

# “The Authority of an Official: How Far Does It Extend?”

By Tim Leighton on January 14, 2025 [hst](#)

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Officials are tasked with ensuring athletic contests are played according to rules and guidance from the NFHS and their respective state associations. They accept this responsibility by preparing for their roles through extensive certification and training.

However, during a recent nationwide surge in unsporting behavior by participants, coaches and fans, officials have had to do more to ensure contests are being played in a safe environment. With the winter sports seasons underway, contests have come inside, and examples of unsporting behavior are now magnified.

In wondering about the authority of an official and how far it extends, HST reached out to Paul McDonald of Ely, Minnesota. He sees this issue through many lenses: He was formerly a longtime high school coach, college men’s basketball coach, athletic director at Vermillion Community College in the Iron Range of northern Minnesota, former Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) Board of Directors member and an official of 40 years. He currently observes officials for the MSHSL and is serving a second elected term as a St. Louis County Commissioner on the Iron Range.

**HST: When the discussion topic is the authority of an official and how far it extends, what is your first reaction to that?**

**McDonald:** Without officials, the games cannot happen. Officials work closely with game management, coaches and participants. We are all working together to bring a great experience for the students and all participants. That is what sometimes gets lost. Some coaches, officials and players think it is all about them and that is when we can run into problems. Once the officials enter the playing area, they have the authority to run and manage the game.

**HST: By rule, an official’s authority covers the visual confines of the court, field or other playing surface. Do you think officials do a good job of abiding by that?**

**McDonald:** Most do, but a few think they are what the people have come to watch. There have been some issues in the tunnel leaving the court, in hallways on the way to locker rooms, etc. When there are issues in this area, make sure to file a report and let the game administrator know what occurred.

**HST: When you reflect on your officiating career on a football field or basketball court, can you recall times or instances when officials had to push the limits of authority?**

**McDonald:** There were a few times when we had to push the boundaries and make some decisions that were not very popular with some people. There have been games that had no real game management, except for the coach, and we had to remove some people from the venue.

**HST: Have you ever witnessed game situations where an official went too far in their authority?**

**McDonald:** Oh yes! I witnessed an official toss a fan in the first minute of a game, a contest when I was observing officials. It was not a good way to start the game in my opinion. I have seen many instances of officials baiting coaches as well over the years and those ultimately don't end well.

**HST: "Managing the game" or having "thick skin" are terms we hear as it relates to officiating. Are those attributes that an official needs to have while maintaining authority?**

**McDonald:** Of course, these are skills that are necessary in this day and age, but we also need to have a presence that exudes confidence without being cocky. So, your body language tells a lot. Be confident and smile occasionally so people know you are enjoying yourself. Know the rules and have good mechanics and work with the people who are there to help you. Officials have the responsibility to uphold the dignity and honor of the officiating profession in their interaction with everyone at the contest. It can be very difficult at times to "bite your tongue," but in the long run you are much better off and should turn to game management to handle some of the difficult crowd situations and behaviors.

**HST: In your teaching, observing and administering of athletic contests, what are some of your talking points to officials, coaches or administrators as it relates to their roles?**

**McDonald:** Be visible at all times and use your voice as a deterrent so people know you are there. I always told my coaches that their teams will model their behavior, so be aware of the behaviors you are exhibiting. It is OK to question but not OK to belittle an official or opponent. I always had a conversation with the person in charge of the event prior to the game to let them know our expectations as officials. If security was present, we made sure they were a part of our team. If there were any problems, we always tried to get them early before they became a major issue.

**HST: In these days where unsporting behavior has increased dramatically, do you think officials believe their roles toward curbing that behavior has also increased?**

**McDonald:** I believe officials should ignore the fans unless they are inciting players/other fans by using offensive/insulting/ abusive language. Do not tolerate gestures/language that prevent you from doing your job.

**HST: What kind of scenarios are pushing an official to stretch to those authoritative limits?**

**McDonald:** People have become much more vocal with their opinions in recent years, and this leads to some pushing of the boundaries. Officials must remain calm and collected in the heat of battle and not react in a way that leads to mayhem at the site. Don't put yourself in a no-win situation as that can lead to disaster. Officials have an obligation to conduct themselves in an ethical and responsible manner. Officials cannot lose sight of why they do what they do. The honor and dignity of the officiating profession is in your hands every time you enter the court, field or rink. Don't forget "little eyes are watching you."