

Observers: Behind the Scenes

For every quality rating system, there are, of course, quality observers. Most observers are veteran officials whose "eyes of experience" are used to mold younger officials into better ones. Observers may or may not be currently active, but all must be up-to-date with current techniques and rules.

There are key elements to look for when rating officials: consistency, signaling, positioning and no-calls.

✚ Officials see numerous plays each time out, regardless of the sport. A good observer looks for consistency in "routine" calls. Spotters looking for consistency in "once-in-a-lifetime" plays get distracted from the task at hand: making each official better than he or she was the day before. Though strange plays are important to discuss, looking for them does not allow for concentration on the other key elements. When looking for consistency, do not second-guess judgment. Look for patterns in play situations and evaluate accordingly.

✚ Communication is another important area of concentration for observers. Signals are the "voice" of every official. The way an official tells the participants, the crowd and his or her partner what is going on is as important as the call itself. Sharp signals reduce the possibility of unnecessary confusion. People who rate officials have an advantage when watching others. Most of the time, there will be bleachers or seats above the court or field. Use that to your advantage. A "bird's eye" view is helpful when looking at angles and positioning. When on the ground level with the officials, it is sometimes difficult to gain proper perspective. Move higher if possible for a better look. On the other hand, there is no reason to be hanging from the rafters. An observer needs to be close enough to the action to get a feel of what is going on. Try to be within listening distance of the officials. Listen for vocal calls and bench communication. Do not run down onto the floor/field to listen to an official talk to a player or coach. That is both unnecessary and uncomfortable for the official. Generally, a spotter can get a good idea of the tone of the conversation by looking for body language and gestures. Discuss what was said later on.

✚ Positioning and signaling are more easily watched from above. Also, observers should watch for no-calls. There may be situations where a no-call would have been better than a call, or vice-versa. That is not second-guessing the official; it is simply offering guidelines.

Remember that, as observers, you cannot expect every official to take every word as if it were handed down in stone. Many associations have more than one observer and it is quite possible that advice could conflict. Comments made to officials are suggestions. Of course, some suggestions can be made stronger than others. Look for the official who takes and uses pertinent advice without damaging his or her style. Do not force young officials to be clones of yourself. When groups use more than one observer, make sure they are all on the same page with regards to rule changes and association interpretations. The last thing any group wants is one rater telling an official one thing about a rule and another rater preaching something else. That confusion is distracting to officials and an unnecessary evil. Also, try to talk to the officials after the contest. That is the best time to discuss certain situations because everything is fresh in everyone's mind. Take good notes and go over them carefully. If a question is asked by an official and you are not best suited to answer it, don't. Maybe it's a rules question that you are not particularly sure of. Don't guess. Take your time and find out from another source if you have to and get back to the official as soon as possible. Better to do some research and get it right than offer a quick answer and get it wrong. Remember, a rating system is only as good as the person doing the rating.