



Referee Harassment: Situation Room #2: Everything that could happen...

Part 1: The Incident

Prior to the first game of the second half the timekeeper informed me that this game had potential to be violent. The game involved a player who was playing his first game against the team who cut him immediately prior to the Christmas break. Numerous factors made the situation worse such as parental uncertainty as to why the young man had been cut, the young man not have been a liked teammate, and the teams had a history of rough play. Unfortunately, a general situation of race stigma and stereotypes made the situation worse.

The game occurred as the time keeper had warned. We ejected three fans in the first period for yelling at the officials. In the second period we assessed a gross misconduct to a player (for taunting the fans) and asked another fan to (do us a favour) and leave after she became a "lightning rod" for yelling at both team's parents to stop harassing the officials. During the same play stoppage that this fan was asked to leave another fan opened the gate and yelled at the officials simultaneous to fans yelling at each other. This was the end of the second period. We had ejected 3 fans, asked one fan to do us a favour and exit the arena, assessed one gross misconduct, one misconduct, and 17 minor penalties.

During the second intermission the linespeople and I decided that we would separate the parents to either side of the empty space in the bleachers. Prior to the third period we spoke with the coaches of both teams and quietly asked any parents seated in that space to move.

In the third period the entire atmosphere changed. I called four penalties. The pace of play picked up. The fans cheered; no harassment of each other or the officials. The visitors took a 2-goal lead into the final minute of play. The home team tied the game with goals at 37 and 16 seconds remaining. The visitors won the game in a shoot out. It was the best period of hockey I had witnessed that season.

Part 2: What the referee thought

There are three questions I asked myself after this game:

1. When should a fan be ejected from the game?
2. When does removing a fan act as detriment to your goal of a fair and safe game?
3. What did we do in this case that was different from other games I had officiated?

The answers I gave myself were:

1. This is not black and white. A small minority of fans will say a lot of things that are terrible; most will not. However, I concluded that fans that negatively impact the game should be removed from the arena. The fan who says "oh come on!"

- once or twice and to no one in particular is probably not negatively impacting the game. The fan who yells at the referee continuously with all of his or her energy probably is negatively impacting the game. The fan who says something derogatory is negatively impacting the game. ***The moment that the fan makes the game about him or herself rather than the kids is the moment that the fan truly cross the line and needs to leave.***
2. This is also not black and white. There have been times in my officiating life that I have ejected fans and regretted the action. I have noticed that ***if you eject a fan that has not truly crossed the line*** the other fans may regard you as power hungry leading to increased anger. Furthermore, ejecting a fan is a detriment if you follow him or her (or stare at them) as the fan leaves the rink. Eject the fan, then move away and let the fan leave; this reduces the perception of a power trip.
 3. This is a tough question to answer. The easy answer is that we created a visual buffer zone between the fans for the third period; that was our last act before everything calmed down. However, we also communicated with the coaches and team officials before the third period. We may have also just gotten lucky. However, the excellent third period was probably a ***combination of luck, choices made by officials, and choices made by fans.***

Part 3: Analysis

The Good

- The communication between the officials and the timekeeper in being prepared.
- Ejecting fans who were harassing the officials early in the game.
- Engaging the coaching staffs between periods 1 & 2 as the coaches were not part of the problem.
- Having an open mind to the game being “normal” in period 3 and the referee not over reacting in the third.

The Bad

- Engaging with the fans is always risky. In this case, the officials got lucky and the fans they engaged agreed to move.
- Although needed, the removal of a fan who was trying to support the referees. Sometimes the right thing to do is not clearly a good thing. In this case it was bad but the right choice.
- The referees did not ask the rink attendant for help.

The Ugly

- Racism, stigma, and prejudice surrounding this game that the officials could not control.
- Fans harassing each other. Fans opening the gate to yell at the referee.
- The entire context of a player being cut from Team A on December 23 and playing on Team B against Team A on January 2.