
Disclaimer: wpgrefs.com would like to thank Dan Lett of the Winnipeg Free Press for freely sharing his following article with wpgrefs.com. Note that the following does not necessarily reflect the view of Hockey Winnipeg or wpgrefs.com.

Dan Lett

NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION

October 17, 2023: The idiots' guide to talking to hockey referees

By Dan Lett

To follow "Not for Attribution", Dan Lett's Newsletter, please [sign up here](#)

As many loyal readers know, I referee hockey. And I love it.

No, really.

If you love hockey, it's the best seat in the house. It's great exercise, although it's tough on the body.

It's also a huge challenge, as I am reminded every season.

Case in point: while refereeing a U18 game (teams, league and identities of the coaches have been changed to protect the badly behaved) I assessed a penalty for charging. The player involved started on one side of the ice, took about 12 long, urgent strides to get up to speed, lined up a player on the boards on the other side of the ice, and after he passed the puck, approached from the victim's blind side and delivered a thunderous check.

Arm goes up. Whistle blows. Coach loses his mind.

As the player is on his way to the penalty box, a coach from the penalized team yells: "That was a clean bodycheck!"

Nope, not even close. There were three reasons why this was a penalty.

No player is allowed more than two strides to build up speed to deliver a hit. Even if you glide into the hit, if you've taken 12 steps to build up top speed, it's charging.

No player is allowed to deliver any form of hit from a player's blind spot. Imagine a straight line running from shoulder to shoulder; deliver the hit from an angle behind that line and you've delivered what is now known as a "blind-side" hit. And it's a penalty.

Finally, in this case, the puck was long gone when the hit came. For all fans who love hockey players to "finish their checks," the rules state that you get about a stick-length grace to finish after the puck is gone. At full speed, that is barely a second between release of the puck and hit.

When all is said and done, it's really hard to believe someone coaching hockey at this level wouldn't have accidentally absorbed some of this knowledge. But most coaches do not understand the rules or why officials make most calls. In fact, for reasons that are completely beyond me, in certifying coaches, Hockey Canada does not put them through a rules test.

Given that coaches don't know the rules, they're going to need explanations from the officials. That's all good and fine, except that most coaches (at all levels of hockey) seem to be oblivious on how to have a productive conversation with an official.

Even in the NHL.

There is an [excellent story](#) posted right now on *The Athletic* about the NHL's attempts to curb the profanity and abuse coaches hurl at officials. The bottom line? Most coaches believe good referees a) let them blow off steam every once in a while, and b) engage in constructive conversations.

The article is not wrong. Officials have to allow a bit of anger to vent or it builds up and then you've forced a coach to make the walk of shame from the bench to the arena parking lot in front of all the parents. But to get a ref to talk with you, and avoid ejection, you have to understand the ground rules.

In an effort to help out all the hockey coaches, here is my super-simple, three-point guide to talking to hockey referees.

- **Use the *Jeopardy!* approach to talking with referees: express every concern in the form of a question.** It rarely goes well if a coach tries to “tell” an official what a bad job they are doing. Don’t say, “That call was bullsh—.” Try “Could you tell me what you saw in that hit?” Or the close cousin, “What did my player do to earn that penalty?” And, if you can, sound like you really want to hear the answer.

- **Start with an assumption that you don’t know the rules.** Because you don’t. Very few coaches have a really good grasp of rules. For all the other coaches, if you are coaching and want to learn more, Hockey Canada has [great resources online](#), including videos and a rule book app. Or ask your referee-in-chief to explain particularly confusing rules.

- **Get down off the bench, go down to the end away from the players, and — particularly if the referee is a lot younger than you — do not yell.** For any conversation between an official and a coach to be productive, it has to be respectful. Standing on the bench and yelling down at a ref, particularly younger refs, is just not on. Remember, there is no bad or missed call that is bad enough to warrant a tantrum.

Most coaches will, after being reminded of the need for civil discourse during the game, behave properly. For those of you who simply cannot be civil, there’s always the walk of shame.