



# Gamesmanship: How to keep players, coaches and fans from effecting your on-ice judgment

What exactly is “gamesmanship” and why is it important for hockey officials?

The formal definition of gamesmanship is: **“the use of dubious (although not technically illegal) methods to win or gain a serious advantage in a game or sport.”** (Wikipedia)

If you’ve officiated a game, you’ll know that players, coaches and even fans will engage in gamesmanship from time to time, in order to gain an advantage for their team. Unfortunately, this kind of behavior can undermine the performance of even the best referees. It is every official’s responsibility to minimize the instances and impact of gamesmanship by discouraging it where possible, and penalizing it when absolutely necessary.

Here are three examples of gamesmanship in hockey, strategies for prevention, and a definition of the point at which it becomes a penalty.

## **1/ Faking an injury**

A referee must assume that any player lying on the ice – either motionless or writhing in pain – has a bona fide injury and may require medical attention. Still, most referees understand that some players will fake an injury to achieve a stoppage in play, prevent a scoring chance or draw an unwarranted penalty.

- How do I prevent this behavior? Follow Hockey Canada guidelines and allow play to continue until the injured player’s team gains possession of the puck. Or, allow a scoring chance to conclude before stopping play. Remember, you should always stop play immediately where you have reason to believe a player is genuinely and seriously injured.
- When does this behavior become a penalty? Players that fake injuries have “tells” – small signs that give away the fact they were never really hurt. Watch for players that return quickly from what appeared to be serious injuries. Or, players that fall down at the slightest contact, and stay down until the whistle blows, over and over again.

## **2/ Players and Coaches that try to get “inside your head”**

We’ve all been involved in this conversation at one time or another:

“Mr. Referee, I am concerned that you are not calling [*insert penalty*]. Please watch for [*same penalty*].” Regardless of the individual’s intent, this is a classic bit of gamesmanship, and an attempt to sway the referee’s decision making.

- How do I prevent this behavior? Focus on calling ***impact penalties*** (page 2-11 and 2-12 of the HCOP/link to wpgrefs.com page). This will ensure that you are avoiding the “cheap” calls that tend to aggravate players, coaches and fans. It will also ensure you have established a clear baseline for acceptable behavior on the ice. If someone tries to get in your head, or influence the way you are calling the game, respond politely and thank them for bringing the issue to your attention. Store that information for future reference but NEVER lose focus on calling *impact penalties*.
- When does this behavior become a penalty? This becomes a penalty if someone confronts you in an emotional or melodramatic manner, and makes a spectacle of his or herself in front of the whole arena. Or, if a player or coach continues to make the same point over and over again despite warnings that the message was received.

### **3/ Ignoring or manipulating the line change procedure**

Visiting teams must complete their line change first, and have only five seconds to make substitutions. However, many visiting teams attempt to short circuit the line change procedure by ignoring the referees signals, and sending out players at the very last moment. This is a potentially problematic strategy that can aggravate opposing coaches and turn up the temperature of the entire game.

- How do I prevent this behavior? Stick closely to the Hockey Canada line change procedure, and immediately discourage coaches from any behavior that seeks to undermine this important process. Do not hesitate to send players back to their bench if a coach has attempted to make a late change.
- When does this behavior become a penalty? This type of gamesmanship is always outside the rules, unless the referee is not doing line change procedure, or is only doing it during some stoppages in the play. Do your line change at every stoppage, caution coaches about abusing the process, and penalize those coaches that repeatedly ignore your direction.

There are other types of gamesmanship not covered in this article such as icing the puck for a line change and shooting the puck into the other teams net at the end of warm-up. Referees will not be able to deal with all instances of gamesmanship, but we should all be aware that hockey is a competitive pursuit, and players, coaches and even fans will try all kinds of things to gain an advantage.

Good officials will be able to recognize gamesmanship when it occurs, discourage coaches and players from engaging in that kind of behavior, and penalize it when necessary.