


4-17-1996

NBA Referees: A Problem on Many Fronts - Trouble in Magic Land

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "NBA Referees: A Problem on Many Fronts - Trouble in Magic Land" (1996). *On Sport and Society*. 467.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/467>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
April 17, 1996

So many subjects, so little time.

What a week this has been. Greg Norman provides us with one of the great collapses of all time. Magic Johnson provides us with shattered glass from his house. While the Orlando Magic both collapse and shatter. And questions abound about the refs in the NBA, those wonderful marvelous fellows who everyone was anxious to have back on the court when they went missing at the beginning of the season.

I said during the strike that anyone who thinks that these refs were better than the scabs, wasn't paying attention, and after the euphoria wore off the regulars would prove to be as bad as they always were. The term "good official" has been an oxymoron in the NBA for as long as I can remember, and that goes back to the days of George Mikan and the Minneapolis Lakers.

The events of the last few weeks in the NBA in regard to the officials have been disturbing. Dennis Rodman, Nick Van Exel, and now Magic Johnson butt, shove, and bump officials who have somehow driven them to distraction. No one can justify these actions, but maybe its time for someone at NBA Central to try to understand what is happening and examine what provokes these incidents.

Two weeks ago Penny Hardaway was slapped with two technical fouls within less than a minute, and neither involved any direct contact with the official, physical or verbal. It is clear that in that game the official was looking for an excuse to get Hardaway out of the game. It is also clear that Hardaway was not very smart. The official sent him packing. Without Shaq and Penny the Magic did not cover the high-priced spread and eventually lost the game.

In the case of Van Exel it is now clear that there was a history to his relationship with the official. Do officials carry grudges like real human beings? I think so.

In the case of Magic Johnson the parameters of the incident are not all that cut and dried, although Magic has already apologized. It would have taken considerably more contact to have been a foul in the NBA. Magic's embarrassment must be enormous given his criticism of Van Exel. It may be that the

problem is not simply the new athlete in the NBA as Magic suggested before his own ejection. It may go a bit deeper.

There is much talk about the need to respect the game, preserve the authority of the officials, and protect the integrity of the game. However it is also time for someone to point out that officials have an obligation here as well. They too must carry themselves with dignity, keep their cool, and pay some attention to the integrity of the game.

In some quarters it is accepted as a given that NBA games are routinely subject to point shaving, and that this is done by players, coaches and referees. It is a simple matter in the long season when scheduling can easily explain an off- night, or when technical fouls and expulsions could affect the ability to cover.

This is not a subject that those in the NBA or in College Basketball like discussed in polite company, but Charles K. McNeil, the high school math teacher who invented the point spread, left the game with a major problem. It is one of both perception and reality, and one that requires vigilance at all times.

The integrity of the game is also affected by the general perception of the fairness of officials. For years now I have been able to enjoy NBA basketball only by learning to ignore the officials. I accept on faith that the inconsistency of calls, the undefinable nature of violations, and the variable standards for stars and rookies, evens out over the long haul. I have concentrated on the game and treated the officiating as a bad joke.

In the past few weeks it has become clear that the officials themselves will no longer allow us to ignore them. This is not good for the game. Let's hope something is done to rein in those egos that seem to be on the loose everywhere.

Finally what is happening with the Orlando Magic? Horace Grant criticizes the effort and maturity of his teammates and then takes a punch at Danny Ferry. Shaq shows up late for the Bulls game, and it is reported as the crime of the century. At one point I feared that I might pick up the morning paper and see the headline, "Shaq's grandmother sighted in New Jersey mall." Brian Hill seems to have lost control of everyone including Anthony Bowie. Suddenly they can't win at home, the crowd is

booing, and worst of all fans are leaving early like this is Los Angeles. Then the Magic go on the road and lose to Milwaukee.

If the Magic don't get their act together soon it will be a painfully short playoff season and Brian Hill may become an anonymous face in the crowd once again.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

Copyright 1996 by Richard C. Crepeau