

## 6 Qualities That Get You Respect

In a business environment, you know the people you don't like to work with. You know the laggards, the braggers and the ones who shove daggers in your back. You see one of those individuals you don't respect walking down the hallway and you turn around and go the other way.

Similarly, there are sports officials we are unhappy to see arrive at the court or field as our partners. With others we're overjoyed when their names appear on contracts. Partners and supervisors both recognize there are special qualities in the respected officials that make us have that elated reaction. Those special officials are "known" — they bring out a positive feeling from officials and coaches alike when they show up for a game.

Pati Rolf had an interesting "light bulb" moment when it came to the issue of earning respect as an official as she transitioned from an NCAA Division I volleyball head coaching position at Marquette University to her current position as one of the top volleyball officials in the NCAA women's game and internationally. As a coach, she gave respect — "everyone deserves it." Yet once she started officiating, she found coaches who told her she needed to "earn it." There is a side of becoming a top official, the one who is sought by partners, assigners and coaches, "that you have to earn. It comes with time. You have to develop respect," she said.

One of the challenges, Rolf said, is the amount of time it takes to create a body of work. "People need to see you work, but you also need the experience," she said, and the two can be in conflict. Experience frames many of the qualities in solid officials. You don't usually, for example, develop a calming influence or become great game managers without learning it somewhere. Officials develop from making mistakes, listening to mentors and supervisors and going to camps. From those experiences, officials become recognized and noticed in a positive way. You're not just the official taking assignments for a paycheck, showing up at game time and throwing your shirt on, then blasting out of the arena immediately afterward.

You also don't have to be the official who works all of the top assignments to be a welcomed sight at a game. Here are some qualities that top supervisors and officials claim set the respected apart from the rest.

### A Calm Demeanor

Having a calming influence may sound like an odd job description for a sports official. Maybe more for a psychologist or negotiator. But if you query enough knowledgeable individuals in touch with sports officiating, you'll find that quality rising to the top. When it's explained, it makes sense. You need to have an inner calm yourself to project that onto the game. If you remain calm, your partners pick up on that. Your presence also affects

the participants. The nature of sports is frequently emotional, and the ability to keep your calm ensures the game is maintained under control. With coaches, given the potential volatility in contests, your ability to remain calm ensures a better relationship with them when you need it to resolve tense situations.

“That builds trust with the teams and players,” Rolf said. “Respect is like a puzzle, and you have to put the pieces together. It’s not just about knowing the rules.”

Last year, Rolf estimated she officiated more than 500 volleyball matches. That’s a lot of coaches to deal with. Some were emotional. “You have to stay calm and listen,” she said, bringing up an example of a coach in a match who was known for getting worked up. Beyond his personality, Rolf had to deal with a language barrier. “I used gestures to indicate I was listening to him and that slowed him down.” She was able to indicate to him that he had a good question and she would check on an answer for him. “I told him it was a great question.”

After resolving the situation calmly, the coach said, “I get really nervous,” Rolf recalled. “How funny is that? That a coach feels nervous asking a question. Players and coaches should feel comfortable coming to us.”

Tom Eades, who has officiated NCAA Division I men’s basketball for more than 25 years, always appreciates the partner who handles himself well.

A struggle for newer officials working into the higher levels of their sport is knowing when to stay silent, according to Eades, who said that includes knowing when to avoid confrontations, and how to address a situation in a calming way.

“The really good umpires are virtually unflappable,” said George Drouches, NCAA national coordinator of baseball umpiring and former Division III coordinator. “You can tell the guys who want to be there. They have fun, are calm and relaxed and exude a quiet leadership about them. They don’t get unraveled.”

When you watch teams on the field, said Craig Cress, ASA/USA Softball executive director, “they have a calmness because of how an official comes on the field. As the assigner, you see that in your officials because it is how they’ve excelled. You do your due diligence on evaluating the officials, but the reactions of the coaches and players confirm your view.”

The longer an official is evaluated in game situations, the greater your confidence in them, according to Cress. Unorthodox plays can prove to be a problem, but they can also help build your confidence in the official, if handled properly, he added. “Ho hum games don’t prove if they can handle tough situations.”

Cress combines that calmness with an “eagerness to learn and a feel for the game” as a combination that is extremely important. “You don’t want uptight people who overapply the rules. It’s how and why you apply them. Feel for the game is extremely important.”

“If you are exceptional at the fundamentals, that calms everyone down,” said Billy Van Raaphorst, who umpired professional baseball and worked his first College World Series last year. “Things might get goofy, but strong fundamentals help you prepare and address those situations. It’s how coaches start to trust you.

“It’s not that you won’t have a problem if you have stone cold fundamentals, but when you do face a tough situation, there’s nothing you can’t handle.”

### Approachability

Along with having a calming presence, being approachable was another quality listed for officials who get noticed in a positive way. From the situation with the coach in the example above, Rolf was accessible and approachable, something that gave the coach a comfort zone with her. “It’s something that elevates you and gives you a rapport with your team,” she said.

Think about those times when you are happy to see your partner. Part of that is because he or she is approachable — you “want” to go up and interact with that person. Rolf said she noticed the importance of that quality and started patterning her behavior to emphasize it after a bad coaching experience. “I will never treat someone the way I was treated,” she said of the situation. Instead, she chooses to mentor others and goes out of her way to room with officials she doesn’t know while on the road so they can build better camaraderie. After a tough match, that’s the person you seek out.

Drouches phrases this quality a bit differently, using an “attraction vs. promotion” term. Basically, the officials who are known and respected have that extra something. People are attracted to them. Rather than having to “promote” themselves, people want to come to them — they attract others because of who they are, their personalities, how they handle themselves on and off the field.

“It goes back even behind the scenes. Those are the guys who are the mentors — they understand they only get to keep what they give away. Coaches and other officials can see through the selfpromoting guys. You want the attraction qualities — calm, selfless, unflappable, quietly in control and everyone just knows it,” Drouches said.

“I like working with other officials who are fun to be around and are good guys,” Eades explained. “You have to be around them in the car, dressing room, the game and afterward, so it’s important you are comfortable and get along. It takes me about five minutes to figure someone out the first time I meet him.

“Do the work the right way and don’t slack. Ego is the one thing that kills more officials. You don’t want to be the type of guy no one wants to hang around. You recognize that type of guy by how he treats other people,” Eades added.

Danny Mascorro, a college baseball umpire whose priority conference is the Pac-12, said an official’s natural personality often works into their approachability. “When you’re approachable, you listen, respect others and their opinions,” Mascorro said. “That brings you respect in return.

“It’s hard to lose that reputation once you’ve built it up, but you only get one opportunity to make a positive first impression.”

### A Good Appearance

Appearances count. Show up on time. Dress appropriately. “If you have the basics at the bottom, you’re better at the top. Officials rise on the roster by knowing the basic elements and mastering them,” Rolf said.

Drouches said “perception” encompasses a lot of the important positive qualities: “Do you look the part? Do you have command of the game? Do you manage the game well and communicate? Do you run a smooth game? Do the coaches trust you?”

Those who shine, he said, are the officials everyone wants on the game. “It’s what separates the good from the really, really good,” he said.

A smooth baseball game starts early, Drouches said, beginning with preparation — the business of umpiring. The crew chief sets the tone. How you come on the field and handle the lineup cards with the coaches and how you communicate immediately dictate others’ perceptions of you. Little things, like maintaining control of the game, add to positive perceptions, he explained.

Your reactions and how you communicate back to players and coaches are critical to building positive impressions, positive relationships and trust, according to Drouches.

Eades agreed that communication is key. “Communication is the most important issue,” he said. “Bad communication can cause more problems than anything else on the court, and you don’t want that. Prove yourself with an accurate whistle and be a good communicator, not by calling technical fouls that may be unwarranted. You need to be able to trust your partner, and not have to clean up a mess afterward.”

Gary Huber, director of assessment for the National Intercollegiate Soccer Officials Association (NISOA), threw multiple variables into the perception/ appearance category. Senior officials, for example, he said, “don’t get overwhelmed. They don’t make stupid mistakes and over-call a game. They are there for the game, not the money. They are physically and mentally awake. Their uniform is squared away. They take pride in how they look, and in the game.”

Non-verbal communication is also part of how you are perceived, according to Huber. Most officials have cues they use to communicate with their partners mentally, physically and verbally, things like the thumbs up sign, a nod of the head, talking during timeouts. “You see the good crews doing this,” he said. “When someone asks why he didn’t get the big game, sometimes the response is as simple as ‘you shrugged your shoulders when your partner made a call.’”

## Confidence

According to Rolf, “The guy or gal with confidence is the best partner for me — like the guy in the movies who is comfortable with himself.” It’s a hard quality to define. It can be as simple as both officials having confidence in their partners to take care of their respective areas without having to worry, but when there’s a payoff or problem, working together to figure out the solution.

Rolf likened it to a dancing partner; you have to implicitly trust that other person — physically, mentally and emotionally.

“The partner can wing it when things aren’t going right, or your partner can freeze in a tough situation,” she said. “I want the officials I work with to see the big picture. The good referees have the experience to take in all those other variables.”

That confidence shows up during game situations and when dealing with coaches. “When you work with a guy, you can see how he handles the coaches by his body language,” Huber said. “Does he have his head, chin and shoulders

up? If he's not confident, he's not going to do a good job. We can teach that on a blackboard, but you have to get the experience."

Confidence takes work.

"The better we are, the more fun it gets," Van Raaphorst said. "To get better, you need to work on yourself and your fundamentals. For an umpire, if you are set, have great timing and know the rules cold, the rest is easy. The better you are at the fundamentals, the fewer problems you'll have."

### A Solid Background

Jim Quirk, NFLRA executive director and former NFL umpire, said the backgrounds of officials off the field (and court) are indicators of success at a higher level. During his years with the NFL, Quirk worked in a Treasury bond trading room on Wall Street, a contentious environment which required facing off with assertive and aggressive traders. Those years helped shape him as a person, which in turn was reflected on the field. "It carried over into my officiating career," Quirk said.

Your personality and experiences off the field and court help form you during a game, establishing your style. From those qualities come your strengths. In his case, for example, dealing with the intense trading environment prepared him to deal with the intensity of the NFL trenches.

Quirk cited NFL referee Jeff Triplette as another example. Triplette, who served in the military and is a retired colonel for the Army National Guard, is a high level corporate executive (CEO of ArbiterSports), so he is what you would call a "detail guy."

"It also was a strength he brought to the field," Quirk said. "You bring your background from your day-to-day job and transfer it to the field.

"You cannot be a shrinking violet. You have to stand up and make the calls. You have to throw the flag. You can't be intimidated. All that goes back to your personal background."

### Game Management

If you handle a big situation correctly, coaches and officials will respect you. Cress called the ability to handle situations another important factor that sets apart the special official — the one everyone wants.

In softball, that means being ready for the second or third play in a sequence, not just the routine ground ball. If, for example, all you are ready for is the basic grounder, then the throw goes wide at first, you may just react to the second incident instead of being “ahead of the play,” he explained. “You need to be anticipatory for the unordinary. It’s not as big an issue in the pros because the talent level is higher, and the routine plays are normally made. But if you have a 10-and-under game, that’s where you learn. The ball gets thrown around a lot more.”

Cress stressed the importance of being in position for the unknown.

“Former players who become officials have this ability,” he said. “They know what the offense and defense will do and anticipate what could be missed and what might happen next. They are ready to react when the unexpected happens.”

Cress will pay attention to the umpires’ ability to anticipate and where they position themselves, along with how they adjust to situations.

“If the officials aren’t handling the routine, they probably won’t be able to handle the unusual,” he added.

Quirk suggested that speaking up when you know a fellow official is wrong is important as well. “Go in, ask questions, start a discussion,” he said. “Don’t ‘tell’ your partner something. Ask questions instead and bring them to the surface with your referee. Help bail out your fellow official. When you step in and help save your partner, you’re preventing future mistakes.”

Becoming the official everyone wants to work an assignment with takes experience — working games, having a mentor and being open minded.

Sports officials also need to take steps to learn from mistakes and experiences. “Don’t gloss things over. Don’t tear your partners down. But you need to deconstruct games in a positive way,” Van Raaphorst said.

It’s a good way you can build toward being that sought-after official.