

NBA referees never stop trying to improve their games

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DENVER — It is 10:38 on a Sunday night and the Cadillac rental car carrying referees Bob Delaney, Derrick Stafford and Anthony Jordan from the Pepsi Center, in downtown Denver, to the Airport Marriott, some 15 miles to the east, is slowing to a crawl.

Fog, as thick as pea soup, has descended on Interstate 70 and visibility is down to 30 or 40 feet. It's a relatively rare meteorological condition in Denver, but for the moment, the Cadillac may as well be plodding through a Scottish moor.

"If your equipment is already here you'll be OK," Delaney, behind the wheel, says to Stafford and Jordan. "If not, well, you're just not going to make it out of here tonight."

The crew that officiated that night's game between the Denver Nuggets and the Miami Heat has reached the end of a four-game swing that took them from Seattle to Portland to Sacramento and, finally, to Denver. Stafford and Jordan both have a couple of days off coming and they're booked on a "red-eye" flight from Denver to Atlanta that night, hoping to squeeze in a few more precious hours with their families.

Stafford's 10-year-old son, Dillon, has a basketball game Monday afternoon that he has promised he won't miss, and the red-eye will get the referee home in time, despite the two hours he will lose going from the Mountain time zone to Eastern time. Stafford's 13-year-old son, Desmond, is counting on Dad to take him and his middle-school baseball teammates to the batting cage the same day.

Stafford says nothing as the fog thickens, but the worried look on his face speaks volumes.

The weather conditions are beyond his control, but explain that to a 10-year-old who rarely gets the chance to play a game in front of the dad he adores.

Yes, hard as it is for NBA coaches, players and fans to comprehend, referees are people, too. They even have families who love them, no matter how much coaches complain about their calls.

Spend a game day with an NBA referee crew and you will come away with a much greater appreciation for what it is the guys in the gray shirts and black slacks do at a game, other than infuriate coaches, players and fans.

You will understand that a referee's day begins long before tipoff and includes hours and hours of



(David Zalubowski/Special to the Express-News)

Referees Derrick Stafford both are veterans. Stafford has been an NBA referee since 1984.



(David Zalubowski/Special to the Express-News)

Erik Phillips, assistant trainer for the Denver Nuggets, helps NBA referee Anthony Jordan with a bandage for his strained groin earlier this season.

preparation and review.

Simply stated, an NBA game is impossible to call perfectly. NBA players are too big, too fast, too strong, too competitive and too clever for three people to referee a game without making the occasional mistake.

Know what?

Even the refs admit that.

"We know that perfect game is not out there," says Delaney, who has been refereeing in the NBA for 17 seasons and has worked four NBA Finals games, recognition that he is among the league's best. "We strive for it every night we go out there, but we know it's not there.

"When you make a call on the floor, you *know* it's the right call. Then you get back in the locker room and watch it on (video) tape, and you say, 'How could I ever have kicked that call?'"

Truth to tell, the mistakes made by referees, per game, likely are far fewer than those made by players who throw bad passes or commit dumb fouls.

It's just that the world is far less forgiving of the mistakes made by the whistle-tooters.

"But you know what?" Delaney says. "No one feels worse than we do when we kick a play."

It is videotape that tells the truth. Controversial calls are looked at, over and over, in slow-motion and even frame-by-frame, to determine if the referees "kicked the play."

And that is by the referees themselves, not the television commentators who are so quick to question the refs' decisions.

There is a TV monitor in the referees' locker room at every NBA arena, and one of the items on the crew's pregame check list is to hook up the "flip disc," an external computer hard drive, to the TV monitor to digitally record the game.

Feedback is instantaneous.

Take halftime of the Nuggets-Heat game, for instance:

Delaney, Stafford and Jordan aren't in their small dressing room under the stands for more than 30 seconds before Stafford has run the "tape" of the first half back to a play in the first couple of minutes on which he and Delaney had awarded the ball to Miami after an errant Nuggets pass.

The pass had zipped right past Miami's Brian Grant, and a large segment of Nuggets fans and players thought Grant had touched the ball on its way out of bounds.

Delaney and Stafford had concurred on the floor that the ball had not touched the Heat player, and they wanted to see if they were right.

Score one for the refs.

The tape doesn't lie.

As the two veteran officials review the out-of-bounds play, Nuggets assistant trainer Erik Phillips shows up, on request from Delaney, to re-wrap Jordan's left leg. Jordan had aggravated a strained groin in the first half and was hurting badly getting up and down the court by the final few minutes of

the second quarter.

Sometimes, you've got to ref hurt.

Meanwhile, the review continues.

Stafford wants to see if a goaltend he called on Denver's Francisco Elson near the end of the first period was a good call. He thought the ball hit the glass on the backboard an instant before Elson swatted it away.

This time the tape shows his call had been wrong.

"I thought it was pretty clear," Delaney says to Stafford, who has a pained expression on his face, "but it was pretty close."

The two veteran refs review several more calls — the tape affirms their calls on all of them — as Jordan, in just his second year in the league, gets some special instructions from Mike Lauerman, one of four referee-group supervisors the league employs. A former ref himself, Lauerman is paying special attention to Jordan, evaluating closely the work of the 31-year-old.

NBA referees are rated annually, and the lowest-rated sometimes are weeded out of the 60-person refereeing cadre.

"It wasn't a big deal," Jordan said of the critique Lauerman gave him. "He just thought I was being a little too 'collegiate' with my block calls. He wants me to be more forceful with them."

There is scant time for relaxation during the halftime break, and the three refs talk a bit about things that made impressions on them in the first half.

"Carmelo (Anthony, Denver's star rookie) already has learned some of the little veteran tricks," Delaney says. "He went to the basket hard and got banged and then he came up holding his eye.

"I said to him, 'Carmelo, you're learning quick,' and he gave me that baby smile of his."

The players, Delaney says, seem to be behaving themselves pretty well. No attitude. No excessive trash talking. With Jordan's leg re-wrapped, they head out for the second half of a close game, hoping for an uneventful conclusion.

Player deportment diminishes dramatically in the first two minutes of the third quarter. Miami's Lamar Odom and Denver forward Nene get tangled after a rebound. Odom shoves Nene and aggressively gets in his face. Nene puts both arms up in the air and takes a step backward as both Jordan and Stafford run between the two players to make sure nothing really ugly happens.

Order restored, Jordan wants to call a double technical foul. Stafford feels a "tech" is warranted only on Odom. All three referees consult before announcing the penalties.

The result: personal foul on Odom and technical foul on Odom.

Naturally, Heat coach Stan Van Gundy protests vigorously, insisting a double technical should have been called.

Delaney, the crew chief, is unmoved.

"First," Delaney says afterward, "there is a foul on Odom, which we all have. At the end, Odom pushes Nene very aggressively."

Says Stafford: "Anthony wanted to call the double tech, but what we want to do is get the aggressor. So, we stuck with the single technical on Odom."

"This," Delaney says, "was a very good example of team officiating."

"Team officiating" — referees communicating among themselves to handle certain situations — has been stressed by the league in the "Web plays" the referees review on their laptop computers every day.

Technology dramatically has improved how the referees communicate with the league office and with one another. Every ref is issued a laptop computer, and on the referees' interactive Web site they get weekly rules tests and daily "Web plays," digital video replays of calls made in recent games that often require them to "click on" to tell the NBA's Basketball Operations staff how they interpreted the play.

Delaney, Stafford and Jordan had spent several hours going over Web plays and test questions at their hotel the morning of the Nuggets-Heat game. They also had watched the Celtics-Spurs game together, commenting back and forth about the calls made by the crew working that game.

"It's all about getting your head into the game before you go to the arena," Stafford says. "The Web plays are great, because they often force you to go back to the rule book to look things up."

"We think we know it, but there are situations that make you go back to look things up, and that's great for us."

Most coaches, the three refs say, know the rule book pretty well, or at least have an assistant coach who does.

Many players, they say, don't.

"To be fair to the players," Stafford says, "the rules have changed so much the last three years that it's been hard to keep up."

The Odom-Nene incident is handled with relative calm, and the rest of the game is played without incident.

Unknown to nearly everyone watching, the refs worked the second half in the "old" three-person referee rotation, where one referee is designated the "umpire." The old alignment minimized the quick stops and turn-and-sprints the ailing Jordan would have to make.

"We went to that to save his groin as much as we could," Delaney said. "We're already down six (injured) refs. We don't want to lose another. Flexibility and adaptability. That's part of our philosophy."

Miami, at the end of a tough, six-game Western road swing of its own, runs out of steam late and Denver wins relatively easily, 88-80.

"I wouldn't call it a real clear-cut game," Delaney says afterward. "It was more difficult to call than our last few games."

"You could tell Miami was tired, a little irritable," Stafford says. "But I think we kept control of things pretty well. I think we're going to be pretty happy with the tape when we review it."

After the Cadillac finally has crept the final half-mile up 40th Avenue to the Airport Marriott, the three

referees say their goodbyes in the lobby. Stafford and Jordan await the shuttle to Denver International Airport, hoping their flight will take off. Delaney heads to his room to file the report on the game the three just worked.

It's a "written" report done online on a computer form off the Referees' Interactive Web Site. Delaney fills in all the pertinent details and submits the report, finishing his day's work at 11:10 p.m.

The 17-year NBA veteran was supposed to head to his home in Lakewood Ranch, Fla., to spend three days with his second wife, Billie, and his three stepchildren. Instead, he will head off to Dallas the next morning to pick up a game for one of his injured colleagues.

"We don't do call-ups from the 'D League' (National Basketball Development League)," Delaney says. "When someone gets hurt, the rest of us have to pick up the slack.

"Sometimes we laugh when we hear coaches and players complain about their road schedules. We never have a home game."

At some point on the flight to Dallas, Delaney will do a video review of the game he, Stafford and Jordan just worked.

He doesn't mind watching tape. Tape doesn't lie, and far more often than not backs up the calls the referees make.

"Nothing beats tape," Delaney says. "The more we watch, the better we get. And it reinforces what we do right. We live in a negative world. You need the reinforcement of the positive."

Refereeing in the NBA truly can be a career if you're good enough and can survive the physical rigors of the job and the strain the travel places on everyday life. Delaney has been at it since 1987, Stafford since 1984. Both have been divorced. Both regret that the time demands keep them apart from their children far too often.

"If you don't like problems, you're in the wrong business," says Delaney, who has a degree in criminology and was a New Jersey State Police sergeant before beginning his career in the NBA. "Nobody's going to praise you. We know that. So you have to maintain your confidence level on your own, and every individual has to figure it out for himself or herself.

"The physical demands ... well, I'm 52 now and I've really had to start watching what I eat. If I don't, I gain weight, because during the season I can't get on the treadmill or do a lot of the other stuff I do in the offseason. Your body can handle only so much. The travel is tough, but we get used to it and we have our little routines.

"Every official says the same thing: The passion for the game is always there; it's getting to the game that's tough."

On this night, Delaney will unwind in front of the TV for an hour or so before finally getting some sleep. He reminds himself to call Stafford the next day to see whether the heavy fog scrubbed that red-eye flight.

Turns out, the equipment already was at DIA, and Stafford and Jordan did make it back to Atlanta

Stafford got to see Dillon's basketball game.

Booking that red-eye flight was the best call any NBA referee made the entire day.

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