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“Ref, Are You Blind?”

Zak Smith, Volunteer Contributor

I will never forget the time a 26-year-old graduate student screamed obscenities at me. I was a wide-eyed college first-year officiating intramural basketball for the first time. To be fair, the game was out of control with fouls and dirty play. But no one had the right to scream “you’re complete garbage” while playing for only a t-shirt.

Initially, I thought becoming an intramural sports official with UREC would be a normal job where I could make some easy cash. Instead, I found a loving community led by unique leaders and a place where I could let my new college personality grow. While we learned the rules to sports like soccer, flag football, basketball and others, we played silly games and threw around jokes like a family. It truly changed my outlook on Seattle U, which often felt like a social desert of isolation. I had never officiated sports prior to getting hired, but that did not matter. Student managers trained us, using their past experiences and picture-filled slide shows to supply us with all the knowledge we needed. Despite all my training, I was not necessarily ready for that first basketball game.

It was the first game of the regular season with two teams full of people who had played basketball for years and were expecting a highly competitive game. The two other officials and I, who were all brand new to officiating basketball, had been missing a few calls, leading to things getting ugly fast. Snap reactions of arms flailing in the air and with aggression verbalized through “Are you kidding me?! That’s a fucking foul!” or “What are you looking at! These refs are shit.” It all boiled over when I ejected a participant who would not stop yelling at me from the bench. It is never fun to eject someone since our goal is participation, but my action worked to settle the game down.

The person behind the whistle often gets forgotten in sports. And I’m not talking about the World Cup or the Super Bowl, I’m talking about recreational intramural sports that are for, you know, fun. No one goes pro from our sports, yet competitive overreactions are all too common.

Now as a student manager for intramurals, I have seen officials break down into tears and become scared of working because of participants overreacting. When we hire officials, no matter their experience levels, we hope to see growth. After all, we are all a part of an institution helping people progress. It is a beautiful thing to hire a quiet person and see their personality bloom with enough support. People often bloom after making mistakes. But when people are discouraged from even trying, no one becomes better.

A part of me understands the competitive overreactions. I have played soccer competitively for as long as I can remember. I play on and manage the Seattle U Men’s Club Soccer team. I always participate in intramural sports and am quick to brag of my twelve intramural championships. I cannot help but get competitive when I play intramurals. It is a natural part of any sport for people to get competitive, but there is a line between playing competitively and getting so caught up in competition that it ruins the game for everyone involved.

Intramural sports are for people who want to socialize with friends, meet new people, take a break from exhausting schoolwork to exercise, play their favorite sport and just have fun. They are not a place for people to hurl insults, scream at fellow students, try to revive a professional sport career or ruin a game for everyone. This does not mean refs and players cannot talk, conversations that build rapport between officials and players are encouraged in our trainings. Often people play intramural sports without knowing the exact rules, which we as intramural staff know and are happy to explain rules. Additionally, officials are not perfect and will inevitably make mistakes especially since many officials are learning the rules too.

These two perspectives must share a peaceful understanding to create a supportive and considerate environment where everyone in intramurals can enrich themselves through sports. The relationship of intramural sport officials and sport participants is not isolated between the lines; we can all be more careful to understand how our reactions that might seem normal to us end up hurting others and perpetuating a world that feels hateful towards anyone who is simply trying to grow.