

Olympic Official

(By Dave Simon, Independent Member, Texas)

As a 16-year-old in his native Puerto Rico, Jose Carrion had never played basketball. But that didn't stop him from beginning an officiating journey that has taken him to the top leagues on the island, the 2004 Olympics and NCAA Division I Men's basketball.

Driven by a desire to become involved in the sport, Carrion began working the "minor leagues in Puerto Rico," getting his first break with a prostyle tournament in the summer of 1991. Married to Gladys, the 31-year-old Carrion has two sons, Anibal and Alejandro. He continues to officiate high school basketball in Connecticut, where he has resided since 2001. He is a member of the East Coast Athletic Conference and officiates in two Men's NCAA Division I conferences—the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (3 years) and the Atlantic 10 (first year). Carrion also refs at the NBA Developmental League (NBDL) (3 years).

Sportorials recently sat down with Carrion to discuss his journeys.

Q: *How did you make the transition from Puerto Rico to the United States? Was IAABO involved?*

A: In 2001, I was recruited by the Connecticut vocational school system. I came to two camps in the United States that summer. My roommate in one of them was Matt Boland, the president of IAABO Board 8 in Connecticut, and he asked if I was interested in joining the Connecticut board when I officially moved. He was instrumental in getting me started because I didn't know anyone else in the area. I began working some games, and then Matt's father, Dave, who is the commissioner and assignor, gave me the opportunity to work a full varsity high school schedule.

In Puerto Rico they use international rules, but I was used to the National Federation High School rules because AAU ball in Puerto Rico plays by them. I love the rules and I always studied them, so it wasn't a difficult adjustment.

Q: *How did you progress? Did you have any mentors? How is Puerto Rico different from the United States?*

A: I always like to establish high goals, which is why I got started so early. It was, and still is a challenge. By 18, I worked the pro leagues and was using my money from refereeing to pay for college.

Since I had never played the game, every day is a learning experience. In Latin America, it is a very emotional game, so you have to learn how to not only manage the game, players and coaches, but also the crowds. You're truly on the court "all by yourself (except for your partners)" in Puerto Rico.

I like to talk with people, and would discuss things with other officials to learn their techniques. When you are new, you must depend on the veterans to teach you new skills. Once you are accepted,

then you can assert yourself more. People trust you when you've gained respect from the players, coaches and your partners.

At every level there were different mentors. Lubomir Kotleba, who is with FIBA, was a major influence. He was responsible for my Olympic nomination and for my assignment at the gold medal game in the Sub-19 World Championship held at Greece in 2003. All the main referees in Puerto Rico have helped me in different ways—Juan Figueroa, Alvin Boria, Anibal Garcia, Calvin Pacheco. They model what is best, and then you see the good things in each different official, take what works for you and apply it. These were all successful international referees and they helped me in Puerto Rico and on the international level.



In the United States, several other members of the basketball officiating were instrumental in helping me: Luis Grillo, MEAC Supervisor, who gave me my first opportunity to work Division I basketball; former NBA Supervisor Ed Rush; and Joe Borgia, who hired me in the NBDL 3 years ago.

Q: *How is the international officiating scene for basketball different from high school, college or the pros in the United States?*

A: In Puerto Rico, it's a requirement for FIBA that you work 4 years at the top tournament of the island. Then the president of the basketball federation has to recommend you to apply for the International Referee License. Two tests are given—one physical and one written.

The types of games are a bit different between Puerto Rico and the United States, but there are similarities in the rules and the gaps are narrowing. The general guidelines for officiating are the same regardless of the competition, but you do have to adjust to some of the rules differences.

Q: *How was your transition from Puerto Rico to the United States?*

A: It was not an easy process. We were well established in a new house in Puerto Rico. It was my decision to move, but my wife supported it. I moved first, and my family joined me later that year.

Q: *What steps do you have to take to be considered for an Olympic assignment?*

A: I honestly can't answer that question. The nomination came as a complete surprise. I imagine that the year before when I worked the FIBA tourney in Greece and had a good performance, that my performance helped get me invited. I was fortunate to work the gold medal game for sub-19 (age) and for the Lithuania vs. Australia game.

The Olympic assignment was the first time I got to work "men's" games at FIBA. Previously under FIBA, I'd refed the sub-19's. Interestingly, of the 30 basketball officials for the men's and women's

Olympics (officials worked both sexes), 12 were from the Americas—Canada to Argentina.

Q: *How would you compare the international game to high school, college or the pros in the United States?*

A: The international game is more physically demanding for officials because it is two-man crews. It's all "men," so when you compare it to high school or college the players are more physically developed. I had to adjust quickly in the first game when moving from one level of play to another. My first Olympic assignment was a huge



men's game—Argentina vs. Serbia. It was a rematch of the gold medal 2002 game at the World Championships in Indianapolis that had a controversial ending. I had to score a basket with three-tenths of a second left, and Argentina won 83–82. I needed to get it right.

Q: *Describe your Olympic highlights.*

A: Overall, it was an outstanding experience. It was not until the week before that I got authorization to go from my job even though I had put in a request 5 months earlier. A lot of people helped me get there, including my supervisors.

The opening ceremony was one of the biggest highlights. You had 50,000–60,000 people in the stadium and you were sharing the experience with other top officials and athletes.

On the court, everything went well. We had no ejections. Only a few technical fouls were called overall. If there were 10 technical fouls in the 70 games that was a lot. There was nothing crazy.

Security was extreme wherever we went. The hotel had 24–7 protection and we were escorted everywhere.

My best officiating memory was the first game and the way it ended. God helped us succeed in that game as a team. Officiating is about teamwork. It's not about individual success. The Olympics' men's semifinal game—Italy vs. Lithuania—was also a highlight for me.

Even though some athletes chose not to participate, I never considered not going. I had no fears at all about being there, and was 100 percent sure I would attend even if I had not gotten permission from my job. I was willing to lose my job. It was God's blessing to get nominated.

Q: *After such a "peak" experience, how do you get back to regular officiating routine and stay motivated?*

A: The Olympics are over. It "was" a great experience and will help me succeed. It's difficult for me to move onto college now because I am still a rookie there.

IAABO and the Boland's helped me get established in Connecticut and I want to return to them what they gave to me. So I'm continuing to work high school whenever I can.

Q: *Any final thoughts?*

A: Refereeing is teamwork. We succeed or fail as a team. There are three teams in every game and our responsibility is to have the best team every night.

A final recommendation for other officials: Film your game as much as possible and breakdown tapes as a tool to improve.



Dave Simon officiated basketball as an IAABO member for 18 years, 12 at the small college level. He has worked as a communications professional for over 20 years, and also writes a syndicated newspaper column. He can be reached at davidsimon15@hotmail.com.