



Reflections of a River Rat:

Becoming a referee

By Jim Holleran

I first got the urge to referee when my daughter, Claire Eileen, started playing for Penfield Youth Basketball in the fifth grade. We would travel to AAU tournaments and the refs would drive me nuts. It seemed for every good referee with good judgment there were five who wouldn't run, missed obvious calls and didn't seem engaged.

Those were the guys that accepted up to eight games a day. They walked because they were exhausted, but needed the \$25 a game. They seemingly didn't care about doing the game justice. In my view, it was about a \$300 weekend, all under the table.

With referees, I had a history as a hothead. As a team manager in sixth grade, I marveled when Jack Phillips of Clarkson showed me his 1947 World Series ring that he won with the New York Yankees. By my senior year at Morristown, when I thought I knew it all, he gave me a technical for complaining about a call while flipping the basketball in the air.

My frustration grew as Claire's career continued. We split the girls into two teams and I became a head coach. I had never coached but knew the game. I hadn't refereed since college intramurals, but thought I knew it all. I even got tossed from a game at Rochester Institute of Technology when two players sandwiched my point guard, knocked her down, and collected the ball for an easy layup. Someone was going to get hurt unless the lone ref started blowing his whistle on blatant calls. I let him know that with my big fat Irish mouth. He was a part of the 8-games-a-day sect. I was excused from the gym.

The next season I got drafted into becoming the house referee for our Penfield teams. I did well enough, but still hadn't been trained about rules, consistency from end-to-end, game management and the mechanics of positioning. I made the worst call in the history of PYB games, and my friend never let me forget it. His daughter was dribbling in the backcourt and I was behind the play. She was blocked by a Corning player, stumbled and grabbed the ball as she fell hard to the floor. I missed the block but falling down with the ball was a travel. To make matters worse, the PYB player left the game holding her elbow. We later learned she chipped a bone in her elbow. After 15 years, my friend Tom still greets me with the line, "Yeah the family is good, but Colleen's elbow is still sore."

The next year Claire was playing on the freshman team as an eighth-grader. With no coaching assignment, I decided to join the girls referee board.

The initial classes were a comeuppance. I was stunned about all the rules I didn't know. All three points over the division line? Incidental contact? Refereeing your zone instead of ball watching? Passing on calls late in blowouts? How to deal with coaches? Not to mention the nervousness.

That was 15 years ago, before Type II diabetes blurred my vision, a fractured tibia sidelined me for three months and a pandemic shut down all high school and summer AAU games. But you can't take away the memories.

You run into guys in unusual circumstances. I'm working a game in Canandaigua involving the Canton AAU team when I hear a spectator say, "Are you Jimmy Holleran?" Turns out it was Frank Crosby of Hammond. His daughter was playing.

When I spied a team wearing black Blue Devils jerseys two summers ago in Walworth, I asked an assistant coach if the girls were all from Ogdensburg? "Most of them," he replied. "Hey, are you a Holleran?" Turns out it was Doug Loffler who had coached in Lisbon, Heuvelton and OFA.

You want awkward? I turned to the scorers table in Fairport a few years ago to report a foul on a clumsy battleship from Our Lady of Mercy. "Blue, 25, block, out of bounds on the baseline." Then I learned it was her fifth foul so I had to

hold my spot, inform the bench, then wave in the substitute. That's when I spotted the girl's father, directly behind the table, smiling, waving and greeting me, "Hi Jim." He was the most gracious parent ever.

One of my favorite stories, although I was never able to verify it, concerned the fellow official who reffed a game in the Finger Lakes League. In the first quarter, he was reporting fouls to the scorers table and a timer kept shaking his head, seemingly disagreeing with each call. After a few trips to the table, the official got hot. He wanted the fellow removed from the table. After all, these guys are an extension of the crew on the floor. They weren't intended to be a jury. First, game management had to talk down the ref. Then someone explained the table guy wasn't shaking him off, but that he had a nervous tic. Everyone chilled and the guy remained on the table.

If no good deed goes unpunished, I learned that firsthand at the NYS Special Olympics Games in Brockport. A friend recruited me to work a few basketball games while my daughter Katie was competing down the hallway in gymnastics. I drew the Cattaraugus County team with one teenager who was always complaining. He didn't seem to have a developmental disability, but his whining grew as his team fell further and further behind.

This was the Special Olympics in which some players may shuffle their feet or double dribble, but as long as they don't create an advantage, you pass. You let 'em play and they enjoy the thrill of wearing a jersey and running up and down the floor. This guy had a huge martyr complex.

"Take it easy, son," I warned. "We're here to have fun." He snapped. His reply began with "listen scumbag!" It was time to stop the game and escort him to the bench for a cooldown. Who would want to demonstrably eject a Special Olympian?

My buddy who recruited me couldn't stop laughing. "Holleran got chewed out by a Special Olympian. Were you overmatched?"

We laughed, but my legend with Special Olympics grew. The next year, Katie traveled to compete in Albany and I agreed to work a few more games. After two games, I arranged a swap of courts so Dan Spilman of Morristown, a referee in the Albany area, and I could work a game together.

The Finger Lakes team was getting blown out when its most capable player freaked. Same deal -- a harmless travel here, a double-dribble there, but no advantage. But the Finger Lakes guy blew a gasket. As he dribbled up the floor, he turned and shouted, "Call the f***** travel." Beep. I halted play and walked to the sideline, telling the coach he had to get control of his player.

It took all my strength to contain my chuckle. Another year, another rip job.

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