

Look Who's Talking

By Jon Bible

Opinions differ regarding when the referee should communicate with head coaches on the sideline, whether it's to answer a question or let them vent about something that happened on the field.

Throughout my career as a white hat, I had what amounts to an open-door policy. I do not recall ever charging a head coach with a timeout for a conference, and I was almost always willing to go visit with one (never an assistant) if I sensed it was in order.

If I thought it was obvious the penalty should be accepted or declined, I simply did that. If we had a complicated situation, I would go over and explain options to the head coach. Coaches at all levels will tell you the main thing they want is good communication. They may not like what we end up doing, but the medicine will go down easier if it's accompanied by a dialogue.

Sometimes a coach will be out on the field questioning, shouting, etc. When I went over there, the first thing I did was to say we need to get back on the sideline before we can talk.

If you have a dialogue with a head coach outside of a penalty enforcement, jog over to the other side of the field and briefly tell that head coach what the discussion was about. Coaches tend to be paranoid, and when some see the white hat visiting with the opposing coach, they begin to think conspiracy.

When coaches needed to vent, I would go over during a TV timeout. Even though I may have had nothing to do with the call, the white hat is the official coaches often want to talk with. I always felt I had a better chance of defusing things if I just went over, put my hands behind my back, looked him in the eye and let him get things off his chest. That was OK as long as he didn't get personal, throw his hat, headset or clipboard to the ground, or otherwise get unduly demonstrative.



Don Ariosto, Huntington Beach, Calif., listens calmly to an upset coach. Ariosto's response — if there is one — will depend on if the coach is just venting, asking a question or acting in an unsportsmanlike manner.

I might say, "Coach, if it happened like you said it did, we may have missed it." With the wrong person, that statement will just escalate things, but often coaches are so startled you semi-agree with them they are at a loss for words.

I have also gone to head coaches when one of my wing officials told me an assistant coach had been wearing them out. They were almost always receptive to that, because they understood the hidden message — if the ranting doesn't stop, a 15-yard penalty may ensue. I've also gone over there when I've had a problem with a player. They appreciate the opportunity to take care of things themselves, and generally speaking they will.

I drew the line when no amount of conversation with me was going to change things, or the coach was trying to intimidate me. I have even told some flat out we've had enough conversation for the day and that

was my last time coming over there.

When I did go to the sideline I tried to be careful not to say anything of a personal or inflammatory nature. Many times a coach went from irate to fairly pacified in a matter of a few seconds, just because I gave him my ear.

In sum, my general attitude was a few seconds of getting a butt-chewing would likely pay dividends in the long run, because the coach would appreciate the fact I initiated a face-to-face dialogue with him. Coaches certainly appreciated it when something funky happened on the field. They may not like the outcome, but they'll almost always take things a lot better if the referee provides an explanation rather than blowing them off.

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