Referees Admitting Mistakes: Survey Results and Analysis

If you've been to an NHL game, you've probably seen it happen.

There's a quick whistle at the net with the puck still visible and in play. The official is typically on the wrong side of the play and unable to see the loose puck. Without hesitation, the referee will tap himself on the chest – the international signal in professional hockey for 'that was my fault. That was on me.'

Let's face it – a hockey game is fertile ground for making mistakes. From applying the wrong rule in the situation, to not being in position to see a goal, or perhaps even something mundane like waving off an icing that should have been called. In the course of every game, every official makes mistakes. Some small, and some rather large.

However, do officials at lower levels of hockey adopt the same willingness to admit mistakes that top-level officials do? Wpgrefs.com decided to find out directly from referees what they think of making and admitting mistakes.

In an online survey, respondent referees were very confident about one thing: all referees at one time or another make mistakes or errors in judgment. Out of 43 responses, not a single referee believed that he or she never makes mistakes. In fact, 32 (74 per cent) strongly agreed that all referees make mistakes.

If we accept that mistakes are part of the job, how do we feel about admitting them?

Respondents were asked if admitting a mistake is a sign of weakness. Only three referees felt that the admission was a sign of weakness. Nearly three quarters of all respondents believed that it was NOT a sign of weakness.

Okay, then does admitting a mistake help you build better relationships with players, coaches and spectators? Again, the feeling among respondents was quite clear: three quarters believed or strongly believed that admitting mistakes helps build better relationships.

What about overall game management? Does admitting mistakes help or hurt our ability to manage the game to ensure that it is fair and safe? Only one official believed that admitting mistakes hampered game management; more than 80 per cent of respondents felt it was a net positive.

"…one official believed that admitting mistakes hampered game management…80 per cent…felt it was a net positive."

So, it appears the majority of referees in Winnipeg are ready to take responsibility for their mistakes, and believe that admitting them is good for relationship building and overall game management. That leaves the prickly questions of how and when.

Survey respondents offered a wide-variety of situations and conditions under which admitting mistakes was a good idea. And some situations where it might complicate our jobs.

Many officials who responded to the survey felt that their ability to admit mistakes was largely determined by how reasonable coaches and players were during the game. “If I’m comfortable with the person I’m taking to, it’s a good time to show them we are human and we all make mistakes.”

Said another official: “Typically, I will admit a mistake if it’s early in the game before any contentious issues.” Several others suggested that the best time to admit a mistake was after a game, when emotions were much lower.

Others felt that it was appropriate to make in-game admissions at any time when it is clear that something has gone wrong. “I admit mistakes when it is blatantly obvious.”

Some respondents said it is equally important to admit mistakes to the other officials you are working with. “Admitting mistakes to your referee team and talking about it will help all officials involved in an incident learn from it and become better officials.”

The big question is – how and when do you admit mistakes to get the best result?

Mark Alward, Hockey Winnipeg’s vice president of officials, said mistakes should – if possible – be admitted at the first available opportunity. This will help an official keep a lid on explosive emotions and frustration from a coach who has taken issue with a particular call.

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“Owning up as soon as possible is the best policy,” Alward said. “I think we need to stress to all officials that the purpose of admitting mistakes on the ice is to show people we are human, that we make mistakes.”

That having been said, Alward noted that many mistakes are not detected until the end of a period or after a game, when the officials can confer with each other.

If concerns have been raised by a player or coach about a particular call, it’s a good idea to get input from your partner or crew to verify that you made the right call (or non-call as the case may be) or that you applied a rule correctly, Alward said.

It’s also a good idea to use these quiet moments to review your knowledge of the rules. “Whenever there has been a contentious or disputed call, good officials know that a few minutes spent reviewing the rulebook is time well spent,” Alward said. “Even the most seasoned referees need to double check rules from time to time. If you’re unsure about the specifics of any rule, review the rulebook.”

Sometimes, you will have an opportunity to admit a mistake during the game, particularly if a coach is asking for an explanation of a call or non-call, he said. Otherwise, (we want to discourage officials from talking before a flood) after a flood and before play has resumed is an

excellent time to reach out to a coach and let them know that, after careful review, you realized that a mistake had been made.

There are times, however, when it may make sense to hold off on approaching a coach to admit a mistake. Alward said that if a coach is extremely agitated, you might need to wait before starting a conversation.

“…Don’t make a bad situation worse by forcing a coach into having a conversation that he or she isn’t prepared to have.”

“As is the case with many decisions during the game, the decision about when to admit a mistake is a discretionary call by the official,” Alward said. “Sometimes, even if you have the best of intentions, some coaches won’t want to hear what you have to say. In those instances where the emotional level of a coach is high, have your conversation with a captain. Don’t make a bad situation worse by forcing a coach into having a conversation that he or she isn’t prepared to have.”

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