

Not All Fouls Created Equal

Why certain calls get prioritized over others



For most of you veterans out there, the title of this article is a no-brainer. Safety in lacrosse is the most important priority. When officials are learning the game, trainers emphasize calling the safety fouls first and with consistency.

In the women's game, those calls are shooting space, stick-to-body contact and cardable fouls. In the men's game, they are high hits, slashes and fouls that require putting a player in the penalty box.

But for new officials, these safety rules can get complex. Many require a degree of judgment.

If there is a potential for safety fouls to occur amongst other, lesser violations, then officials must move that foul to the top. Prioritizing fouls makes the game safer.



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Minor fouls and fouls which are black-and-white calls in both games are much easier to recognize and master, but they are not as relevant to player safety. It requires discernment.

So why bring this up? We teach our trainers to emphasize foul prioritization. When officials are required to make split-second decisions, not all fouls are created equal. To efficiently process and call a safe and fair game, officials must prioritize fouls.

Coaches, players, and fans also need to build this awareness into their game. Officials get a lot of unwanted help during games. Often those people are shouting out the names of other fouls that may or may not occur. ("Offside! Empty!") Sometimes they shout things that are not even fouls. ("Moving pick!" "Open stick!") Or on an end-line out-of-bounds call, they'll tell you who was closest to the line on a shot, even though the criteria in both games is to award to the player closest to the ball.

Right or wrong, officials are prioritizing fouls and calls in that moment. If there is a potential for safety fouls to occur amongst other, lesser violations, then officials must move that foul to the top. Prioritizing fouls makes the game safer.

Additionally, not all officials are looking for the same fouls. Sure, there may be an official very close to a coach on the sideline, but some are looking at off-ball plays, while others are working on the ball.

Coaches, players, parents, and spectators are always looking at the ball. So if that official standing so close to the coach is not making the obvious on-ball call, chances are this has to do with foul prioritization and respective areas of responsibility and coverage. Some officials must be assigned off-ball.

The US Lacrosse Officials Education Program's online course (available for free at uslacrossecourses.org) and manuals further outline the responsibilities each official takes at certain moments of the game.

For safety prioritization to work, coaches, parents and spectators need to support officials. All too often an official makes a big and appropriate safety call, and the next thing you hear from the sideline or the stands is, "That was a great check! Great defense! Keep it up!"

This kind of comment reinforces bad player behavior and will only serve to escalate the severity and frequency of calls. What works better? Substitute that player so he or she can be coached regarding the call in question or simply has time to cool off before rejoining the game.

The nature of officiating is to react to a play and call it accordingly. Keeping the game safe is the first priority.

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