

TOP 10 REASONS FOR REFEREE MISTAKES by David Karchmer

Refereeing is a lot like the jiu jitsu journey. Just like a white belt, every referee starts out as a novice and has to work over a long period time to get to a level of high proficiency. And even once attained, it is a set of skills that needs to be continually practiced and honed or they will fade away.

As humans, we accept the fact we cannot be perfect in everything we do. It's unlikely anyone can claim that their grappling training went flawlessly, or a competition went without a single error. Yet, it's a benchmark that is expected from the referee.

So since even the best referees make mistakes, here's a list of 10 reasons they happen when they do:

1. **Imperfect knowledge of the rules** – It might be surprising that learning the written rules of a tournament organization should be considered only rudimentary. Having a signed rules seminar certificate is simply not enough to be considered having a comprehensive knowledge. Firstly, not all organizations take the time to publish an elaborate set of written rules or offer rules training, which can leave large gaps in understanding. Additionally, even written rules can be open to interpretation, and the result is a lack of clarity or confusion. And when you consider the dynamic nature of grappling, you can imagine an infinite number of scenarios that make it difficult to account for how to treat all of them. It's easy to believe that tournament organizations spell everything out, but they can't and they don't. The reality is referees often need to be detectives to get to the bottom of what rules are or how they are to be correctly enforced. If not, you'll see both mistakes and inconsistencies in rules enforcement.
2. **Reluctance to immediately analyze and correct mistakes** – Accepting imperfection or admitting errors is challenging for anyone. Referees make decisions all day that are scrutinized and reviewed by those around them. A referee has to have the internal moral compass to want to do what's right, which means the willingness to recognize and accept their own gaps in knowledge or poor judgment. After accepting the fact mistakes will be made, recognizing mistakes and taking immediate corrective action is an important set of skills.
3. **Pressure from outside influences** – Coaches, competitors, instructors, and parents are all willing to share their opinions during competition. It's important for a referee to have the confidence to hear often rude and crass opinions and not be manipulated by them. While it might make sense to simply block those outside voices out, it actually can serve as valuable input particularly in error correction if used effectively. But whether it's literally during or after, a referee's job is to offer impartial application of the rules, free from manipulation.
4. **Observing unfamiliar positions** – All referees have a fair to substantial amount of time invested in their own grappling training. Within their own training, they develop their own style, or at least most readily accept the styles taught or shown to them over time. This means some referees are just not exposed to 50/50 or berimbolo style guards, some don't train a lot of leg locks, don't have an intricate gi game, or maybe have more self-defense based jiu jitsu they prefer. This can have an impact on their familiarity with the intricacies of certain positions. In some cases, it may even help decide how they score partial positions or make referee's decisions if they see games they don't play or particularly care for. But it's a referees responsibility to take himself outside his comfort zone and make himself a true student of the sport and accept grappling styles in their entirety.

5. **Lack of attention to necessary details** – Sometimes competitors are very evenly matched, and the smallest of details can decide the outcome. Referees that stand at a far corner of the ring with their arms crossed are doing a disservice. Always staying close and focused on the action, noticing grips, watching for safety concerns, and carefully recreating positions will ensure that even the smallest details of a match are properly addressed within the rules.
6. **Fatigue** – Refereeing can be a long day. Not all organizations can afford to substitute referees every hour. This means a referee could face 10 or more hours on his feet, maybe with a lunch break. Much like being a competitor, a referee needs a good night's rest the day before a tournament, needs to eat properly throughout the day, and stay hydrated. Otherwise, it's is easy to get tired and lose focus, which is the impetus to mistakes, poor calls, and a bad disposition.
7. **Distraction** – Having referees that simply don't focus on their own mat while running a match is an obvious no-no, but sometimes distractions runs deeper. Things like an argument with a loved one, a disagreement with a coach during the day, or just not feeling well can all play a role in preventing a referee from being 100% focused on the task at hand. A referee's job is very mentally taxing needing high levels of concentration throughout the day, so distracting thoughts in their head can easily lead to errors. Referees need to do their best to clear their heads and be ready for business at all times.
8. **Pride** – Pride can be defined as a high opinion of one's own importance or superiority, and is really the reflection of a referee's self-respect. So sometimes when disputes arise and calls are challenged, it's natural for the referee to be defensive to preserve their self-esteem. The question becomes if this sense of pride overwhelms the moral compass of what can be considered 'correct', and clouds the referee's judgment. The concern is not necessarily that mistakes are made, but rather if the referee is able to objectively overcome these feelings and correct errors, and not be so defensive that they are blinded. Much like jiu jitsu's concept of 'leave your ego at the door', the most successful referees moderate their pride with humility when trying to score a match.
9. **Bias or favoritism** – Previous periods in competition history saw greater evidence of bias and favoritism. While no longer as responsible for bad officiating as some may think, there is still a portion of the referee population that cannot be fully objective. Allegiances to teams, friends, students, even nationalities, can all play a factor and impact the outcome of a match. While it should not have place in the sport and there are steps that can be taken to minimize it, it's not something easy to remove from human nature.
10. **Laziness** – Refereeing is a job like any other, and put simply, some people do not like to work and are not good at their job. Lazy referees always seem to be on break, they arrive late and want to leave early, and their rings run slow. Just like any bad employee, lazy referees need to be identified and not offered the opportunity to display their lack of work ethic in the future.

One difference between average referees and great ones is not whether or not they make mistakes - it's how often. While it's an honorable goal to be infallible, a referee needs to accept the inevitability of mistakes and understand the reasons that they're made to minimize that frequency. The best referees not only recognize their few mistakes, but also look to take immediate action to correct them. So

perhaps the ultimate goal of the referee should be making competitors feel confident that their matches are being judged correctly by someone serious about being good at what they do.

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

