Referees and Coaches

“Together for the betterment of handball “

Neither referees nor coaches should consider themselves bigger than each other and neither are they bigger than the game itself. The star of the show is (and must be) handball while players and officials – including referees and coaches – are just “supporting actors”. The most important factor is all that is in the best interest of the game of handball. Thus, referees and coaches must work together, not against each other!

To draw an analogy, referees and coaches are like “cats and dogs”. They have different demands and don’t live naturally together under the same roof. Coaches are often commenting on the decisions made by referees and likewise, the referees criticise coaches about their behaviour and for the way their teams play. This often leads to an argument on the court, giving our beloved sport a bad image - we cannot afford this! Handball is enjoying an ever-growing popularity amongst its fans and supporters, and as key components of the sport, both the coaches and referees have a responsibility to facilitate this growth. It is in their common interest that handball looks good!

When cats and dogs are encouraged to live together and within their own environment, the household becomes more harmonious. In order to keep the “household of handball” harmonious, these two antagonistic parties have to learn to work together. Communication between referees and coaches is a fundamental aspect. Problems between the two groups are diagnosed only by exchanging opinions and talking openly. This communication allows the groups to find better solutions and to solve misunderstandings. Consequently, we get a more enjoyable game!

Handball is a popular sport, with high expectations from the spectators, the media and the organising bodies of the game: it must be fast, spectacular, easy to follow and understand, exciting, and most importantly clean and fair. As major participants of the game - referees and coaches have a huge responsibility in presenting the game well. It is not acceptable - and certainly does not serve to better the game - if they yell and fight with each other.

How can handball be presented well? – Referees and coaches have to know each other, understand each other’s roles, learn from each other and tolerate each other. It is all about mutual understanding!

So, let’s try to summarise what the two parties expect from each other!
Refereeing from the coaches’ point of view

As a practising coach, there were times when I also looked at the referees as “a necessary evil of the game”. Since becoming a lecturer and working on technical matters as well as on the development of the game, I now see referees in a different light. Nowadays, I pay more attention to their activity, try to get under their skin and make an effort to understand their actions.

The 2005 IHF Coaching Symposium in Bangkok was a real revelation for me where coaches and referees exchanged their opinions about each other’s job in a very friendly and creative atmosphere. I followed the same practice when I participated in the coaches and referee courses in Hungary. When the EHF invited me as a coach to talk about the coaches’ view of the referees at a Referee Candidates Course in Portugal, it provided me with the opportunity to collate all my research. After several discussions with my coaching colleagues, it is clear that there are some statements that reflect the general opinion of coaches.

Now I would like to share my experience gained in this field....

COACHES – Requirements from the Referees

- **Be prepared** – visibly show that the game is important to you. The coach prepares his/her team for days, weeks, months for the game. The referees must respect that with their attitude towards the game

- **Look professional** – present yourself well, both as a person and in the role of referee (clothing, appearance, gesture, language, etc.)

- **Be fair and without prejudice** – start every game with a clean sheet and do not make decisions based on like and dislike

- **Be consistent** – develop the same style as a couple and maintain it throughout the whole game

- **Accept (some moderate) criticism** – the coach is fighting for his/her team and has to show it to them

- **Acknowledge mistakes** – reply briefly without discussion and make the most of non-verbal communication

- **Have a firm hold on the game** – full control, show authority, set an example at the beginning of the game and maintain it

- **Be flexible** – overlook minor infringements (clothing, behaviour, sign language individual temper) for the sake of their acceptance when it comes to more important decisions
**Be approachable** - sometimes coaches need some explanation to avoid further conflicts (time-out and half time breaks are good times)

**Have empathy** – show to the coach: - ‘I know, I was there once on the other side (as a player or as a coach)

**Do not compromise yourself** – don’t try to compensate for a bad decision with another bad decision

**Understand the coach’s position** – he/she is under pressure, sometimes his job depends on a referee’s decision

**See the substance of the game** – keep in view the principles of handball and the flow of the game

**Quick decision making** – blow the whistle with confidence and use the hand signals with no hesitation

**Be yourself – Have personality** – do not change the way you are and do not copy others (even if they successful or they are your referee “idol”)

**Have fun!** – enjoy what you do. After all, handball is a game!

**Coaching from the referees’ point of view**

I also spoke to referees about what the coaches think of them and what the coaches expect from the referees in general. I always find that referees react well to constructive criticism – they absorb all the comments and respond to them positively, they are willing to do their job better. Therefore, it is only fair to give them their chance to express their expectations of the coaches.

**REFEREES – Requirements from the Coaches**

**Be patient** – accept the decision of the referee and do not protest against it

**Knowledge of the game** – know the rules of the game in detail

**Display your role** – just be a coach to the best of your ability

**Be able to communicate** – in different ways (verbal and non-verbal)

**Be objective** – judge your own team first

**Respect the rules of the game** – make your team play according to the rules
- **Understand the referee's position** – he/she is also doing his/her job
- **Set a good example for your team** - behave well on the bench
- **Start the game with a clean sheet** – and do not have any prejudice
- **Thank the referees after the match** – for the image of the game and for respect, even if you disagree with their performances

## AREAS WHERE REFEREES TEND TO MAKE MISTAKES

The general activity of the referees and coaches is an action/reaction reflex.

The international body draws up the rules of the game, and the referees are responsible in applying these on the court. Then, the coaches develop the techniques, tactics and strategies within the limitations of the rules. When certain rules fail to facilitate the development of the sport, the international body modifies the rules and trains the referees accordingly. The coach instead tries to take advantage of the new rules and to push the refereeing right to the limits. Therefore, the vicious circle continues...

There are always going to be situations where the rules are not clear and consequently are interpreted differently. What the referees have to understand is that the coach prepares the team to play to the limits of the rules and go as far as the referee allows. Then if the style of refereeing indicates a certain direction, the coach develops to that direction, in order to take advantage of the rules. What the coach has to understand is that the referee is responsible for running the game according to the rules and does not like to be pushed over the boundaries. Sometimes, it is a good idea for referees to reflect on some game situations often criticised by the coaches and see it from their point of view, the consequences of the action, on a certain area of the court, and how the decisions may influence the everyday work of the coach.

1. **Pushing the attacker in motion, with two hands**

   **Action:**
   - pushing the attacker who threatens the goal, face to face
   - pushing the winger who runs-in, from the side
   - pushing the attacker who is passing the defender, from behind

   **Area:**
   - backcourt (most visible)
   - goal area (less visible)
   - wing (least visible)
Consequences:
- losing sense of body position, thus danger of injury
- losing balance, thus losing power for goal shooting
- losing rhythm, time and direction

Examples

Decision: (after watching the game footage, discussion with the referees)

2. Defence inside the goal area

Action:
- stepping in when/before checking the attacker with ball
- running through/cutting in to catch the attacker with the ball landing inside the goal area while in contact with the ball/player

Area:
- middle section of the goal area (less visible)
- wing (more visible)

Consequences:
- unfair advantage of the defender, thus better position for body contact
- lost/reduced advantage of the attacker gained by skill, thus losing deserved goal scoring position

Examples

Decision: (after watching the game footage, discussion with the referees)
3. **Step mistakes after gaining possession of the ball**

**Action:**
- catching the ball then start on one or two legs when changing direction/faking
- when catching the ball in the vicinity of a defender, then advancing with it while making body contact
- catching the ball and running towards the goal when fast break

**Area:**
- middle section of the court (visible)
- score-dangerous area (visible)

**Consequences:**
- unfair advantage of the attacker moving towards the goal
- unfair advantage of the attacker passing by the defender

**Examples**

4. **Infringements around the pivot player**

**Action:**
- incorrect blocking of the pivot (holding with one hand, pushing backside out, pushing the defender inside)
- pivot going around the defender, stepping inside the goal area
- pushing the pivot out or into the goal area
- defender going around the pivot, stepping inside the goal area

**Area:**
- around the goal area (less visible)
Consequences:
- losing sense of body position, thus balance and strength
- losing strong foothold, time and direction of movement

Examples

---

Decision: (after watching the game footage, discussion with the referees)

5. Rapid start-off

Action:
- attacker starting off with wrong foot position
- attacker/s passing the centre-line before the whistle signal
- attacker is obstructed when catching the ball from the goalkeeper

Area:
- middle section of the court (visible)

Consequences:
- unfair advantage of the attacker moving towards the goal
- extra time for the defenders for retreat

Example

---

Decision: (after watching the game footage, discussion with the referees)
Conclusion

The game of handball is constantly changing but coaches and referees are always going to be key elements when discussing the success of a match. Therefore, in order to achieve the best outcome for this sport we must remember that these two parties should work hand in hand. They should develop together so neither coaching nor refereeing courses should be organised and run without the presence and active involvement of the other party. Don't forget cats and dogs can live together well!

Zoltan Marczinka
EHF / IHF Lecturer
2008