes

In addressing an issue the referee will be satisfied that the following items have been correctly addressed.

1. What was the rule violation – what was observed?
2. Was the official in the correct position?
3. Was the decision within the official’s jurisdiction?

This may take a few minutes to investigate so patience is necessary. The referee will communicate back to the coach on the specific issues raised. In conducting these discussions the coach can use some successful approaches.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure the referee understands you are the athlete’s coach • Be timely in bringing issues to the referee • Stay as calm and objective as possible – firmness and assertiveness are expected behaviors • Question the rule violated and understand the application • Ask the referee if they observed the violation • Use the rulebook to address the specific issue • Make your case based on specific interpretation • If the issue is meet specific raise the question based on the content of the meet information • If there was an extenuating circumstance or event bring it to the referee’s attention for investigation • If you believe that all requirements have been met by the athlete or his representative (coach) state that and why you believe it is true • Ask questions in the general meeting on the conduct of the meet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protest a judgement call based solely on your disagreement with the officials judgement • Do not display unsportsmanlike conduct – it only hinders the case • Do not spend a lot of time questioning judgement calls requiring independent confirmation once you know two independent people participated (e.g. false starts, relay take-off) • Do not attempt to delay competition once a decision has been made.

As can be seen there are many positive ways a coach can obtain a fair resolution to areas where there are questions. Effective communication is the key to successfully resolving questions or concerns. Sound officiating, based on rule application and impartial observation should reinforce the principles a coach has been teaching to the swimmers. By strengthening the relationship between coach and official the overall swimming program will show continued growth and improvement.