3-Person Officiating System for Basketball
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Throughout the many levels of basketball that are played throughout the world, the officiating is scrutinized much more than any other aspect of the game. Casual basketball fans might say that the referees are horrible and do not know what they are doing; however, these fans probably do not understand how the 3-Person Officiating System operates. Due to the speed and complexity of the game, the officials must perform their duties correctly; this is an equally difficult process which allows them to maintain control of the game.

Official’s Positions and Duties

The 3-Person Officiating System consists of three different positions officials must occupy: the lead, the center, and the trail. The lead and trail position themselves on the ball side of the court which is known as the strong side. The center is positioned on the opposite side or weak side. Each position has an area they must watch and can only make certain calls from those positions. Refer to Appendix A for term clarifications.
The Lead Official

In a typical half court possession, the official that is located under the basket along the baseline is the lead official. This official mainly watches the lane and all play under the basket on the ball side of the court (this is the area highlighted in red in the above image). It is their responsibility to watch for players going out of bounds along the baseline and infractions, such as offensive players occupying the lane for three seconds. They must also watch for different types of off ball fouls under the basket like moving screens, hooking, holding, and pushing. The majority of calls they will make deal with on ball situations, or when the ball handler enters the lane. The different calls that can be made include shooting fouls, blocks, push offs, and charges. The lead position usually makes the most foul calls because most fouls happen in this area. When an offensive player drives the lane and there is contact, it can sometimes be difficult to determine who initiated the contact, which gives the lead a block/charge situation. A block/charge situation depends on which player got to the spot on the floor where contact was made first. If the defensive player reached the spot first and obtains initial guarded position, the result is a charge. If the offensive player reaches the spot first and has control of their body while the defender comes in late, this results in a block. This situation is considered to be the toughest call to make in sports due to the speed of the game; not to mention, as stated earlier, the lead official has a lot to watch for in their area.

The Center Official

The center official is the referee that stands on the sideline furthest away from the lead official. He is positioned roughly about the distance that the free throw line is from the baseline; this is commonly referred to as “foul-line extended”. This position has to watch the weak side or non-ball side of the court, including that side of the lane which gives them the widest area to cover (refer to the blue shaded area in the previous diagram). The center is expected to call a lot of off ball fouls, such as illegal screens or contact that is far away from the ball. They also have to call out of bounds along that sideline. Sometimes, there may be a cross court pass into the center’s area which results in a shot attempt. That attempt may end up being near the basket, which is still their call because the lead may not have the best view. Many times in this scenario, basketball fans wonder how they can make that call since they are not under the basket; however, from the mechanics of this system, it is their call to make. The official will make that call from the sideline position and may also be further away from the play than the lead official. Since the offensive player came from the center official’s side of the court, it is still their call because the lead official’s view may be obstructed by other players. Another call the center must make comes when perimeter players go into the lane for rebounds and contact is made from behind. The lead sometimes would not be able to see this contact coming from the weak side so the center must help.
The Trail Official

The trail official is on the same side of the court as the lead official, but they try to always be closer than the players to the opposing basket. They have to cover the white area in the image above. This way, the officials have all of the play enclosed between them so they can make the call. The trail official’s responsibilities include any fouls that occur around the perimeter, determining if the shot attempt is a three- or two- point attempt, out of bounds along the sideline, and back court violations. On shot attempts, even if they are in the lane, this official watches the ball to determine if goaltending or basket interference occurs during when the ball is in the air. On many occasions the lead will ask the trail if the ball went in the basket on shooting fouls called by the lead. The lead was watching the players but the trail is watching the ball, therefore they must inform the other officials if the basket counts or not.

Movement and Rotation

Since basketball is played on a 94 foot long by 50 foot wide court, the 3-Person Officiating System involves different movements and rotations to keep officials in the proper position to make the correct call. The most common movements performed by officials are the transition during a change of possession and changing positions when the ball moves from the strong side to the weak side. For communication purposes, especially during collegiate or professional games, officials rotate when fouls have been called.

Transition Movement and Strong Side Switch

As shown in the above figure, when possession switches from one half of the court to the other, the officials also move to the other side. The trail official from the previous side becomes
the new lead official since they will be the first down the court. They move along the sideline and gradually move towards where the baseline and nearest side of the lane intersect. The lead official from the previous side becomes the new trail and follows the ball carrier up the court, moving from the post under the previous basket to coming up the sideline. The center official transitions along the sideline from foul line extended to foul line extended. When a turnover occurs and there is a fast break, the movement patterns of the officials still give them two officials near the play under the other basket to watch for a foul.

During typical half court possessions, the offensive team will pass the ball from one side of the court to the other. The side of the court that has the trail and lead official is referred to as the strong side since two officials are on that side. As the ball moves from the strong side to the weak side, so do the officials as long as a shot attempt is not taken. The lead official will move along the baseline to the other side while the center slowly moves closer to half court becoming the new trail official. As the center is moving towards half court, the previous trail moves up to foul line extended, becoming the new center official completing the switch. The three officials keep strong side of the system with the ball while the center and trail switch roles and responsibilities all while still watching for fouls and violations.

**Foul Rotation**

For example, let’s say that the lead official calls a shooting foul under the basket which results in two shots for the offensive player. The lead official proceeds to run towards the scorer’s table to notify them about the player responsible for the foul. Instead of having to run back from half court under the basket, the center and trail rotate to lead and center. This rotation eliminates confusing situations, such as who the foul was on. Also, it allows the other officials to get the players ready for the free throw attempts, while the official that made the call is
notifying the table. Another benefit from this rotation is that the same official is not always under the same basket for the majority of the game.

**Conclusion**

The game of basketball is not the easiest game to play; likewise, it is not the easiest sport to officiate. This is dissimilar to football, where the referees have set positions based on their officiating strengths. Basketball requires the ability to understand three different positions, each with different responsibilities that one must perform countless times per game. So the next time you are watching a basketball game, keep an eye on what the officials are doing; you will learn that their jobs are far more difficult than you think.

**Appendix A**

**On ball**: situations or fouls that occur involving the player in control of the basketball

**Off ball**: situations or fouls that occur involving players away from the ball handler

**Lane**: the rectangular section of the court located under the basket that extends to the free throw line

**Moving Screen**: when a player does not keep their feet set in the same position when they set a screen for another player, can also be called if a player never sets their feet in the first place

**Foul Line Extended**: position along the sideline if the free throw line was the same width as the court

**Initial Guarded Position**: the defender must have both feet touching the floor with their torso facing the player in control of the ball

**References**

*Penn State Intramural Basketball Officials Packet*. Image. Dec 2013