

Teaching Self-Officiating

By Will Smolinski

It is important to remember when coaching youth Ultimate that everyone in the community is an equal. The intertwined concepts of Spirit of the Game™ and self-officiating rely on every participant in the game feeling safe and respected. Everyone is expected to follow the same rules, and should show the same respect to other teams and teammates as they do to you.

Self-officiating works best in a positive environment, free from ridicule and aggressive/defensive behavior. It is imperative that athletes are not verbally or physically aggressive toward other players no matter what their roles outside the scope of the team may be.

Know the Rules

The rules of the game are the cornerstone of self-regulation. Imagine watching a game where one team is trying to play Rugby and the other is trying to play American Football—it would be quite a mess. To a lesser degree, this can happen in youth Ultimate. What is considered a foul on one team may not be on others. The only way to prevent this from happening is to establish a firm knowledge of the rules, which can be surprisingly easy.

Practice the Rules

Just like throwing, catching, cutting, and defensive skills require practice, so does familiarizing yourself with the rules and using conflict resolution skills. The four things that are important here are:

1. Recognizing / Calling the Foul
2. Reacting
3. Listening
4. Resuming Play

Teaching Ultimate Rules

- Reading the Rules as Homework
- Assign “Rule Experts” responsible for knowing a specific section
- Stop play to teach/talk about rules
- Correct misinterpretations of the rules during practice
- Cover one rule per day at conclusion of practice
- Talk to individual players about frequent rule violations
- Rule Quizzes / Tests

Recognizing Fouls

A lot of times it is hard for newer players to play and officiate at the same time. If you get them to act as an observer on the sideline it can help them focus on just recognizing and calling infractions. During drills they can make calls like travel, up/down, and in/out. Making sure they announce calls loud enough for the whole field to hear is important. It can help to occasionally designate players who purposely foul and assign observers during scrimmages to pay close attention to rule violations.

Reacting

Athletes can become defensive when a foul is called on them or become overly critical of an opposing team if they are making a lot of calls. It is very important that they learn that both fouls and foul calls are not personal. Having players practice taking and making foul calls to resolve conflict without punishing either team is difficult. It is important to start off talking about “community health” skills such as conflict resolution strategies, showing respect to every player, and making everybody feel safe.

It is imperative that players learn to control their non-verbal reactions, like tone of voice and eye rolling, as much as their choice of words.

Practice Conflict Resolution

- Create drill where one position is fouled in the same place each time—get players used to calling and reacting to foul calls
- Assign team “Jerk” whose role is to contest everything, or to be rude at practice, saying only “contest” or “foul” and not reacting to non-verbal behavior
- Correct individual players’ reactions to foul calls using specific cues, such as “calm down,” “just say ‘contest’,” or “ask what the foul was.”

Listening

Many times teams commit the same fouls repeatedly because they do not call that rule in practice (even if they know it). This is where a thorough knowledge of the rules becomes very important. All conflict resolution requires both parties to listen. It is

important that both teams know their role in the foul calling process, question each other, and recognize the concept and significance of “best perspective.” One creative way to practice listening is developing role plays where athletes are given scripts of situations that they must discuss as players on opposing teams (see below). They must come up with solutions to the scenarios. Another way is to have one player on each team be “mediator” for foul calls. They must listen to one side, relay that call to their team, listen to their teammate, relay that call to the other team and so on and so forth. Over time, different players should take on this role so that everyone learns the rules and how to self-officiate.

Resuming Play

During self-officiated games it is important to move on and continue the game when a foul is called. This is easiest to accomplish if both teams know the rules and listen to each other. Players involved in a foul call should make sure both teams are ready and promptly tap this disc in (“Defense ready? Disc in!”). Ways to work on this are using the tap-in to start iterations of drills, or providing incentive/encouragement to players who ask ‘are you ready’ to both teams before they tap-in.

Sample Script

1. Defender on Team A calls “pick” at stall 5
2. Thrower on Team B does not acknowledge the call until after the throw
3. Receiver on Team B hears call, catches disc, stops play

Questions: Who should have the disc when play resumes? What is the stall count?