



HOW DECISIVE ARE YOU?

**The Sports Officials Guide to
Effective Judgment, Confidence
& Decision-Making**





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**In any moment
of decision, the
best thing you
can do is the
right thing, the
next best thing is
the wrong thing,
and the worst
thing you can do
is nothing.**

Theodore Roosevelt

Decisiveness, judgment and confidence are some of the “must-haves” at the highest levels of sports officiating, but they’re also necessary traits at all levels of officiating. Those three traits are tightly tied together in the sense that you can’t truly be decisive without good judgment and the appearance of confidence.

Decisiveness is defined as an ability “characterized by firmness and decision.” It’s no good to simply be a quick decision-maker. Anyone can do that. Being decisive means that you have the ability to decide, and that ability comes from your level of judgment. From the strength of a decision you then have the ability to act, and that action must be a confident one. Sports officiating requires that you are able to make key decisions *effectively*.

Decisiveness is both a skill you can build and an internal state you can summon when you need it. It’s not about being stubborn, arrogant or hasty. Decisiveness is simply the ability to decide with speed and clarity. The feeling of decisiveness is similar to a feeling of confidence, strength and assuredness. Think back to a time when you felt particularly decisive. How did you hold yourself? You probably stood tall with your head high and your breathing steady. Your movements were probably controlled and smooth. Your voice probably resonated and projected well. Those are all elements of confidence – or “presence” – that many officials strive to cultivate in their careers.

The ability to make firm decisions quickly is a skill that can be learned and practiced. You can start by simply timing how long it takes you to make decisions. Minor decisions, such as what to eat or what route to drive home, should be made swiftly. Major decisions should take more deliberation. And then there’s the reality and expectation of making game-time decisions as a sports official. Swiftly is not likely to be quick enough, and as for deliberations, you may be lucky enough to have a couple of seconds if the play allows.

Before we get into how to become more decisive, let’s pause for a moment and take a quick quiz to gauge your existing level of decisiveness. The questions and answers below are based on broad generalizations. Nobody is strictly one way or another, but your answers to the following questions can give you some sense of where you fall on the decisiveness scale.

WHAT TYPE OF DECISION-MAKER ARE YOU?

**Your boss emails asking you when to hold the next team-building day.
You reply:**

- 1 "Give me a day or two to think about it and I'll get back to you."
- 2 "I'm swamped. Let me ask some of the other workers what their thoughts are."
- 3 "Friday the 6th is clear. Want me to set that up?"

**When you meet someone who knows exactly what they want, you find
yourself feeling:**

- 1 Inspired to be more like they are.
- 2 Put off and a little intimidated by their assuredness.
- 3 Intrigued by their similar approach to your own.

You want to take your significant other out to dinner, and you have three good options: BBQ, Mexican and Italian. You're good with all three and decide to:

- 1** Choose Mexican, second guess and go to the BBQ restaurant, then arrive and wish you were having Italian.
- 2** Let your significant other choose. You don't want to pick the wrong one.
- 3** Head straight to the Italian. You know you're in the mood for pasta.

The house, garage and basement are all cluttered. It's time to do some spring cleaning. What's your approach?

- 1** I struggle to let go of things and justify why I need to hold on to everything.
- 2** I'm good at sorting things into piles but sometimes the things I put in the "throw away" pile creep back in.
- 3** I cut right through the clutter in little time. I'm ready for some tidy spaces.

You've been put in charge of a new project at work, and you're required to choose your team from among your co-workers. You start by:

- 1 Setting up a series of short interviews with your co-workers, so you can choose the best possible team.
- 2 Sending an email to your entire department asking who might be interested in joining you on the project.
- 3 Swiftly picking a team based on your existing experiences with each person.

You're interested in seeing a new movie that you're sure you'll like, and it turns out to be terrible. You think:


- 1 I did the best I could, but I definitely regret my choice of film today.
- 2 Next time I'll wait until a few people I know have seen the film and get their opinion before I buy a ticket.
- 3 I don't always make good choices — but I'm willing to take some chances.



**IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY
1 THEN YOU MAY BE A...**

PERFECTIONIST DECISION-MAKER

Your desire for perfection can hinder your decision-making. You pour over every decision, and that brings extra stress into your life. The quest to get decisions right often leads to longer deliberations. When you make a wrong decision, you tend to overthink it, beating yourself up. That leads to a spiral of longer and longer deliberations until you eventually can become frozen in your decision-making process, fearing taking the wrong step. You might consider using such experiences to better understand what strategies would lead to better decision-making. Start by making a small decision you feel satisfied with. Repeating this routine regularly will build your self-confidence in your ability to choose well within a reasonable timeframe.



**IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY
2 THEN YOU MAY BE A...**

SELF-DOUBTING DECISION-MAKER

You tend to be stuck in a loop of doubt and indecisiveness. Socially, you're more likely to go with the crowd than to commit to a preference, and while this takes the pressure off having to decide, it also means your voice and your will make no impact. Try choosing your battles and focus on distinguishing between what's worth deliberating over, and what's not. Use visualization to explore possible outcomes and when one resonates, trust your gut that it's the right choice – and stick with it! It may turn out it wasn't the best option after all, but that's OK. There's something to learn from the experience. For now, change your focus from what could go wrong to what could go right.



**IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY
3 THEN YOU MAY BE A...**

SPONTANEOUS DECISION-MAKER

You like to make a decision and stick to it. You have no problem deciding what's right for you. You're confident in your decision-making process and don't waste a moment considering the outcome. While you're efficient in the decision department, it does mean that sometimes you can jump headfirst into a decision before weighing all the options, being somewhat impulsive. Remember, it's okay to take some small amount of time to deliberate and come to the best option. To help ensure that you equip yourself with knowledge and education whether that's reading, researching or talking to others, and you'll continually be confident that your judgments are solid.

THE 4 ELEMENTS OF DECISIVENESS

In the business world, money can be made or lost based, in large measure, on the decisiveness of the executives. In battle, the decisiveness of the commander often determines who wins or loses. In a ballgame, the outcome can often turn on individual calls that happen “in the blink of an eye.”

Because of that, people often mistake speed for decisiveness. Speed is an element of being decisive, but it's only one component. Tom FitzGerald of FitzGerald Associates, a CEO consulting firm, says that decisiveness in any discipline has four components:

- 1 SPEED**
THE TIME IT TAKES TO MAKE A DECISION
- 2 IMPORTANCE**
THE NATURE OF WHAT IS BEING DECIDED UPON
- 3 COMMITMENT**
TO CARRY OUT THE DECISIONS, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT
- 4 RIGHTNESS**
THE CORRECTNESS OF THE DECISION

Certainly each element has a parallel in officiating. Speed is important. You never want to rush a call, but there is that fine line between pausing to make sure of what you saw and taking a split second too long.

Many of the calls you make in a game (some people would say every call you make) are important. Do you ever treat a call as if “it wasn’t mine to make” or as if “that one didn’t matter anyway”? What is your commitment level to being the best official you can be? Do you want the big games? Are you ready for them? Speaking of readiness, are you committed to being ready every play? Finally, the cliché is that officiating is the one avocation where you are expected to start out perfect and improve from there. Being right? It’s everything for an official!

So if the components can be identified, why does the ability to be decisive come so difficult for some? Some people are better decision-makers than others. What makes their decisions more effective, more credible and more respected by their peers? Probably it has most to do with a commitment they made to themselves to integrate decision-making into their overall officiating learning plan. They consistently seek out better ways to get the work done, take responsibility for themselves and their decisions and strive to learn from others.

HOW WE MAKE DECISIONS

So many factors go into decision-making. To improve, it's important to know how experience and training impact the decisions we make. Research done on decision making can provide some answers.

Believe it or not, officials are the same all over. The sports vary and the language differs, but regardless of cultural or geographic factors, the constant is that all officials need training to get better.

Clare MacMahon, a lecturer in the School of Sport and Exercise Science at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, has studied and taught decision-making skills and the development and training of tactical knowledge for years. She has worked with Canadian Football League officials, FIFA referees in Belgium and baseball umpires in Florida, and has shared her research on officials and decision making around the world.

The better officials could be considered experts in the field. What has to be done and how long does it take to become an expert? "It takes between 8,000 and 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become an expert," MacMahon said. "It's often translated into what's known as the 10-Year Rule. There's this huge volume of practice that has to lie underneath becoming an expert."

In working with international soccer officials, MacMahon found it took an average of 16 years to reach the elite level. That led her and a colleague to question how practice time was being utilized, and to match the training to the job demands.

“We chose two main characteristics to distinguish major types of officials. One was how much interaction the official has with the athletes or about the performance demands,” she said. Is there a lot of running? Is there a lot of communicating with coaches and with players? Second, we looked at the number of athletes or the number of cues that are being monitored. And by combining those two we came up with three major types of officials.”

REACTORS

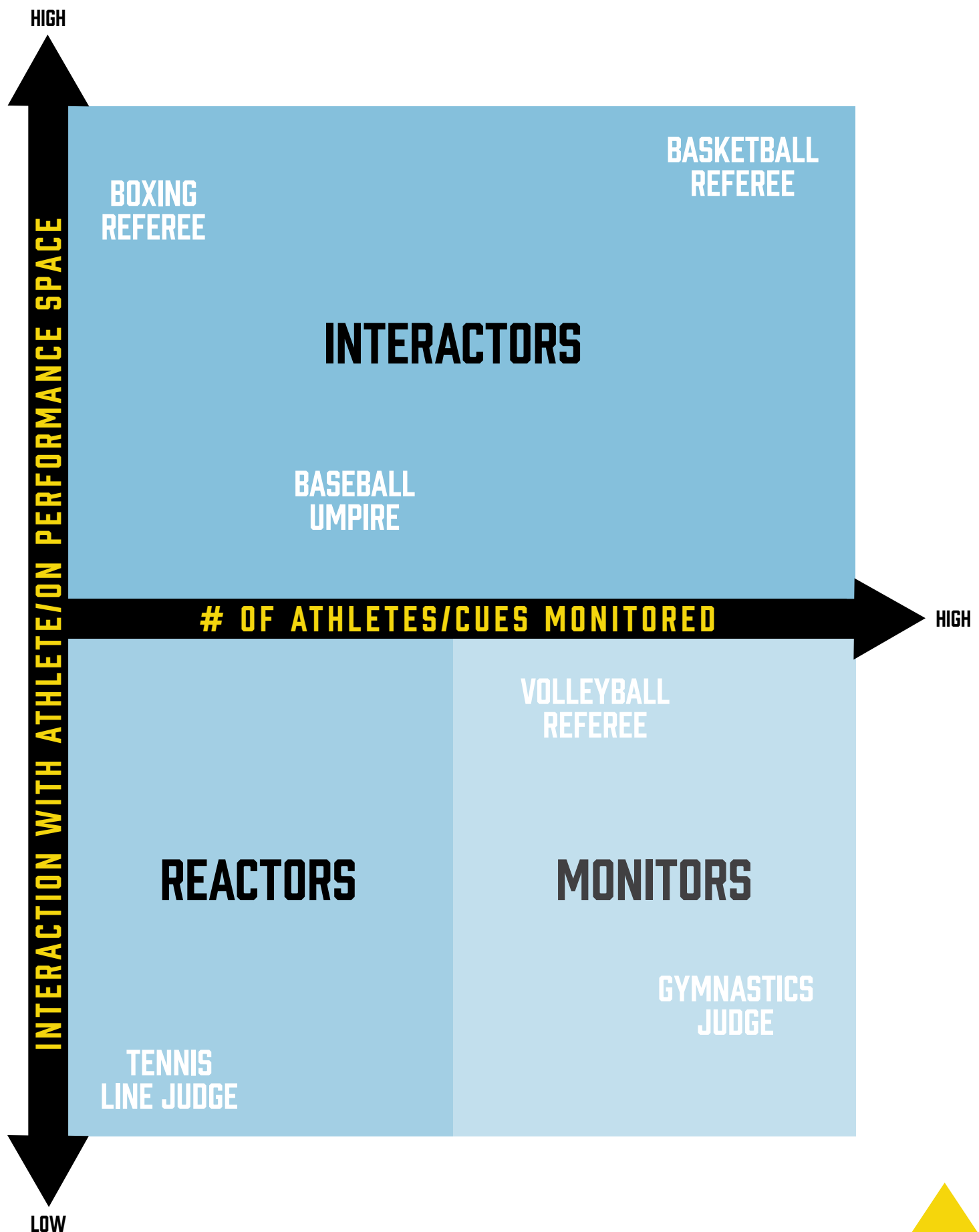
These are officials who don't move a lot or interact a lot with the participants. They have very specific cues that they're paying attention to.

MONITORS

These officials are ones who have more cues with little movement. There might be one athlete that they're monitoring but there are quite a few cues that they have to pay attention to.

INTERACTORS

The most demanding roles belong to officials who interact a lot, face many physical demands and have a large number of athletes to observe.



MacMahon's research focused a lot on officials training and she learned some interesting things. "Officiating lead games was the most relevant practice for improving performance," MacMahon said. "When we look at practice activities with athletes, we never rate actually performing as a practice activity. But we needed to do this for officials." It's similar to the old officiating adage that the best way to get better is to work more games.

That determination in MacMahon's research led to the creation of the phrase "deliberate experience."

"Because they're not getting necessarily the practice that they need otherwise," MacMahon said officials are likely to take longer to become experts. Those gaps helped explain why it was taking 16 years for officials to get to the elite level.

Everybody has the skills to take in information. We rely on our senses of sight and sound and the rest. Some people have better natural skills in those areas than others. MacMahon calls those abilities "hardware skills" because they're hardwired into our bodies. But the real key to improving decisiveness lies in the processing of the information — the "software skills" if you will.

All humans are bound to a limit in our reaction time. "We cannot get much faster than 200 or maybe 160 milliseconds," said MacMahon. "If you train and train and train, you're not going to get faster than that." Instead, MacMahon's research points to other skills to become quicker. Officials who utilize "advance cues" can improve the speed of their decisions. You never want to anticipate a call in officiating, but you can read certain keys and movements enough to predict an accurate outcome — especially if you've worked enough games and seen enough plays in repetition over the course of many seasons.

MacMahon said tests with working officials reveal that "officials are better at identifying signals, detecting fouls and violations. They're better at assessing plays that lead to injury. Their consistency of decisions is better. And not all the time but a lot of the time, more experienced officials are better than less experienced officials."

INFLUENCES ON DECISIONS

A number of factors can influence officials' decisions, subconsciously or not. "Officials process information which is incomplete," MacMahon said. "It's intentionally deceptive."

It's fast-paced. And all this processing is happening under time pressure. So there are gaps in the information. What do we do when we have a gap in the information and we're forced to make a decision? We try to fill in that gap.

For example, a soccer referee's decisions on yellow cards are affected by time in the match. "There are fewer yellow cards (given) in the first half of a soccer game," MacMahon said. Officials can also be influenced by what they see at warmups. "Watching the warmup helps you know what to expect," she said.

According to MacMahon's research, the more pitches umpires see, the more likely they are to call borderline pitches strikes. "We found that borderline pitches were more likely to be called strikes when they were assessed after having seen two ball pitches or when we had a 3-2 or a 3-0 count," she said. "This context of where the information is being presented or where the decision is happening is having an influence."

By using global positioning devices, researchers have found that soccer referees who are farther away from plays are more prone to errors. "There is a predictable pattern of errors based on how the information is projected onto the retina for assistant referees when they're not standing on the offside line," said MacMahon. "Where they're standing influences their offside line, which may not be the correct offside line. And you can predict the type of error that they're going to make based on whether they're too far ahead or too far behind that offside line."

WHAT ABOUT JUDGMENT?

Those influences can have an effect, as is illustrated by MacMahon's research, but what part does judgment play? That's another crucial skill for officials. Can it be taught? Can it be improved?

How officials handle game-changing decisions based on their judgment often determines how they are regarded by coaches, fans and their peers. So, is judgment an inherent trait that some officials have and others do not? Does it differ from common sense or gut instinct? Does good judgment unfold over time? Is it a product of luck? Of intelligence? Is there a process in improving judgment for an official, newer or experienced, to consistently make good or better calls?

If you are of the belief that judgment is a process that unfolds over time, then it probably is possible to learn it. However, if you believe that judgment is nothing more than gut instinct — you either have it or you don't — then the decision-making process will probably be inconsistent at best.

Judgment is an innate ability to understand the fairness aspect in a game and to quickly determine if somebody violated the guidelines they've been given. That said, it is possible to teach judgment to a certain extent by having clear guidelines about expectations. At the same time, the X factor is the difference in abilities of different officials in deciding what is and what isn't a violation of the rules in any given contest.

Everyone has judgment and it can be improved. Studies show that automobile drivers improve their judgments with driver training classes. Failed businessmen improve their judgments after taking business courses. Troubled young people make better judgments and improve their lives after counseling. Officials must make the best possible use of their judgmental abilities through education and understanding.

One clinician at an umpiring camp shared this story: “After observing poor calls on live out-safe drills I dramatically improved the judgment of prospective umpires by demanding, ‘On this drill you will call every runner out unless you are willing to bet your life the runner is safe.’ That year’s new candidates actually topped the performance of college-rated umpires in the same drill from a few days before.”

So yes, judgment can be improved. There are three major factors toward making that happen for sports officials:

1 POSITIONING

Officials must understand the importance of a good calling position with proper angle and distance from the play. Work on obtaining a good angle first and then concentrate on the proper distance from the play. That means having all the elements of the play in the official’s primary view, realizing that the number of elements will vary from play to play.

2 FOCUS

No matter how good your positioning is, it is useless unless the official focuses in the proper area to see the critical points of the play. This is where the tried and true officiating philosophy of Pause (observe the initial action of a play); Read (decide where to go to best cover the play); and React (physically moving to the proper calling position) comes into play.

3 TIMING

Good timing is essential for an official’s success. Good timing includes waiting for the play to end before rendering a decision. Avoid at all costs the such dreaded calls as the “Blarge” or the “Ooooutsssaafe” call.

HOW TO TEACH JUDGMENT

To help teach good judgment, maximize the number of plays an official is exposed to. That can be done through working or observing games, watching videos or to a lesser degree, discussing play situations. Conceptual discussion of a play will never replace seeing the play.

Of course, judgment is not exclusively a function of experience. There are officials who have years of experience yet never seem to get a feel for the game. Those officials are wildcards. Even though they might be able to quote chapter and verse from the rules, their partners are on edge the entire game wondering when the weird call is going to come. Those officials have the catalog or database but not the ability to synthesize the information and put things in context. A lot of that comes down to common sense and personality, and there is not much that can be done in the way of training programs to improve those officials. Ultimately, not all will become a great official.

Mentoring will help, if the official is younger and willing to take some constructive criticism. Unfortunately, the more-experienced officials often are less likely to listen to suggestions concerning judgment. Those officials point to the rules and steadfastly maintain that they are among the few who call the game as it was intended. Know any of those officials?

On the other hand, there are a few less experienced officials who just seem to “get it” very quickly. Part of that is because in many sports today a newer official can get a ton of games under his or her belt at a very early age. It may also be that the official played the sport and developed a good feel for the game. Maybe mom or dad was an official and that official built up years of experience going along to watch. In some cases, it’s just that the official is born with good instincts.

We can all learn the rules and get in shape, but the acid test for an official is his or her judgment. Most training programs are best suited to address the intellectual and objective aspects of officiating. However, the major contribution should be by providing opportunities for play discussions and videos reviews. The bottom line is that developing judgment is mostly about gaining experience. An old musician's joke went, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer: "Practice, practice, practice." The same goes for officials. How do you get better judgment? Officiate, officiate, officiate.

THE CONFIDENCE FACTOR

We've talked about many elements of decisiveness like speed, knowledge and judgment, but what about the final aspect of being decisive? What about confidence (or at least the appearance of confidence)?

First, let's understand the difference between confidence and cockiness. Confidence is an attitude you exude that signals to everyone that you're in control, that you can be trusted and that all things will be handled well. Cockiness, on the other hand, has negative connotations and should be avoided. It reflects an attempt on your part to put yourself above the proceedings and does little to engender trust. Floating just beneath confidence and well away from cockiness is something called "moxie." Moxie is your expression of confidence under fire and tends to reflect favorably on you and the game.

There's nothing wrong with combining moxie with confidence if you understand when each works and how either is perceived. That notion applies as well in all sports where just about every new coach or manager you encounter will be trying to take your measure — at least until he or she knows enough about the quality of your work to take you seriously. Not everyone who puts on a striped shirt was born to be an instant leader and have the perfect response to any situation; most of us have to work at our image. Cultivating that image is key to your ongoing credibility. How does that work?

Confidence and moxie go together like brick and mortar: Confidence is the brick that sets the foundation for solid performance while moxie, like mortar, holds it all together and fills in the cracks. Also like mortar, moxie is pretty well useless by itself while brick alone will only last you until the first storm. Cockiness is a wrecking ball that tears it all down.

As an official, you have to develop confidence from three critical sources while avoiding showing too much moxie and keeping cockiness in check at all times.

1 SELF-ASSESS

Your first source of confidence must come from within. If you have any idea why you're officiating, it's inevitable that there will be times when you look around and ask yourself what it is you've gotten into. Fine, you're sane. If you don't have enough confidence in yourself to provide some good answers to your question, though, perhaps you're not ready for the level you are currently at in your sport. The confidence you develop from experience, training and study needs time so don't rush it. If you're progressing at a good pace, then having some moxie will help you address your self-doubts.

2 CONVINCE YOUR CREW

At the same time you're addressing the inner you, you have to project confidence to, and gain the confidence of, your fellow officials. Those men and women can break you — often faster than you can break yourself. On any sized crew, if you stink as an individual, you will all fail as a group, so the other officials have to believe you can all help each other. Practically speaking, you should leave your cockiness at home when given the chance to make a good first impression on those folks: Let them read you and let your actions during the game speak for themselves. When they're ready to accept you, you'll get the message. When you're eventually well-established, your moxie will start defining you, but it's only the icing on the cake in comparison to your ability.

3 THE PARTICIPANTS

Many of the coaches and players usually don't care much about the officials at all, while the rest see you as a potential obstacle — or a potential ally. Whether they're trying to break you or merely manipulate you, if you confidently go about your business in spite of their entreaties, they'll soon learn they're wasting their time and move on. That is where showing some moxie often pays big dividends: If we may define it in that circumstance as knowing when to take on the right troublemaker, you can significantly steepen their learning curve about you.

Confidence in officiating should be projected the entire time you're in charge of a contest, but it is exponentially important when it comes to your specific calls and no-calls. Your level of decisiveness may be both accurate and speedy, but if you give the appearance of someone either unsure or overly cocky, you will never be viewed as decisive.

MAKING BETTER DECISIONS

To wrap things up, effective decision-making is the process of identifying potential infractions and then taking action with speed and confidence using good judgment.

Being decisive does not come naturally for most people. As we learned earlier, one of the most common reason people have for being indecisive is that they are striving for perfectionism. In other words, they have a fear of failure.

Certainly, there isn't an official who doesn't want to call a perfect game every time, but the reality is that it rarely – if ever – happens. If you make a bad call, there's nothing you can do about it. That's when you have to move on and tell yourself that next time you'll make the right call.

Another hindrance to decisiveness is that many people see conflicts as “bad,” and have trouble being decisive because they fear their decision will lead to confrontations. That's similar to what we discussed earlier as “self-doubting” in decision-making. Mark Twain once said, “Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear.” An official who has mastered his or her fear through confidence can be decisive.

Without question, the best officials at every level are decisive. The tough calls come their way, and they make them accurately and without flinching. But how do the rest of us get to that place? There are several parts of your game you can work on that will improve your decisiveness. This include rules knowledge, proper mechanics and positioning, experience and continued learning. The latter can be a camp, film viewing or just plain discussion.

Talking game situations over with new officials who have questions often helps veteran officials at least as much as the newer official. If you make the effort to become a more decisive official, what's in it for you? Plenty.

Certainly your games will go better: coaches and players will accept your calls most of the time, you'll suddenly start to have an "easier time" of things out there, but you'll also quietly be developing something much more important to any official — a good reputation. Coaches, players and fans all want to believe that their game is in the hands of one of the most competent officials in the area.