The Unwritten Rules of NBA Officiating: When Will Mark Cuban Learn

1-16-2002

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As Dallas Mavericks' owner Mark Cuban goes off to manage a Dairy Queen today it is a reminder not only of his insult of NBA referees but of three basic facts of American life. First, it takes no particular intelligence to become a billionaire. Second, some people have way too much money. And third, it is an absolutely futile exercise to criticize the referees in the National Basketball Association.

Mark Cuban has repeatedly made a fool of himself over NBA officiating as well as many less important matters. For his repeated criticisms of the referees Cuban has now paid one million dollars in fines to the NBA league office, a price, he says, that is well worth paying; thus illustrating the first two basic facts of American life.

What follows is some advice for Mark Cuban and for all those who get way too excited over NBA officiating.

Mark, haven't you heard of the home court advantage in the NBA? Where do you think that comes from? Why do you think that NBA teams win a higher percentage of games at home than on the road? It isn't an accident. It is by league design and the referees are critical to the process.

Haven't you heard about the unspoken rules of the NBA such as no foul will be called on a big star in a critical situation? Or, no foul will be called on the final shot of the game unless the player fouled suffers lacerations and broken bones? Or, star players will be protected by officials except when you think they are certain to be protected?

Complaining about the referees is non-productive and 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 (in the late '40s for those who don't remember the big guy). I always got furious at the officials watching their phenomenal performances. 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 something that was never going to change. I offer that as an approach that all NBA fans and owners might adopt. When you watch a game either ignore the officials or just laugh at them. Regard them as just another part of the total scene rather than part of the game, like bellowing arena announcers or all that irritating music during the action.

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 to learn how to do this.

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. It is as if suddenly one official remembers this rule and decides he must call the three-second violation to meet some weekly or monthly quota.

Or perhaps something else is at work. Could it be that there is a computer chip installed the brain of every NBA official that is programmed to send a travelling or three-second violation signal to the ref at random? Then and only then a 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 Mr. Cuban. Either ignore the stupidity or develop an aesthetic appreciation of the artistry. This truly is genius at work.

And leave Dairy Queen out of it!

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.

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