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I Never Missed One From the Stands

Ted Williams was wrong. Hitting a baseball is not the hardest task in sports. Reffing a basketball game is.

A few years back, I made a foolish decision. I agreed to become a basketball referee - not a real ref, a certified official, but far worse. I agreed to officiate games in the Middlebury Adult Men's League in which I had played for nearly 15 years.

The clever fellows running the league played to my innocence and my egotism. "We need you," they said. They derided the officials they had and claimed my association with the league as a player for so long gave me special credibility and authority. "You'll be good at it," they added.

Right.

About five minutes into my first game, my former teammates and friends in the league were transformed into snarling monsters, casting aspersions on my eyesight, honesty, masculinity, heritage, my very being. I knew immediately I had been naive. By the third game, I thought my name was "Jesus Christ Karl!"

I'm still at it. Once a week, Tuesday or Thursday night, from December to March, I show up at the Municipal Gym, and lumber my way through two full length games, blowing the whistle from 7:30-10:30 pm. Like all refs, I sometimes make calls in the frantic last minutes of a close game that I wish I could take back. Some nights, I go home reasonably satisfied; other nights, I go home discouraged by my imperfections.

Starting out, I knew the kind of ref I wanted to be. I would not be a "picky" ref who never misses a lane violation but can't seem to see a thunderous whack on the shooting hand at the end of a game. I also didn't want to have "rabbit ears": I would not be overly sensitive or easily offended. After all, these are guys between 20 and 50, not teen-agers needing to be taught self-control.

Knowing how you want to do something, and doing it that way, are two very different things.

In truth, I though it would be easier. I never missed one from the stands, or sitting in front of the tube. I didn't reflect sufficiently on the fact that, in all my years, I had never actually seen a well-officiated game, a game without innumerable mistakes by the refs.

I discovered that floor level can be a lousy place to call a game. The baseline is a swirl of large bodies whose movements are punctuated by grunts and slaps and curses at indignities suffered them which go unseen by me. Sometimes, I realize I am the only person in the gym who has no idea who knocked the ball out of bounds.

The players admonish me to "be consistent," "call 'em both ways," "let us play!" (that one when they are about to commit mutual mayhem). They expect perfection. The obligation of spontaneity is more difficult than I had imagined also. Snap judgments must be correct judgments. No instant replay. I'm supposed to know immediately whether the defensive man had established position when these two elephants collided, whether the shooter had released the ball before he crashed into the defender, how long the big guy has been in the paint - it goes on and on.

Why do I do it? Why do I subject myself to this weekly humiliation? Isn't this nocturnal role as a zebra a peculiar expression of masochism?

I do it because it's hard - and I love the game. I'm a better person for it: people will actually sit next to me at College games when I am a spectator. I no longer feel the need to "correct" the refs in a loud voice during quiet breaks in the action.

I have gained a greater appreciation for the basketball's powerful dance, the tension between offense and defense which centers on the risk of violence and the complementary will to avoid it. I admire the players who try to "do it right," and play without unnecessary physical contact while expressing all the extraordinary athleticism the game demands. The fundamental idea of the game seems more accessible to me from my vantage point on the floor. As the ref, I am the guardian of the game's aesthetic.

Tonight's games feature the graybeards against the Greyhounds. The portly Angela's five take on Martin's, the league's doormat for the last two years, now soaring with the addition of a couple young studs. Then, in the nightcap, it's Buxton's versus Woody's in a rematch of last year's championship game. Woody's, the oldest team in the league, a dynasty for over a decade, is creaky this year, showing its age.

My goal tonight is to "be consistent," "call 'em both ways," "let 'em play." I expect I'll call the first ever perfect game.