

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SPORTS OFFICIALS

# STRONG SAFETY

**To achieve a secure officiating environment,  
individual officials, crews and schools  
all have important responsibilities.**

**Work together to promote safety.**





# STRONG SAFETY

Developed by the National Association of Sports Officials

Dedicated to the memories of Ricardo Portillo and John Bieniewicz. Portillo, a recreational soccer referee, died on May 4, 2013, one week after being punched by a 17-year-old player during a game in Salt Lake City. Bieniewicz, a longtime soccer official at various levels, died on July 1, 2014, days after he was punched during an adult soccer game in Livonia, Mich. This document was created to promote safety for officials in all sports and levels, offering guidance for individual officials, crews and schools/leagues.

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This resource may be duplicated and used to promote the safety of officials in all sports at all levels.

# Strong Safety

With the emotions surrounding sports, it's impossible to prevent every bad action from happening. But efforts should be made by all stakeholders in the game to keep sports officials as safe and secure as possible. Officials have a tough job on the court and field. They deserve to arrive at the game, work it and leave the venue feeling confident their well-being is important to game administrators, participants and fans.

In order to achieve a safe officiating environment, schools, officiating crews and individual officials need to work together. A strong safety plan is important.

## Individual Official

**Each official can do his or her part to stay safe during an assignment. Every official should be informed and utilize security resources. Manage the game properly and be aware at all times.**

### Prior to Game

■ **Know who you are meeting.** If schools provide you a game host or administrator, as they should, know who you are meeting and where.

■ **Park away from the fans and teams if possible.** Park safely away from others as best you can, in a well-lit area that gives a direct path to and from the entrance. Try to park in an area that gives you two options for leaving — forward or backward. For sports in which locker rooms are not provided, park close enough to the field so that you don't have to walk a mile but far enough away so you aren't going to be bothered by fans.

### During the Game

■ **Know where the game administrator is located.** If anything happens in a game, you will need the game administrator. Know where that person said he or she would be, so you can get to the individual quickly.

■ **Have team awareness.** Know that if a team is having a frustrating season, or just a frustrating game, their anger level may be higher. All it takes is one play to put someone over the edge. You can use your voice and presence to help prevent physical play from escalating into violence.

■ **Have crowd awareness.** The smaller the crowd, the more one belligerent fan can be seen and heard. Fans are more involved than ever and just as with players, one play can be the trigger to trouble. Do not respond directly to fans, and take a no-tolerance stance when it comes to players' or officials' safety. Use the game administrator to resolve or remove the problem when necessary.

■ **When something happens, react accordingly.** The most important thing is to remain calm, but act swiftly. If a warning, yellow card, unsportsmanlike conduct penalty or technical foul can solve the situation, let the rules guide you. If it takes an ejection or red card, do it.

■ **Stay calm, but don't tolerate physical contact.** If you are bumped or pushed, eject the offender. There is no second chance. If you are assaulted, do not retaliate except to reasonably defend yourself. Seek assistance from partners, game administration and/or games security/police personnel. When in a safe environment, take specific notes about what happened. If you think you were assaulted, press charges. You are not doing anyone — especially other officials — any good by trying to let things quietly go away.

■ **Handle scorer's table/sideline personnel.** When a person at the scorer's table or chain crew makes unnecessary comments or improper gestures, take care of those responses immediately. Their actions can incite fans. Deal with the offender directly or seek the game administrator.

■ **Know your exit strategy.** Know where your locker room is and how you are getting there. If you've had trouble with one team during a game, plan your exit to avoid the confrontation of being near that team if possible.

## After Game

■ **Get off the field or court ASAP.** When the game ends, get off the court or field. Unless required by your state or conference office, you don't need to observe the handshakes or stick around to get a handshake from a coach. Once you are gone, anything that happens won't be a risk to your safety or involve your jurisdiction.

■ **Don't engage any fans on your way out.** Nothing good can come of it. Even if you know you are right and they are asking a simple question, immediately after the game is not the time to hold a conversation.

## Crew/Partners

**There is safety in numbers. Officials should be ready to look out for one other. An official is more likely to be targeted if he or she is walking alone than with a crew. Stay together, work together and be safe.**

## Prior to Game

■ **Know where you are going.** That should be addressed by the crew chief with the school and communicated to the crewmembers in advance. Sometimes the game is at a neutral site, sometimes they have specific places for you to park and meet a representative from the school.

■ **Travel together if possible.** Even if you aren't driving in the same vehicle, plan to arrive at nearly the same time. That also makes it easier for game administrators who are meeting you.

■ **Discuss potential safety issues in pregame.** Aside from discussing plays, coverage areas, rules and team tendencies, officials also should talk about safety and security. What should you do if a fight breaks out or there is an issue with a fan?

■ **Communicate expectations to the game administrator.** Prepare the administrator on the crew's expectations in case something gets out of hand. Is it possible to arrange for coaches and players to stay out of the locker room while the crew is using it? Will the room be locked during the game? Will personal items be safe?

■ **Do a field, court check.** Officials should walk the field and court prior to a game for safety rules regarding materials, clearances, buffer zones and hazardous design defects that can get overlooked. Are spectators, cheerleaders or team benches/areas too close to the field or court? The goal should be to recognize and remove every hazard that is reasonably within their control.

## During Game

■ **Don't relax during dead balls.** If a fan is going to make a scene or a coach is going to go ballistic, it's likely to happen during a dead ball. Look out for each other. Keep your awareness up instead of taking time off during timeouts, especially when another crewmember's attention is on a game administration task.

■ **Step in after an ejection.** If the situation (coach-umpire argument in baseball, for example) starts getting heated, get close enough to the discussion so you can hear what is being said and so you can intervene at the right moment. Don't become part of the discussion. Your partner should be able to handle a one-on-one with a coach. But when there is an ejection or obvious end to the conversation, step in and get the coach and your partner apart.

## After Game

■ **Leave the field or court together.** Leave promptly together. Don't run off the court if your partner is dealing with a scorers' table issue or being shouted at by a coach or player. Exit as a crew.

■ **Your locker room is your space.** Even if your "locker room" is your car parked in the right-field-corner lot, that's your space. Ask fans to politely leave you alone and let you discuss the game with your partner(s). And when your locker room is the coach's office, politely make sure the coach knows that while you are there, it's your space.

■ **Leave the venue together.** Try to leave the locker room at the same time. And then do the same for the parking lot. There is safety in numbers. An official shouldn't drive away until every other member of the crew's car has started and it is apparent that all is well.

# Schools/Administration

**Officials experience a wide range of treatment from schools when working games. Host schools have a number of responsibilities to officials, and a little planning and execution can go a long way. Schools should be attentive to detail in regard to officials.**

## Prior to Game

■ **Meet about safety.** Prior to the season, school, league or governing body personnel should meet with officials association representatives to cover safety issues and needs.

■ **Keep communication open.** Schools need to make sure that they have all the necessary information from their officials on file: email and physical addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, etc. Give the officials the appropriate names, numbers and emails of individuals to contact in case of emergency. Prior to the contest (about a week in advance), send a reminder card, email or make a phone call to confirm the officials.

■ **Provide a safe place to park.** If possible, provide officials parking spaces in a well-lit area, but schools should not publically “announce” those designated spots. Signs marked “officials’ parking” brings unnecessary (and potentially dangerous) attention to those cars.

■ **Have a game host or administrator available.** Officials should not have to arrive at a school and feel they are on their own. Have a designated game administrator or host greet the officials when they arrive at the school and escort them to their locker room.

■ **Provide a private, secure locker room.** Give the officials access to a separate locker room with access to a toilet and hot shower. If possible, provide a room that is separate from game participants, other school personnel and fans. Make sure the room can be locked or provide a private locker to keep officials’ personal belongings safe.

■ **Provide and verify a safe playing environment.** Confirm that the field or court is properly marked and safe for competition.

■ **Escort the officials to and from the locker room to the court or field.** Either walk with the officials or provide transportation if needed. Make sure to escort the officials to and from the locker room during halftime and immediately after the game as well.

■ **Identify location of contest administrator during game.** Make sure the officials know who the game administrator is (especially if that person is different than the game host) and where he or she will be located during the contest. Officials need to know the whereabouts of that designated person.



■ **Don't reveal too much information about officials.** For the pregame introductions, it's OK to introduce the officials. Get the proper pronunciation of the officials' names. Do not, however, announce the hometowns of the officials for safety reasons.

## During Game

■ **Educate on the importance of sportsmanship.** Have the expectation that coaches teach their players to respect the decisions of the officials, even when they may disagree with those decisions. To prevent in-game actions, have penalties documented and in place for coaches and participants who cross the line.

■ **Fully cooperate with requests in regard to problems with spectators.** If the officials determine that a spectator needs to be removed, do so promptly.

■ **Make sure administrators are prepared for other issues.** Have them ready to handle serious issues, such as calling medical professionals and police, if necessary.

■ **Maintain playing surfaces.** Arrange for the playing field or court to be properly maintained during the contest (sweeping basketball courts, dragging infields, etc.)

■ **Prepare auxiliary staff.** Have all auxiliary personnel trained and ready to go and versed in proper, respectful behavior toward officials (trainers, timers, scorers, ball boys, chain crews, etc.)

## After Game

■ **Have security escort officials.** Give officials an escort from the court/field to their locker room. Also, have security or an administrator wait for officials to shower and change clothes and then make sure all officials get to their vehicles.

■ **Keep all unauthorized personnel out of the officials' locker room.** Make sure players, coaches and fans do not have access to the locker room.

■ **Understand safety concerns.** Check with the officials if there is anything that occurred during the game that administration needs to be aware of (ejections, unusual situations, etc.)

The physical security of officials and their personal property is achieved through a partnership between the officials and school or event personnel. No plan will be 100 percent successful in avoiding problems. However, by taking the proper steps, problems are more likely to be prevented or swiftly handled.