

How to improve grappling officiating by David Karchmer

In 1993, Royce Gracie displayed the effectiveness of jiu jitsu to the world. The momentum of the first UFCs, followed by the Internet age and the advent of social media, have caused tremendous growth in the popularity of the art. More and more schools are opening, existing schools of traditional arts are incorporating jiu jitsu into their programs, and even pure online training programs are now available. Naturally, with this increased volume of students now taking some form of grappling, there has been a commensurate growth in the sport, creating more and more tournament organizations.

There are prestigious international tournaments, and even talk of making jiu jitsu or submission grappling an Olympic sport. So to satisfy this thirst for more and better competitions, further legitimizing the sport, taking them to the next level of mainstream popularity, there has to be a solid competitive infrastructure for competitors, coaches, and spectators to rely on. While the tournaments do not have to be the same themselves, there are certain steps that should be taken to ensure a unified approach for everyone to understand.

- 1. Unified Rules** – The growth of MMA to more mainstream success can be partially attributed to the adoption of a consistent set of rules. Unified rules enable a seamless understanding of the competition for sanctioning bodies, tournament organizations, competitors, and spectators. Grappling really would benefit from this type of adoption, although it can be considerably more complicated than something like MMA. Certainly it can be done, as in Tae Kwon Do, Greco-Roman and Freestyle Wrestling, and Judo -- all Olympic sports. And it would not have to be confined to one element either. There could be distinct sets of unified rules for gi, no-gi, and submission-only grappling. This way it would not impede on anyone's preference for type of grappling they prefer. Ultimately, though, a unified rule set should capture the spirit of jiu jitsu with an emphasis on self-defense, dominant positions, and submissions and not on inactivity and strategic exploitation of the rules.
- 2. Technology** – Cameras are everywhere these days -- smaller, cheaper, and of higher quality. It makes sense to consider using this extra set of eyes to assist referees in making the correct call. Instant replay is a viable option, and can help referees quickly resolve disputes over existing calls. Naturally, a mechanism must be devised within the rules as to how and when these instances of instant replay can be used, or when they may be invalidated. One idea is a *coach's challenge rule*, one that permits coaches the opportunity to request instant replay on behalf of competitors. While these types of double-check instances could be welcomed, it's not something that should be overdone to the point of slowing down matches or tournament flow to accomplish. Additionally, costs and time may be prohibitive to provide each tournament competitor these technological options, so they may have to be selectively available, maybe starting with black belt divisions. Regarding professional events that pay prizes and perhaps even collect PPV monies, it may become a requirement that these uses of technology are included in the events.

3. **3-Referee System** – For those unfamiliar, two additional referees are located in chairs in the opposing corners of the match area. Those referees have the same power as the referee in the center, and scoring must be confirmed by at least two of the three referees. If all three agree, the corner referees remain seated. But if one disagrees, he stands up and gestures a score or penalty points to be awarded or subtracted. This method serves as an immediate double-check for the center referee, offering both different viewpoints and experience levels, and can help minimize errors and speed error-correction. This method is typically employed by some organizations only for semi-finals and finals of high rank matches and super-fights. Wider adoption of this system could produce significant results, but the challenge is the requirement of having three referees for each individual match, a rather costly endeavor for most tournament organizations. Sometimes, the three-referee system is further enhanced with instant-replay technology, creating the most reliable officiating today.

4. **Shadow and Reverse-shadowing** – Like in other skilled trades, it's helpful to have an experienced mentor walk you through your role, and it is no different for referees. 'Shadowing' is when a novice ref stands by and observes an experienced ref, literally watching the action from up close and discussing the matches as they occur. This takes the pressure off the novice since they are merely observing, and allows them to watch an experienced referee go through the motions and offer suggestions, observations, and advice. A full day of shadowing can be extremely helpful to a new ref and help prep them for their first time out. 'Reverse shadowing' is the next phase, when the new ref actually scores the match, and the experienced referee is close by backing them up, looking over their shoulder. Trying to interact with someone else during a match takes some practice, but the concept of having someone coaching a new ref throughout the day can be extremely valuable and speed the learning curve. Frankly, these shadowing concepts are not used enough by organizations.

5. **Improved training courses** – Outside of the standard IBJJF rules certifications, there are hardly any quality referee training courses available. Furthermore, those Federation certifications are very often presented by someone simply reading the rulebook aloud to you. Frankly, rules certifications by their very design are meant to provide clarity to the written rulebook, and often don't offer practical training in necessary referee skills including ring control, commands, error correction, customer service, and professionalism. These other skills, if absent or neglected, can have an equally significant impact to the outcome of matches or to the tournament experience for competitors, coaches, and spectators.

Since refereeing is already considered a rather thankless job, it may also be difficult to recruit more talent into taking the position. These five recommendations can not only help solidify a more solid approach to competition framework, but also help make the referee's job easier, more effective, and less stressful. Anything that can improve the competence and confidence of officials is something that should be pursued, so hopefully tournament organizations will put more emphasis into these critical areas.

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.

In addition to training and instructing, David has focused the last eight years on officiating grappling competitions and has officiated more than 3,000 gi and no-gi matches at over 65 events for multiple organizations. He was a previous head referee at Grapplers Quest and the current head referee at FIVE Grappling and Copa NoVA tournaments, and routinely officiates events in North America. Visit his officiating website www.TheGrapplingReferee.com

