

# LEGAL LINES

## “It’s Only a Rec League Game”



(By Alan Goldberger, IAABO Parliamentarian, Bd. 33 NJ)

Too many officials, high school and college assignments are looked upon as high visibility assignments, where they are under a magnifying glass lest the watchful eyes of supervisors, assignors and athletic director types catch them in a lapse of judgment or rules knowledge. Often, these same officials, when working underclass or recreation leagues will feel that they can relax the enforcement of rules which were, after all, designed for more “organized” levels of play.

### Laxness in the Area of Enforcement of Safety Rules

Officials who have been lax in the area of enforcement of safety rules in lower level basketball have often found out to their detriment that the nonscholastic and recreation basketball game is the last place in the world that officials should be hesitant to enforce rules relating to player safety. This is so for several reasons.

- “Rec” basketball is most often staffed, coached, and administered by at least as many volunteers as paid staff. Thus, in the true sense of the word, the only “professionals” having anything to do with game administration will be you and your partner. Thus, it is not reasonable to assume that the persons associated with the administration and coaching of youth or recreation league basketball, will have even a basic knowledge of the safety related aspect of playing rules.

- Recreation basketball is often sponsored by organizations with limited resources and ill-defined structures. Some of these groups may have adequate insurance to cover claims for personal injuries suffered by participants. Others may not.

- The quality and competence of coaching personnel largely made up of volunteers, is problematic. Therefore, players—and their loved ones—will rightly look to game officials for dealing with rules enforcement related to safety.

- Recreation basketball is often played on nonregulation courts, in nonconforming facilities where safety hazards unknown to many high school and college gymnasiums are often encountered.

- Site managers and other administrative staff are often nowhere to be seen or found before, during, or after the game. This places an additional burden on game officials to take control of situations that could precipitate injuries.

All of these situations can contribute in some way to increased legal exposure for officials working the nonschool basketball game. Therefore, officials need to be especially wary of common situations involving rules coverage regarding player safety. Here are a few trouble spots to watch out for.

- **Facilities. 1-9-1.** Nonscholastic gyms often will be a far cry from the “regulation” basketball court. So long as no safety hazard is

presented by a nonregulation facility, our concerns are few. However, we need to be especially vigilant in these venues to be aware of abandoned equipment or other obstructions within the sidelines or close enough to create a hazard. We need to look at the backboards for appropriate padding. And, we need to watch out for makeshift equipment, like the alternating possession arrow which really *is* an arrow taken from archery class that may be protruding out onto the court along with the scorer’s table.

- **Equipment. 3-5-1.3.** These rules require us to adjudicate, with-in some guidelines, the dangerous, confusing or inappropriate. “Rec” programs are almost entirely dependent on officials to police these rules. Any equipment that is dangerous, confusing or inappropriate for basketball is illegal. Beyond that, elbow, wrist, hand, finger, or forearm guards, casts, or braces made of hard leather, plastic, metal or any hard substance are illegal, whether covered with soft padding or not. Knee braces need to be padded. Devices born to protect a broken nose are legal so long as a danger to other players is not presented by its size or sharp edges. Eyeglass protectors are similarly permitted so long as no sharp edges are present. These restrictions apply to all team members—even during pregame and half-time warm-ups.

- **Jewelry. 3-5-6.** Regarding jewelry, one of our old interpreters used to say: “if it wasn’t there when you were born, it’s jewelry.” The earring or rope bracelet that are worn on the playground or in pickup games is a catastrophic injury waiting to happen in your game. Body parts have been separated from their rightful owners by virtue of having been tangled in somebody’s jewelry during basketball games. Invariably, some participants will show up ready to play with all manner of “accessories.” You—as an official—are all that stands between safety and total disregard of safety. So, when it comes to jewelry, the message is: Take it off—take it all off—and do it before the game starts. The only exceptions are medical alert items and religious medals. These items must be taped and, in the case of religious medals, worn inside the uniform.

- **Headwear. 3-5-2.** Rubber bands and cloth materials may be used to control hair, provided a headband in no wider than 2 inches and made of nonabrasive soft material. Be wary of religious headwear—unless the organization has a specific rule, these items are prohibited. Headwear worn for medical or cosmetic reasons must be documented before the game with the statement of a licensed medical doctor. Finally, all nonconforming headwear must be non-abrasive, soft and not present a danger to any other player. The headwear must be attached in such a way that it is not likely to be dislodged during the game.

- **Hair and Nails. 3-5-7.** Any time a player’s hair or fingernails may pose a threat to the safety of that player, or anyone else, the Referee must not allow that player to participate unless and until a change is made.

- **Player Injuries. 5-8-2, 3-3-5, 3-3-6.** The rules require officials to suspend play immediately when necessary to protect an injured player. Except for those relatively rare situations, officials must stop play following injury to a player after the ball is dead or in control of the injured player’s team, or when the opponents of an injured player complete a play. Included in the definition of “time out” situations for injuries is stoppage of play due to an official determining

that a player is bleeding, has an open wound, or an excessive amount of blood on his or her uniform or person.

### **Player Requiring Attention From Bench Personnel**

A player who requires attention from bench personnel on the court (as well as a bleeding player) must leave the game until the next opportunity to substitute after the clock has been started following the substitution unless a charged time-out is taken by the injured player's team. In injury situations, we need to determine if the player really is in need of assistance. If so, beckon the coach on to the floor and keep the immediate area clear; officials should not attempt to treat the player; nor should they discuss the cause of the injury with anyone. Do not request anyone to move the injured player so that you can get the game started again. It does not matter if the delay is 1 minute or 4 hours. Only medical personnel should determine if the player can be moved and when. Often, medical personnel may need to be summoned to the site. The delay occasioned by these circumstances is often unavoidable. Nonetheless, don't be talked into taking a shortcut that may exacerbate an injury. Finally, continue to supervise activity of both teams: keep both teams separated at or near their bench areas.

● **The Unconscious Player. 3–3–7.** An unconscious or apparently unconscious player cannot return to the game without written authorization from a physician. This rule may require you to briefly visit with the injured player so that you can make this judgment. If in doubt, err on the side of safety and do not let the player return to the game without a physician's written authorization.

● **Unreasonably Hazardous Situations/Emergency Conditions.** The officials' Code of Ethics requires us to deal with the "unreasonably hazardous situation" and the "emergency condition." Some leagues place additional duties on recreation league officials (see box at right). What could be an "unreasonably hazardous situation" or an "emergency condition"? The lights dim? There's a fistfight in row 9 that spills onto the visitor's bench? A sharp object is thrown onto the court from the bleachers? We need to make sure game management, if any, deals appropriately with these occurrences. In "rec" ball, often times there will be no onsite game management. If a situation outside the court presents a danger to anyone, the game must be suspended until the condition is abated and it is safe to resume play. The most common emergency condition may be an injury to a player (see "Player Injuries" above).

● **Safety for You.** After spending an hour and a half or so looking out for the safety of others, between the time the buzzer goes and the time we get back in the car, we need to look out for our own safety a little bit. The first item of business—immediately—take the string off your neck. Next, locate your partner or partners—just to make sure. The "R" will, of course, approve the final score. Then, both officials leave together without being detained by anyone on the way out.

This is not the time to hang around table side fishing for compliments after the game. If you return to a dressing room, lock the door. If there is no dressing room, it's to the car for both officials without stopping for discussions with anyone.

Finally, officials who ignore these concerns do so at their own peril. The fact that it's "only" a kid's game will be of no comfort after the lawsuit arrives at your door.

### **STATE BOARD NO. 1 MESSAGE TO NEW JERSEY OFFICIALS: YOU MAY NEED A "YELLOW CARD"**

THE FOLLOWING MEMO WAS SENT TO ALL NEW JERSEY IAABO BOARDS BY STATE BOARD No. 1: Recent newspaper reports indicate that a municipal recreation program in Morris County requires referees to warn spectators who exhibit unruly or inappropriate behavior, after which the referee is required to raise a yellow card as an indication that the spectator must leave the gym. Although the newspaper articles stated that many of the referees engaged are high school and middle school students, it is possible that some IAABO officials may work recreation basketball in municipalities that employ this system.

Please advise all officials, therefore, to be aware of any special rules or mechanics that are formulated in recreation basketball requiring officials to, in effect, referee the entire building. Officials working these games should be aware that they are being asked to undertake increased responsibilities which may carry increased exposures should a spectator be involved in an incident that results in injuries to persons and/or property.

In short, if the officials are empowered to warn and then eject unruly spectators, it could be argued that they have a duty to do so which could have the effect of expanding an official's liability should he or she fail to exercise that particular responsibility.

### **Penalize a Team Whose Spectators Interfere With the Game**

Although there is casebook support permitting officials to penalize a team whose spectators interfere the proper conduct of the game, the casebook places responsibility for the behavior of spectators squarely on the home management or game committee—and not on the officials. Unruly and inappropriate behavior by spectators is, unfortunately, a commonplace occurrence—as opposed to spectator conduct which interferes with the proper conduct of the game. To place the burden on officials issuing warning for all unruly and inappropriate spectator behavior game casts a significant burden on officials. Especially at the recreation level, which tends to attract the less experienced officials, there is more than enough to keep the officials occupied supervising 10 players on the court and 2 benches.

Therefore, officials working in recreation departments that employ the "yellow card" system must be willing to accept these additional responsibilities mindful of the increased exposure they entertain, if they wish to accept those engagements.