

# In a Brutal Winter, Referees Are Put on Notice

(By William C. Rhoden, *Sports of the Times*)

February was not a great month for referees in Men's Division I basketball. Earlier this week, Hank Nichols told them so.

Nichols is the national coordinator of basketball officials for the National Collegiate Athletic Association. After watching about 3 weeks of rough post play, coaches roaming out of the coaching box and players going over the back to get rebounds, he fired off a bulletin to his referees.

"I kind of got after them and said that they've slipped in what we were supposed to be doing and what they've done all year," Nichols said in a telephone interview on Thursday. "They were going well and now they're not, and we need to step it up these last couple of weeks so we can get back on track."

Nichols said his bulletin was not related to the John Chaney incident, in which Chaney sent in a little-used Temple player to commit hard fouls. But his strongly worded memo addressed an atmosphere of loosely regulated physical play that has crept into the college game and has in fact been forming for the past few seasons.

The college game has become rougher, and the officials aren't doing anything about it. For all of the focus on Chaney—and he deserves every bit of it—there is an overriding problem that must be addressed before the vigilantism he practiced becomes a way of life in the college game.

"The officials today are letting too much go," Jim Boeheim, the coach at Syracuse, said in a telephone interview. Boeheim led Syracuse to the national championship two seasons ago and won his 700th game last week. "I had a pro general manager come to our game and said our game is more physical than the NBA," he said. "That's not right. These are kids."

The Big East used to be the worst conference when it came to unbridled physical play. One season, the league even experimented with the NBA allotment of six fouls a player.

Boeheim said the Big East tried to shed its image of physical play for a while. "Now we're getting back in it," he said. "I think it's a big mistake. The beauty of basketball is seeing guys play and move and run and not have people holding and grabbing."

Scoring has dipped in Division I men's basketball since 2000–01, when teams averaged 71.4 points a game. The current average is 69.7 points.

The more telling statistic is the decline in the number of fouls called in the past 5 seasons.

In 2000–01, referees called an average of 19.9 fouls per team per game. The figure has decreased with each successive season: 19.2 in 2001–02; 19.1 in 2002–03; 19.0 in 2003–04. At the midpoint of this season, the figure was 18.6 fouls per team per game.

That's a significant drop: nearly three fouls a game that were called four seasons ago are not being called.

About 5 years ago, Nichols initiated an effort to take excessive physical play out of the college game, and more fouls were called. But in recent seasons, the trend has gradually moved back to fewer fouls being called.



"I thought 4 years ago the game was rough and getting ready to get out of hand," Nichols said. "Almost everybody in basketball was concerned that the game had gotten to a point where the weight room outweighed the skills."

"Until the last week or so, we had pretty much eliminated rough play and a wrestling match every night. We've had some slippage these last couple of weeks in February."

Frankly, I was surprised that the numbers supported Boeheim's belief that the game had become more Neanderthal. Referees like to call fouls; they are law-and-order people who use their whistles to dictate the course of a game and send messages to recalcitrant coaches and players. Why would they let the rough stuff go, particularly when they could have a Chaney thing on their hands?

"I think what happens," Boeheim said, "is that officials say they don't want to determine the outcome of a game by calling a lot of fouls. But if they call the fouls

early, players will stop fouling because they want to play.

"The heart of this is that the rules are written and the officials are not calling the fouls because, somehow, they think they're going to determine the outcome of a game. It's something that we've been trying to address for the last 2 years, but it's not working."

But there may be a more distressing reason for the lack of calls this time of year: fatigue.

The referees—especially the older ones—are tired, and the NCAA tournament is just around the corner. Referees are the nomads of the college sports industry. Instead of being under the NCAA umbrella, as they should be, officials are independent contractors who can work as often and for as many conferences as their schedules and health permit. By this time of year, many officials have had it.

"It could be the whole syndrome in February that everybody's tired, including the refs and the players and the coaches," Nichols said. "They can be getting tired, which means they're not at the top of their games every night, and they're going to pass on some plays."

Every NCAA tournament has a story line—an undefeated team or a Cinderella. Given Nichols' memo and the events of the past week and a half, a significant story of this tournament will be the officials. They have to call what they see, and they definitely have to see more.