

Nowhere To Run To, Nowhere To Hide, But IAABO Bd. 52 Gives Back

(By Ray Gallagher, Sports Editor, North County News,
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There's no place to hide when you're a Section 1 basketball referee, no corner of the gridiron to duck off into, no breaks between pitches like you have in baseball, no glass to deaden the unreasonable audible of the multitudes, no instant replay to bail you out of a bad call.

No, the basketball ref is Johnny on the Spot; scrutinized, vilified, ostracized for four quarters . . . out there on an island with his partner where about 50 percent of the time he makes the wrong call, according to the relentless armchair referees. Basketball refs may have rabbit ears, for sure, but they wouldn't last very long in the business if they incited fans by taking them on in a battle of witless banter, and the opportunity to be heard would never be welcomed anyway; for you can never please the guy that's always right.

Perhaps more than any other official on the planet, the basketball referee feels the most heat in the world of sports . . . from the professional guy who makes his living before crowds of 20,000 or more to the kid doing it for the local recreation department in front of every Tom, Dick and Uncle Louie in the land.

Basketball officiating is the most arbitrary, subjective and most unsystematic of the major sports. Contact is in the eye of the beholder. Who initiated it, who avoided it, who stood his ground, who bailed out, who cut who . . . and the pace, man the pace is out of control.

Palming is only called upon advantage these days, and who's to say exactly when an advantage is gained? Oldtimers call the jump stop traveling and a palm is still a palm if you ask me, but what do I know. I didn't pass that test they pass out. I don't get heckled on a nightly basis. I don't have to wear those sleek, black nylon pants with the zebra-striped jersey that makes the hoop ref stand out like an Iraqi-looking fella' with loaded Converse at a US Air terminal.

Some guys let 'em bang, some guys call every tick-tack they see to make the game all about them. Some guys are a horror show and some guys are so sharp they see it all but somehow allow the game to take its natural course. The pairings themselves are impossible to predict, making it imperative that each referee be on the same page for a well-officiated game, which is a rare thing indeed, according to the average Joe, who barely knows the rules but has an opinion on everything. Every coach/fan has an opinion about a call, so while they're necessary to make the world go round, you hardly need to hear each one. But the basketball ref can't miss out. He's right there within earshot for four quarters, taking it all in but somehow refusing to cave in to the pressure of the big game; because that's what most Section 1 refs live for . . . to be on the grand stage at the Westchester County Center calling the biggest games of the year.

Most of them won't be on the court that night, but they'll be out there day in and day out on a Section 1 hardwood near you for the next 4 months trying to get it right each and every trip down the court, but doing so only 50 percent of the time, according to Joe Fan. So the next time your about to bark at the man in stripes, give him a break, if only 50 percent of the time.

Yeah, being a basketball official is about as thankless a job as there is; he/she is the civil servant of Section 1 officiating; the guy who tries and tries but can't please a soul.

Really, we should be throwing a party for these guys, but here in Section 1 it's those same guys, the unrewarded wonders in stripes, who are throwing the party at Iona College in New Rochelle at the

Westchester/Putnam Basketball Officials Holiday Hardwood Classic.

Leave it to these students of the game to come up with a technically sound name like that.

I said, we should let them have their day in full grandeur by giving them the benefit of the doubt at the Mulcahy Center hardwood when Nanuet tipped off against Pearl River, when North Salem took on Briarcliff, when Harrison and Rye got after one another, when Stepinac looked to take down Mahopac and again when Iona Prep battled Scarsdale in the battle of the America's Richest amateurs.

All the boys in stripes from the Westchester County Board, IAABO Bd. 52, were there, openly critiquing one another during the games while sneaking off for a piece of wedge between games, so when you see them out there this season give them a pat on the back and thank them for a thankless job, and be grateful they threw this five-game basketball party at Iona College. It's the least you can do, considering all the proceeds from the Classic go to scholarships for Section 1 basketball athletes they hardly even know.

"As an association, we just want to give back to the kids and communities through scholarships and stuff like that," explained chairman Richy Thomas. "It's the least we can do. We live for this stuff. We take it very seriously and this is our way of giving back."

I would have been there myself doing so, except for "must-take" vacation time I've acquired, but my wife, Nikki, who just happened to be bearing my first child, would have me strung up if I bagged our plans and went to a couple of games during rare vacation time, so my main men Thomas, Howie Green, Sal DeGrande, Chick Muzzuca, John Fitzpatrick and Billy Sacco and the rest of the boys will have to make due without my scrutiny.

