

Dealing with Abuse from Spectators and Others

Sporting environments and competitions evoke a lot of emotion and passion from those involved, including spectators. An official who demonstrates a pleasant style, smile and calm manner creates a positive environment, which can have a positive effect on participants, coaches and most spectators.

Spectators and others frequently disagree with official's decisions, and from time to time, decisions will infuriate spectators and others to the point where they can become hostile towards the official. This situation can be minimised by the approach the official takes to those situations. It is important that the official does not engage with the spectators e.g. no eye contact or verbal response, as this can further incite the aggrieved spectator.

Comments from spectators at sporting competitions are part of the officiating environment. As a group, spectators usually exhibit highly emotional responses and often take delight in antagonising officials. Their behaviour can be off putting, not only to the inexperienced official. There are a range of strategies for officials to deal with the pressure created by spectators.

- Officials should ignore the comments as best they can by blocking them out. This can be achieved by focusing on key aspects of officiating like positioning or what and where to observe. Generally speaking, the comments are not meant personally, it is highly irrational, emotive behaviour that is being displayed by the spectators. Failing to ignore the comments can lead to lapses in concentration and an incorrect focus for the official, often leading to errors in officiating.
- Officials should remain calm. Be aware of the important officiating areas to focus on during a competition.
- Never respond to spectator abuse, (much as you might like to!). Seeking the official's attention and distracting them is one of the aims of an abusive spectator.

Procedures for situations where spectator behaviour becomes serious and contravenes the rules of the sport

NSO's usually have a range of procedures that the official is expected to follow in different situations. This can range from climate conditions, to injured participants, to spectator behaviour. The official needs to be familiar with these procedures and the actions that are required in the event of spectator behaviour that becomes serious and needs to be acted upon. Contact your NSO for further information as to what your next steps are should the situation deteriorate.

Seeking support/counselling

There are occasions when spectator abuse starts to wear the official down. It can have a negative impact on the official and officiating. Being subjected to regular abuse reduces the enjoyment for officials and hence many officials retire because of the abuse they are subjected to. Officials who are concerned about abuse should seek support from others to assist them to deal with it. Speaking with experienced officials can help with additional strategies or a new approach to dealing with abuse. Officials associations and sporting organisations can also provide support to officials. You might also like to contact your state department of sport and recreation for assistance

Sports administrators also have a role to play in preventing abuse of officials, and a number of sporting organisations are starting to implement strategies to stop the abuse of officials. Abuse is well recognised as having a major impact on the retention of officials, and as a result, more is being done to address it.