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NBA Refs Unfiltered

Three veteran NBA officials open up about their job.

by Kyle Stack / @KyleStack

Learning about the NBA's increased effort to assign players technical fouls for overt actions and other point-of-emphasis foul calls weren't all I took away from the NBA's annual referee meeting last week in Jersey City, NJ I also got to speak with a few veteran officials.

During last week's conference, there were a few timeouts when the media could approach referees for on-record comments. I'm not familiar with how often refs are able to speak to the media, but I was told by others there that it's far from a normal occurrence.

While waiting for the meeting to begin at my seat in a massive conference room on the third floor of the W Hotel — just across the aisle from Reggie Miller — I quickly looked over my right shoulder to see veteran ref Ken Mauer approaching the row of seats in which I was sitting. You know him as the one with the slicked-back hair. He sat to my left and started talking to me as if we had known each other for years. Of course, we had just met.

So, I chatted with him for a bit until the meeting's intermission. At that point, I walked (more like jogged) up to Danny Crawford, then found Joey Crawford after the meeting finished. Following are my conversations with the three officials.

Ken Mauer — entering 25th season

SLAM: Why do refs assign technicals to players? Is it strictly a matter of maintaining discipline?

KM: Well, it's what you're seeing right here. We've been instructed how to referee the game — block, charge, offensive foul, restricted area. The [NBA] wants players disciplined. They don't want us allowing one player to do one thing, and every other player sees we allow that player. Now, I'm speaking more from a personal standpoint.

Other referees handle situations differently. Me, the NBA wants that called, I'm gonna call it. First, I believe it's good for the game. I believe it sends a message to other players to play. Just play. I don't referee that way. I believe in calling technical fouls when they're necessary. Granted, if it's something where I can say to the player before he overreacts...I think the League would want that. But if it gets to the point where I couldn't get to him and he committed an overt action, then the NBA wants that technical foul.

SLAM: Is the propensity to call a foul directly correlated to your relationship with that player?

KM: No. Not at all. I mean, I don't look at that all. It has nothing to do with...whether it's first year or 15th year. With me, I believe you have more credibility if you're giving a technical foul to a player.



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SLAM: I should clarify the question. Not in terms of whether you get along with a player but whether how well you know a player, his personality, the way you can approach him.

KM: Again, if I can get to the player to avoid him committing something unsporsmanlike, then I'm going to do that — with all of them. But once he's done it, done an air punch, waved someone off, told somebody something vulgar, well now is not the time to try to go up to him. Now, I'm going to give a technical foul. Then I'm going to say, Listen, it's over, settle down. You're always trying to talk to players but you're not trying to avoid doing something. They dictate a technical foul. I don't go looking to give a technical foul.

SLAM: There are a lot of stresses that go with the job — dealing with players, coaches, fans yelling at you. Then most refs are hard on themselves for the job they do. How do you release that stress?

KM: You know, I don't find it stressful. I find things like the travel...that can be stressful. The hotel can be stressful. Being on the road, being sick and working. Maybe you have a situation where you can't see your family or you missed a flight and had to spend 12 hours in an airport. That's stress. To me, preparing for the game, having a nice lunch, getting rest, getting to the arena and going and doing your job — that's why we do it. Being part of the game.

There are going to be some games that are better than others. Some games are going to be crazier than others, some are going to have more fans yelling at you. Some games are going to be civil, some are going to be blowouts. That's, to me, I love that. That's part of the game. I don't necessarily find that stressful. What I find stressful are other things. Not necessarily doing the job.

SLAM: If you blow a call in a game or you feel like you could have done a better job in a game, does that live with you afterward?

KM: I think it stayed with me longer when I was younger. It bothered me. I'll watch the play over and over...but there comes a point where that doesn't help anybody. I've gotten much better at saying I missed the play, I'm sorry I missed the play, I've already told the player I've missed the play. I have no control over it [afterward]. I have to move to the next game so it doesn't affect my next game. So, yes we take it very seriously. I think a lot of it bothered me in the past. I remember plays to this day that I missed.

SLAM: Do you get a confidence boost from games you referee well? Is that important for the younger, inexperienced refs?

KM: Oh, yeah. There are some games where you think 'I got it.' For whatever reason, you see plays or you had some tough block/charge calls and you saw 'em and you got 'em. Or you have a goal-tending. The players played and there was a great flow and the game ends up being 96-93. You feel good, you have a meal, you watch tape after the game...those are the games you live for. You had a great rapport with your partners and everybody had a great game. There are some games where a team shoots 22 percent and everybody is upset. There are so many things going on. Somebody got hurt and somebody gets ejected.

SLAM: Every career has a learning curve. There's always a point where you start to get it, things fall into place and it feels like you've turned a corner. Is there a point in a ref's career where that takes place?

KM: I think it's different for a lot of people. How old you are when you get in the League, how mature you are to handle situations and a lot of the things off the court as well as on it. Did you get hired at 33? Did you get hired at 23? It's the same thing with the players. So, for me, it sounds corny but I still think I'm maybe improving a little. I really do [think that]. That's my goal. You try to get better and I think last year I had a better playoff than the year before. I think I'm getting better. But to answer your question, it's different. I would say in your sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth year you're starting to get it. I think your first three or four you're green. I think you're green in any job your first three or four years.

SLAM: Is there an intimidation between players and refs that goes on?

KM: I think with some guys more than others. Some guys...when I was early in my career, I gave a lot of technical fouls, some that weren't deserved. I didn't want to be intimidated so I maybe did things I shouldn't have done. Only certain people allow themselves to be intimidated. I didn't want ever want anybody to intimidate me.



Danny Crawford — entering 26th season

SLAM: What personality characteristics does it take to succeed as an NBA referee?

DC: Obviously you have to have thick skin. You have to be pretty understanding that it's an emotional game and you have to understand that. At the same time, you have to know when to shut it off. You have to know when to let a player have his say but also when a player needs to get back to playing basketball.

SLAM: What about for younger refs?

DC: There's a feel for the game that's so critical. You can learn the rule book but there's a feel that you

must have. You'll see right away. Not that you don't ref by the law. But there's also times where feel for the game comes in. You know when to lay off a call. You know when a game is getting too rough. Those are critical things that you must be able to pick up. That feel of the game is critical for a young guy to be successful.

SLAM: I assume the ability to communicate is important.

DC: Yes, the ability to communicate is...you can't get away without it. As a matter of fact, that's going to determine if you're going to be successful. If you have no people skills, the chances of surviving in the NBA

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are probably slim to none. You're going to be challenged every night. That's the beauty of our job; it's a challenging job. It changes night-in and night-out because the players come at you from different angles game-in, game-out.

SLAM: There are stressful components of refereeing day-to-day. What do you do to deal with it?

DC: The number one thing is rest. It's critical to get your rest because I don't care what your day is like... I don't care how many delays you dealt with — when you get on the court you have to be perfect. It is so critical. There are no excuses. It's something expected of us. You have to get your rest, eat correctly, stay in shape to avoid injury. It's actually a very disciplined lifestyle one must have in order to be successful in this job. Everybody thinks it's a glamorous job but it's actually a pretty boring job if you are disciplined in doing all the things that you need to do.

SLAM: When you started did you think you'd be in the League by your 26th year? Did you think you'd get burned out after the first decade?

DC: Nah, I'm a gym rat. You know what, refereeing is the next best thing other than playing. I am still a gym rat; I'm just obviously in bigger gyms right now. This job is not a boring job. It's a fun job, it's a challenging job. It can be a stressful job if you allow it to be. Once you get to a point where you know what's expected of you, you're prepared, the job is fun. The challenge is night-in and night-out...every time I walk on the floor, I don't know what happens but I know I can handle it. When you get to that point, and the reason why I'm at that point is, I'm prepared. If you prepare, you're in shape, you're well-rested...

SLAM: It sounds like you have the same mentality as a player.

DC: The only difference is they fly charter, we don't. [Laughs] We fly commercial. With them, they fly commercial. We go back to the hotel, we go to bed and then we get up at 4:30 in the morning if we have a game the next day to catch a 6 a.m. flight. After doing all our reports, we probably get done at 1, 2, getting up at 4:30.

SLAM: Do you do four, five games a week?

DC: We can. Four games, yes. There are some games per week where you'll do four, most weeks we average three. But you have back-to-backs.

SLAM: In roughly the same geographic area?

DC: Yes, yes.

SLAM: You're not traveling cross-country or anything.

DC: It's rare. I worked a game on the 23rd of December last year here, travel on Christmas Eve and worked Christmas Day in L.A. So I was in Newark on the 23rd, travel on the 24th, work in L.A. Christmas Day. So those are rare. But on occasions we get those. If you think about the time zones, it can be challenging. So what did I do when I got to L.A.? Slept. [Laughs] And I'm a professional sleeper. [Laughs]

Joey Crawford — entering 34th season

SLAM: How do you not let some of the stresses of the job affect you?

JC: It becomes your job. You try to get the plays right. There are stresses but there are stresses in any job. What you're doing is you're prepared, one, and if you stay in shape, hit the rule book, do your tape, stuff like that, you just go out and if you make a mistake, you make a mistake. You work the game.



SLAM: Was there a point when you started that you were uncertain you could last this long in the League?

JC: Oh my God, the first five years in the League nobody knew who you were, nobody believed anything you did. But you had veteran referees who got you through the moment. That's what I did, to help my partners.

SLAM: Ken Mauer pointed out Years 7, 8, 9 when a referee feels more comfortable in his position. Do you agree?

JC: Yeah, I always say it's five years to get comfortable with the travel, the arenas. I think when you feel like you belong is when the players and coaches stop giving you that look every time you blow the whistle. That takes time. You want them to have confidence in you. You can tell. I always tell young referees, You'll know because when you blow the whistle and you stop getting that look of amazement, not only from the 10 players but you may get that confusion look from your partners when you blow the whistle.

There's nothing that trains you for this job other than the NBA. It's great to go to the D-League and you call the plays and the rules are good and you're getting good training down there. But the players in our league are so fast and so good that there isn't anything in the world that prepares you for it until you get here.

SLAM: What keeps you in the game? Is it love for the game, interaction with the players and coaches?

JC: The interaction with players and coaches doesn't have anything to do with it. It's getting the plays right. It's trying to beat that recorder, that replay, and I've never done it. I've still never had a perfect game. In fact, I've never had a perfect quarter. So that's what you're looking for. You're looking for perfection and you never get it.

SLAM: It's like golf — perfection is never attainable so some players settle for setting a bar they can reach

where they'd be satisfied. You don't feel that way?

JC: I don't think you get satisfied with this. That's the great thing about it. You don't get satisfied.

SLAM: What do you offer to the younger refs who seek out your advice?

JC: Oh my Lord, they call all the time. In fact, I call them. I'm the degenerate NBA fan. I watch our game but I watch referees. I offer to them my experience of handling certain plays, how there could be things on the floor where nobody knows better than me how I handle myself...I may get upset the way I'm holding my body and a player or coach gets upset. And I look at the tape, 'My God, no wonder that player got mad at me.'

SLAM: Any difference in how fans respond to refs now versus 10, 20 years ago?

JC: I don't ever pay attention to fans. I'm just glad they're there. I don't even know they're there. It's concentration. When you make a mistake in a game, it's simply because of a concentration issue.

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