



The Kinder, Gentler Sports Official

**Released on MyReferee: May 2007
CopyrightC Referee Enterprises, Inc.**

Rulebooks and officials manuals have sparse coverage on the subject of warnings. Much is left to the officiating imagination. Talk to refs and they'll tell you that use of a warning is a key tool for game management. Ask them when they use them during games and they grope for an answer. Warning players and coaches has become the stuff of art, an individualized palette at each official's disposal.

It has been said that "warning is not enforcement." To read it from the dictionary: A warning is a cautionary to desist or not engage in a particular behavior or course of action. A warning is counsel or advice with the intention, the intimation, that a penalty will be imposed if a behavior occurs. In brief, it's a threat. When we warn a player or coach, we threaten them with a sanction for non-compliance.

Why do we warn? We warn because it's good game management and our officiating manuals instruct us to. We warn because doing so is an important technique under preventive officiating. Here is the wording from the NFHS football manual: "In many areas, preventive officiating includes appropriate warnings by officials." The operant word is appropriate. What does that mean?

I would think that an "appropriate warning" is one that can prevent a very select number of fouls from occurring. For example, if a team has 12 players on the field and you notice, warn the team and hopefully it gets corrected before you have to flag it. Each sport has its similar events. Those cases can be penalized or you can warn them out of the penalty before you have to invoke it. The judgment necessary to know when to warn and when to "whack" is learned. It is a sophisticated thought process. It is not brute-force thinking.

Some say we have taken the use of warnings well beyond what was intended by those who write the manuals and rules. I agree. Yes, we have honed our game management skills to a level well above the command-and-control era of officiating. Today, we fashion ourselves as kinder and gentler refs. We cajole, we wheedle, we warn. Far too often what we don't do is enforce. We sometimes act like parents I have seen so often in a mall or airport. Their kid is acting out and they ask her to stop. She keeps it up. They ask her to stop. She keeps it up. They ask her to stop. She keeps it up. The words of the parents have been completely devalued. They have become worthless.

As officials, we find comfort in warning versus enforcing. It's the path of least resistance and too often we skip down it. We don't want to be viewed as the "bad guys" or too strict. We want to belong. We hope our threat will be sufficient. We like things smooth.



Well, I believe we would be well-served to take stock of our approach to warnings, especially as they apply to unsporting behavior. The games we work will be better served if we do. We are in charge of the game and there is no equivocation in that fact. The conduct of the game is ultimately on our shoulders. It's our job and within our authority to clean up the mess that some games become. We bemoan the lack of sportsmanship and we should. Yet we're part of the problem. We have for too long acted like parents of spoiled kids. We warn, warn and warn again, instead of simply enforcing the law.

We aren't hired to be surrogate parents or hall monitors. We're hired to judge and then to enforce. That is the riveting reality of being an official. Administrators, rulemakers and governing bodies want us to step up. Let's.

MICHAEL STONE
NRL REFEREES' CO-ORDINATOR
ARLRA PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE CONSULTANT
ARL LAWS COMMITTEE MEMBER