

## **Advice for new referees** by David 'Silverfox' Karchmer

Congratulations! You've made the leap and decided to become a referee. You've certainly read the rules and maybe even taken a certification course. Unfortunately, that is where most referee training ends. Even if you get more elaborate training, usually important skills like ring control, commands, error correction, and customer service are not taught. This can leave a new referee unprepared for a good portion of their responsibilities.

Here's a list of some advice that can help fill in the early knowledge gaps for new referees. This advice may not align to every organization you might work for, but they do offer insight into some of the critical skills you will need to develop to handle all situations you may encounter.

- **Refereeing is a job, so be a good employee** – Remember that refereeing is a paid position, and you work for a boss and a company. Be on time, listen to what you're told, and always try to do a good job. Complain to your mommy when you get home. If you're with an organization that doesn't make you happy or feel comfortable, you don't like the pay, or hate who you're working for, then look elsewhere and don't let your dissatisfaction impact your time on the mat with competitors.

- **Make sure you and your table working are 'in sync' before you get started.** Never assume the table worker is prepared for their task, even if they've been 'trained'. Talk everything through before your first match, since sometimes table workers have zero experience and may not even understand grappling. Politely correct as you go, as it may be a learning experience for them too.

- **Don't let anyone interrupt your table workers during the match.** Your table has to be focused on you 100% of the time. Sometimes the table is being worked by someone who would rather be texting their significant other, or watch the match in the next ring. It's recommended you instruct your table to not even watch the competitors, and focus on you the whole match. People bothering the table during the match (usually about brackets) are not going to help you maintain accuracy. Instruct them to politely put someone off until after the match, or have them refer the person to speak with you instead.

- **Double check the duration and rules for each division.** Sometimes you jump from one division to another. Sometimes the long day makes things blur together. Take the time before each match to make sure you know the correct duration and rules for the particular match you are doing, and that your table is on the same page before you start.

- **Look at your scoreboard often, especially if it has time left on it.** You have to make sure that the table is conveying your hand signals to the scoreboard correctly, and if they are keeping time, make sure the clock is moving or stopped as you expect. This will help you recognize and undo mistakes early.

- **At minimum, ask the competitors if they have any questions before the match.** This will help avoid the 'I didn't know' song and dance afterwards, when you can point to the opportunity you gave them before the match started. I recommend giving a 30 second overview of the rules unique to their division and how you run your ring, but it's your preference or tournament guidelines.

- **Learn to recognize neutral positions that are good times to move competitors away from the edge of the mat.** Of course you want to be minimally disruptive during the match, but if people are on the edge, stop them before action sends them out of bounds. Selecting the appropriate time to stop and restart matches will minimize positions and scenarios that are complicated to recreate.

- **Don't be afraid to correct a mistake immediately during the match.** Try to find a safe time to correct the scoreboard while not missing the action. It is much better to do so during the match, then to correct at the conclusion, or ignore your error completely.

- **Avoid providing explanations during the match.** Sure, the coach is screaming at you about a call, but if you are confident in your scoring, politely signal him you will address it later. If you lose focus on the action, you may compound the situation by being taken out of your game and possibly make mistakes.

- **Don't be afraid to defer advanced divisions to your experienced peers.** If you're an inexperienced purple belt and you get assigned an advanced division or a black belt match, check with one of your experienced peers and see if he will take the division or step in for you. Don't feel obligated to get in over your head.

- **Remember your commands and hand signals are not just for you and the table workers.** People are watching from across the room, coaches are sitting at mat side, and people are videotaping for posterity and YouTube. Everyone wants to know and understand what you are doing, so be clear with hand signals and loud and obvious with commands. Feel free to raise your hand with two fingers and say 'Two points blue – sweep'. This is a spectator sport, so remember others are watching and need to know what you are doing during the match. This clarity exudes confidence and helps demonstrate you are knowledgeable and in control.

- **Don't stand back and fold your arms during takedowns or submission attempts.** You need to be ready to act when fighters are heading out of bounds on their feet or there is a near submission. Folding your arms shows the wrong posture for a referee at a time when you may need to react quickly. Have your hands free and ready to address any needs during those critical times.

- **Understand that chatter from the background can be helpful.** It's easy to say you should block it all out, but it's not necessary to. Coaches and spectators are constantly trying to manipulate you with comments, but it doesn't mean that what they are saying is necessarily *wrong*. Don't be afraid to use outside information to help you shape your own decision, as correct to the rules as possible.

- **If there is any negative discussion after a match, don't take it personal, and just politely refer it to the tournament promoter or proper tournament authority.** Most tournaments stick by referees decisions now and avoid the dreaded do-over, right or wrong. Don't look at videotape and get sucked into discussions about reversing decisions. Let the tournament director do customer service after the fact and handle any bad feelings from competitors or coaches.

- **Consistency is king.** The key is to treat every match and every competitor the same. Use the same methods, the same process, and the same manner for everyone regardless of rank and notoriety. If you don't, people will notice differences between matches and may assume your lack of consistency is bias.

- **Enjoy the opportunity to get paid to watch jiu jitsu** – A referee has the best seat in the house to watch live grappling, so enjoy it. Not only is competitive jiu jitsu fun to watch, but it's also educational. By watching live rolling, you can better understand things that work and don't work, learn to recognize things done correctly or improperly, and just have an opportunity to using at a learning experience for your own game.

*The author was awarded his black belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in June 2012 and has been training for more than 16 years. His martial arts background includes a black belt in Tae Kwon Do he received in 1993. His BJJ journey began at Gracie Thornwood, NY in 1999 after he took a seminar with Royce Gracie and became hooked on the art.*

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