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NBAers Adjust to the Tech Rules

Players discuss how they've adapted to the rules.

by Kyle Stack / [@KyleStack](#)

When the NBA announced in September that it would re-emphasize its "Respect for the Game" policy for the 2010-11 season, giving referees the leeway to assign technical fouls more liberally to players who complain about calls, the assumption was that players' emotions on the court would be too constricted. After several recent conversations with NBA players, it seems that notion still holds water roughly one-quarter into the season.

Eight players interviewed earlier this week stated varying levels of frustration in regards to the NBA-enforced rules, including an inability to express emotion freely either verbally or through body language. The rules which the NBA granted referees the freedom to call technicals for include the following:

- Running towards an official to complain about a call.
- A player who makes an aggressive gesture after a call, such as an air punch.
- A overly aggressive disagreement in which a player waves his arms in the air or hits his arm to display how he was fouled.
- Persistent questioning of a call, even in a civil tone.

[Matt Barnes](#), a small forward for the [Los Angeles Lakers](#), said that even though the rules are difficult to account for, his experience in the League has helped his cause.

"This is my ninth year in the League, so you kind of get some respect from the refs," Barnes said. "Some of the refs you still can't talk to. I think some of them take it a little too personal. It's a game out there, we're emotional, sometimes our emotions get the best of us but we really mean no harm. I think unless we're really disrespectful to them, they should take it easy." Barnes admitted that players and refs are "settling in," and that it's been smooth sailing in recent games.

[Jodie Meeks](#) of the [Philadelphia 76ers](#) also explained that refs have shown more patience for a player's natural reaction to a call. "I think it's cleaned up a lot since the season started," the second-year shooting guard said. "There's not as much complaining and technicals."

[Kris Humphries](#) and [Stephen Graham](#), both of the [New Jersey Nets](#), also agreed that referees have become more understanding of the emotions the players were discouraged from showing at the outset of the rule's re-emphasis. Humphries said he thought the NBA probably spoke with referees to redefine what 'respect for the game' means. Graham wouldn't go that far, but he said game officials have adjusted since



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the start of the season.

"It's gotten a little bit better," Graham, a small forward, explained. "It's not as bad as at the beginning of the season. But they still need to be how they were a couple years ago with technical fouls. Let players play and adjust to the game first."

Humphries, a physical power forward, estimated there were two technicals called per game at the beginning of the season. (It should be noted it was simply a rough estimate.) While that mark is overstating it, it's clear the re-emphasis on disciplining players for overt reactions toward refs has caused the number of technical fouls to spike sharply, at times, compared to past seasons.

There have been 271 technical fouls whistled on players this regular season, through Thursday. Compare that to 286 techs called on players through December in the 2009-10 campaign, and 325 assigned to players through December of the 2008-09 season. While it appears this year's total from October through December should blow last year's out of the water, it may not catch up to the '08-'09 total.

That's due in large part to the refs cutting back on techs since the opening slate of games in October. Forty-three October games produced 44 technicals. By comparison, there were just 21 called each in October of 2008 and 2009.

Refs called 147 technicals in 217 November games this season, and they have called 80 more T's in 120 December games, through Thursday. November '08 and '09 saw 118 and 124 techs called, respectively. The December totals from those two seasons were more varied, as 147 were tallied in December '08 and 180 in '09.

As much as the refs might have softened their stance in some cases, the players have learned to adjust to a stricter in-game environment. "You don't see as much bad body language because players in the back of their minds probably know they'll get a technical [foul]," Meeks said. "I think it's cleaned up a lot."

Meeks' backcourt teammate, fellow second-year man [Jrue Holiday](#), emphasized players don't lash out like others think they do. "It's not like last year I was saying anything, or this year," Holiday said. "Before it seemed like they were handing out a lot of techs in any little situation, where you'd show any little bit of emotion. But from what I've seen [lately], everybody is a little more mellow. We talk to each other as opposed to the refs. There's always a team captain who talks to us instead [of us talking to a ref]."

[Pau Gasol](#) took a diplomatic stance when asked what the adjustment has been like since the outset of the season.

"Once you adjust and understand there are certain ways you can't react and expose the referees, whether you think they're right or wrong, everything has settled down," the Lakers' tenth-year power forward said. "I don't play thinking about it."

That mindset was echoed by virtually every player interviewed. Holiday and Humphries insisted that despite early season reservations about the re-emphasized rules, on-court time spent adjusting to the new style helped ease the transition as they head into mid-December.

Graham singled out a couple components of the 'Respect for the Game' rule which have been given more leniency from the refs.

"I think they're letting us get away with gestures," Graham said in response to a question about the repeated hand gestures made by the Nets' [Brook Lopez](#) and the Lakers' [Kobe Bryant](#) during the Lakers-Nets game last Sunday. "We can wave our hands, throw our hands in the air. But as long as we're not directing it towards the refs or saying anything to the refs directly, they won't [call us on it]."

Players aren't the only ones who think they can adjust. One Atlantic Division team executive explained in an e-mail message that stricter rules shouldn't be foreign, especially considering some NBA players adapted to a different set of officiating rules in the World Championships last summer.

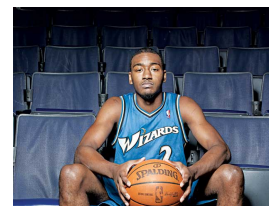
"If Team USA players who participated this summer could do it, I am sure the other 350 NBA players could do it," wrote the executive, who didn't want to be named due to the sensitivity of the topic. "I don't think it's an issue."

The NBA also feels players can make the adjustment, and Tim Frank, the NBA's Senior Vice President of Basketball Communications, said the players have done so.

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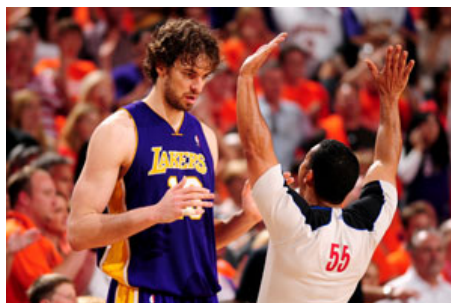
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"Players have responded well, and we continue to focus each day on consistency in the application so that the refs and players fully understand the expectations," Frank wrote in an e-mail message.

The NBA Player's Association didn't return phone call and e-mail messages asking for their position on the matter.

Yet as much as most players have adapted, others are cautious of the continued emphasis on the restriction of players' on-court emotions. [Tony Battie](#), a 13-year power forward now playing for the 76ers, noted that it's difficult for players to withhold their impulse to show emotion in such a physical game.

"Players get used to it," Battie said of the rule's re-emphasis. "But it's kind of hard, especially when there's a difference between a disagreement with a referee and an emotional reaction, whether leading to a call or getting pumped up to something that is going on. There's a fine line, and hopefully the refs will have a little bit of leeway in what the emotions are about. So, if it's something a guy disagrees with versus just a guy overly excited because of a play, because as you know, none of us really foul out there. [Smiles] We'll see how it goes."

[Joe Smith](#), who joined his 12th NBA team Wednesday when he was traded from the Nets to the Lakers as part of a three-team deal which included the Houston Rockets, said players actually do think about how referees will perceive their actions.

"Everybody's thinking about it," said Smith, the No. 1 overall pick in the 1995 NBA Draft. "You see, sometimes, guys read to react and they kind of catch themselves. I'm quite sure it's in the back of everybody's head out there on the floor."

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4 Responses to "NBAers Adjust to the Tech Rules"

Lee Posted: Dec.17 at 4:10 pm

Lame. NBA players are robots. I would welcome the physicality of the 80s and 90s now.

Jackie Moon Posted: Dec.17 at 6:42 pm

Awesome, I have notice players biting their tongues, it's great to see less whining and "gaming" of the refs. Respect the call.

RunningBrave Posted: Dec.18 at 1:05 pm

Somewhere, Rasheed Wallace is laughing his motherf***ing a** off!

MikeC. Posted: Dec.18 at 1:48 pm

I was assuming the total of league-wide techs was going to go waaaaaay down with the retirement of Sheed.

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