

6-6-1995

## NBA Officiating

Richard C. Crepeau  
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "NBA Officiating" (1995). *On Sport and Society*. 261.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/261>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
June 6, 1995

It would be difficult to find any activity in sport as futile as criticizing NBA officials. Ever since the arrival of Shaquille O'Neal, complaining about refs has become one of the biggest growth industries in Orlando. Magic fans, sports writers and commentators, radio and TV broadcasters, Magic officials, coaches and players have all been moaning about the Shaq's treatment by the zebras.

With the coming of the NBA playoffs the whining has reached new and epic proportions. In last Sunday's newspaper a "My Word" column opened up on the officials as if they were guilty of war crimes. On Monday the column was even quoted in The New York Times where officials were accused of threatening the integrity of the game.

Lighten up folks. This is basketball. It's only a game.

Haven't you heard of the home court advantage in the NBA. Where do you think that came from? Why do think that NBA teams win a consistently higher percentage of games at home than on the road? It isn't an accident. It is by league design.

Besides complaining about the officiating is non-productive and it shows a complete misunderstanding of the artistry of NBA officiating. This is a well-developed art form, an achievement to be admired and cherished, not something to whine about.

NBA referees have been like this for years and they are not going to change. I have been watching NBA basketball since George Mikan was the center for the Minneapolis Lakers (the late '40s for those who don't remember the big guy). I always got furious at the officials watching their phenomenal performance. They never seemed to be watching the same game as I was, and there was never any consistency to their calls.

At some point, I don't really remember when, I decided that it was foolish to expend all that energy on something that I could not control, and was never going to change. I offer that as an approach that all Magic fans might take. When you watch a game either ignore the officials, or just laugh at them. Regard them as just part of the total scene, not part of the game, like Paul Porter or all that irritating music during the action.

Or try to remember that this is more than simple incompetence that you are watching, it is studied incompetence, a learned ineptitude. These guys go to school.

I just love it when some NBA toady, usually on national TV, starts talking about how good these officials really are. When that happens I double check to make sure I haven't inadvertently turned on the comedy channel.

But they do go to school, and one can only speculate on what they study. Is there, for example, some definition of "travelling" in the NBA? If you watch a game there seems to be no rule, just an occasional call at the whim of the referee.

What is a foul? I would defy anyone to develop an operational definition out of the empirical evidence. It can not be done. At times a body slam is not, but the next trip up the floor a touch is called a foul.

As to the three- second violation, my theory is that NBA officials learn to count to three by a circuitous route: 1, 2, 4, 7, 6, 5, 8, 9, 3. And when is this rule enforced? You can watch a game for long stretches, and then bam, bam, bam, three-second violations are suddenly in vogue. Like suddenly one official remembers this rule and decides he must call it to meet the weekly or monthly quota.

Or perhaps something else is at work. It could be that there is a computer chip installed the brain of every NBA official which is programmed to send a travelling or three-second violation signal to the ref. Then at random the call is made. It would appear that there are two or three of these things set to go off each game, and no one ever knows when.

Indeed I would submit to you that such inconsistency, such non-patterned enforcement, such metaphysical definitions of the rules, can only be carried out by a carefully selected, highly trained, and sharply honed group. These are not ordinary mortals in stripped shirts, these are men of genius who have studied countless hours to achieve skill levels clearly beyond the abilities of the average fan to comprehend.

So lighten up. Either ignore the stupidity or develop an aesthetic appreciation of the artistry. This truly is genius at work.

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