Dealing with Difficult Coaches

Coaches are told, trained and reminded that this is “all about the kids.” Yet, some coaches still get too excited and “passionate.”

Believe it or not, the most common cause of issues with coaches is confusion with a call, not disagreement. So, you need to let everyone know what you are calling, whether it is a penalty, incompletion, tackle, first down, or score. The stark reality is that almost every call will make half the people at the field unhappy, since every call penalizes one of the two teams. But, when people don’t know the call, you run the risk of upsetting everyone because they don’t know if it benefits their team.

Make sure you announce every call confidently, clearly and loudly.

The second most common cause of issues with coaches is perceived inconsistency in calls. “Why did you call that on us? You didn’t call it on them a few minutes ago!”

Sometimes, referees are indeed inconsistent. This is normally a challenge for less experienced referees who were not confident in their first call, so they second-guess themselves when a similar play happens later. For example, if a ball carrier makes a move that isn’t an obvious flag guarding but is less obvious, like slightly adjusting their hand motion as they run, the ref may call that a penalty. Then, they start to doubt themselves, perhaps because the offensive coach gets angry, or they remember highlights from an NFL game. So, when a similar play happens later, maybe with the other team on offense, the ref decides this time to “get the call right” and not call it flag guarding. Not surprisingly, that coach may be concerned that the rules changed in the middle of the game … and their team suffered both times.

What’s the solution? Make the call on the play as you see fit then immediately confer with your fellow ref. Tell them what you saw and what you think that means. Did they see the same thing? Is the ruling correct? In this case, is the particular move the ball carrier made flag guarding or not? After you discuss it and come to an agreement, announce the call to both sidelines. And, be consistent throughout the rest of the game.

What if you don’t agree? Generally, the more experienced ref’s decision should stand. But, if you cannot agree or are not confident, call over the Field Manager to discuss.

One of the issues that refs come across is that coaches or parents may think they know the rules better than the ref, when in fact they know the rules for a different league that has different rules. So, be confident in your knowledge of the rules, double check with the Field Manager, and remind the coach that different leagues have different rules.

Later in the game, if a similar play happens, but has a distinct difference, be clear in your call. “Ball carrier deliberately blocked the defender’s hand from reaching the flag. This is a flag guarding penalty.”
Then, if that coach questions the call, explain in more detail. “The ball carrier stopped moving his left arm as he was running and held it over his flag. It was a great run by the way. He just can’t guard his flag like that.”

**Be consistent.**

Explaining “close” calls like this – especially if you are confident – can help prevent the perception of inconsistency later on. The referee team should always be moving to have the best views of every play. But, coaches usually stay in the same general spot on their sideline so they may not have a great view of a play. So, announcing calls clearly makes it easier for coaches to see you are being consistent. For example, think about a relatively straightforward call like a completion. Instead of giving a generic call using hand signals for a completion or incompletion, which is clear, but not informative, what if you gave more information. Perhaps on a play early in the game, explain: “Receiver got one foot in bounds, so it is a completion. First down!” Then on a similar – but significantly different – play later in the game, you are set up to explain: “Receiver did not get a foot down in bounds. Incomplete pass. It is now third down.” Calls like this indicate to the coaches that you saw a difference in the two plays. Although a coach may disagree with either or both calls (you can remind them that you had a better angle of the play), they shouldn’t argue that you are not being consistent. Compare that to a general incomplete pass signal on the second play. The coach will wonder if you thought the kid dropped the ball (they didn’t!), got one foot in (how is this different from the reception earlier in the game?!), or maybe thought the kid lost their flag before the catch (they didn’t!). Realize that “close” plays may happen again later in the game or season with slight but important variations, so it only helps you and everyone else on the field to take the time to briefly explain what you saw every time they happen.

**Be prepared.**

Here is an overview of different personality types for coaches and how to deal with them if they start to become a nuisance or distraction. Also, keep in mind that the coaches differ depending on if they are winning or losing. Typically coaches who are losing tend to be more vocal or upset.

**Aggressive / Combative**

*This is the stereotypical “nightmare” coach. They argue over anything and when they do, they argue loud and tough. They seem to forget about the kids and want to win at all costs.*

Are they winning? Remind them, “You’re winning, coach. Let’s have fun.”
Are they losing? Remind them, “We’re trying to keep the game fair and fun for everyone, coach.”

If they are too “passionate,” try to delay the discussion until they can calm down. Say something like, “I hear you, coach. Let’s talk about it at half time (or after the game).” Then move back into position. You also could go get the Field Manager at this point to watch the game. Really, the Field Manager should be having that discussion with the coach at half time or on the sideline.

If they continue to argue, throw a flag and call Unsportsmanlike Conduct.

If they still continue, get the Field Manager to deal with them.
“Know it All”
This type of coach claims to know the rule book inside and out and will try to make you look bad (or even cause you to doubt yourself). Often, they don’t actually know the rules as well as they think they do or are using a different rule book entirely.

Listen to them for a few seconds; quickly judge if they are correct or not. If you are not 100% confident, meet with your fellow ref to discuss.

- If the coach is right and you are wrong, change your call.
- If they are wrong, then briefly explain the rule as you interpret it (e.g. “A receiver only needs to get one foot in bounds, not two. That’s the NFL.”)

If they continue to argue, don’t delay the game too long and try to push off the discussion. Say something like, “I hear you, coach. Let’s talk about it at half time (or after the game).” Then move back into position.

You also can defer to the rulebook: Show them your rule book or ask them to get you theirs. Then find the applicable rule and let that end the discussion.

If they persist, get the Field Manager to deal with them.

“All Star”
This type of coach is really there to just work with a small number of players on their team. They think that those 1, 2 or 3 kids are future all stars in any or every sport they play. So, they only pay attention to them, at the expense of the other kids on the team. They typically only speak up to the referees when one the “favorites” are involved in the play and tend to yell at the other kids if they commit a foul or don’t make a great play.

Typically, their favorite players will stand out on the field, so you can usually keep track of how much they play. Remind them to give every player an equal opportunity to play offense and defense and touch the ball. Try to monitor this yourself.

If the “favorite” players are too aggressive, make sure to call penalties.

If you hear the coach order a player to be too aggressive, call the Field Manager over to deal with the coach.

New / Inexperienced
This type of coach usually doesn’t argue calls because they don’t know enough to question the refs. But, they make ask a lot of questions. Usually, the biggest problem they cause is slowing down the game. They don’t have the right number of players on the field, take a long time calling a play, or otherwise add confusion to the game.

In general, try to help them proactively:

- During the pre-game meeting, ask them if they have any questions about the game or rules.
  (Even with experienced coaches, this pre-game meeting gives you insight into what their hot buttons or concerns may be.)
• Be sure to give them reminders about down, “no run zone”, time, etc.
• Explain the rules when there is a penalty.
• Remind them to give every player an equal opportunity to play offense and defense and touch the ball

“Reluctant”
This type of coach doesn’t want to be there, perhaps they only signed up due to being pressured by others. Maybe no one else signed up. They can usually be identified by a general lack of organization and/or enthusiasm.

Probably won’t argue with you much, but may need to have some rules explained to them. They probably are expecting the rules to be the same as the rules in NCAA or NFL games. If they do argue, then focus on the message: “It’s all about the kids.”

Like an inexperienced coach (above), make sure you clearly communicate “game” information and results of any play.

Fun / Out there to have a good time with the kids
This type of coach is usually very fun to work with. They don’t get upset over the score or penalties. The only concern they may raise comes from a lack of attention to detail. Similar to an inexperienced coach, they may not know what down it is or that it is a “Pass Only” situation.

In general, enjoy yourself. Have fun.

Just be sure to give them reminders – like the inexperienced coaches – to keep the game flowing.

Summary
Most refs will officiate a coach’s game 3 or 4 times during their season (50% of that team’s games). So, you will get to know the coaches well over the course of the season and be more comfortable as the season progresses. This familiarity also requires you to be consistent, because the coach will likely remember a call you made earlier in the season.

And, since you are refereeing about half their games, that means the other half are being ref’d by other refs. This is why it is very important that all refs are consistent. If you call it one way and another ref calls it another, then this breeds confusion and frustration for the coaches and teams. If all refs are consistent, it helps ensure that coaches are getting the same experience each week on the rules. For the refs, this takes the “heat” off of you because coaches understand “that’s the rule” and don’t blame the ref.

Finally, remember to involve the Field Manager earlier instead of later if you are confused about any rule, call or how to deal with an adult on the sidelines.