

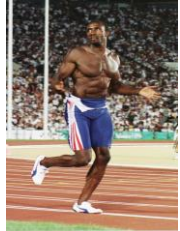
Responding to Interpersonal Conflict as an Athletics Official

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Distressed or Angry Athletes

- Can pose challenges to athletics officials and volunteers, disrupting competitions, hampering the focus and performance of other athletes, and making officials feel threatened.



Angry and/or Violent Athletes

- ▶ Rare - most athletes are either polite and gracious or so focused on their competition that they have no time to express anger or act in a violent manner.
- ▶ However, rare events of anger or abusive behaviour are upsetting to officials, volunteers, spectators, and other athletes and they pose potential liability risks in extreme circumstances.

Who are the First Responders for Dealing with Explosive Athletes?



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Unabomber Approach



1. Expand on your own manifesto about entitled athletes, annoying coaches, athletes' past rules violations, etc.
2. Add the offending athlete to your personal list of problem athletes and get his home address for bomb delivery.
3. Let the athlete know who is in charge, meaning you, the official.
4. Overstep your authority by denying opportunities to appeal.

Mother Theresa Style



- ▶ Treat all athletes as good souls who need only encouragement and guidance to behave honourably.
- ▶ When you doubt the inherent goodness of some athlete, remind yourself that it is not in your job description to transform the difficult athlete's personality.

BC Athletics Code of Conduct

- ▶ According to the BCA Code of Conduct, athletes, coaches and others are held to the following standards:
 - ▶ Refrain from using profane, insulting, harassing or otherwise offensive language in the context of the activities of Athletics.
 - ▶ Address fellow athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers, event organizers, spectators and others associated with Athletics in a courteous and respectful manner.
 - ▶ Respect an individual's dignity; verbal or physical behaviors that constitute harassment, abuse, or bullying are unacceptable.

Example 1: X-Rated Conduct in Call Room

- ▶ You are the Starter's Assistant in the Call Room of a club meet.
- ▶ Masters athlete becomes frustrated with young and inexperienced call room staff.
- ▶ Becomes verbally abusive toward call room volunteers including obscene language.
- ▶ Threatens other volunteers and an official in loud voice as he leaves the venue.
- ▶ What do you do?

Sources of Anger Outbursts

- ▶ Anger outbursts (and worse) arise from one or more of several types of factors.
- ▶ External stressors (e.g., in athletics from malfunctioning equipment, event scheduling stress, disqualification)
- ▶ Internal states (e.g., athlete-perceived high stakes, hyperarousal from performance anxiety or substance use)
- ▶ Personality characteristics (e.g., narcissism, low agreeableness)

Cycle of Interpersonal Violence and Conflict

- ▶ It takes two to tango... or waltz... or rhumba...
- ▶ Research on family violence shows that “violent families” are different from non-violent families not in the frequency of initiation of anger outbursts or initial verbal jabs but in family members’ reactions to an angry verbal or physical outburst by others.
- ▶ Violent families respond to verbal or physical abuse in kind.
- ▶ Non-violent families tend to respond to anger outbursts by one of their members using some combination of conciliation, compassion, or temporary distancing.

Domestic Violence Research Tells Us

- ▶ Domestic violence evolves via 3 steps.
 - ▶ There are identifiable first signs of conflict that even violent couples can learn to identify, thus preparing themselves to respond adaptively.
 - ▶ Once such first signs arise, the individuals can choose to “stir the pot” or do something less provocative.
 - ▶ At some point in the interaction, a point of no return arrives when something bad happens (e.g., harsh words, violent actions).

Why are we talking about domestic violence?

- ▶ Families are exposed to external stress as are athletes, officials, and coaches during athletic competition.
- ▶ High states of emotional arousal are common in family relationships and are part of all competitive sports or other activities (e.g., performance anxiety in musicians).
- ▶ Athletes are not immune to personality problems like low agreeableness or narcissism; in fact high achieving athletes are at higher risk for the latter than are non-athletes. See Vaughan et al. (2018).

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Conflict occurs in Social Contexts

- ▶ Nobody has an argument with themselves. Well, almost nobody.
- ▶ If an athlete has a tantrum in an empty stadium, the only harm is to his blood pressure.
- ▶ Officials and athletes have an inherently conflicted relationship.
 - ▶ At one level, officials exist to facilitate the athletes' performances. Sometimes their facilitation goes smoothly; other times something happens (e.g., malfunctioning blocks) that hampers athlete performance.
 - ▶ At another level, officials are judges and enforcers of rule violations and their interpretation of rules and their specific judgements can lead to athlete disappointment.

Four Principles of Conflict Management

1. Anticipate high risk situations unique to your role and environment.
2. Express sympathy to athletes with difficulties and spontaneously (not reluctantly) offer practical solutions that are within the rules.
3. Remind yourself that you are not in competition with the athletes.
4. Deflect and distance yourself from the conflict if it persists or escalates.

Anticipating High Risk Situations

- ▶ Championship meets or situations in which athletes are attempting to qualify for championships or elite teams.
- ▶ Schedule and/or equipment problems.
- ▶ Meets with parents or other emotionally-involved spectators who may not be familiar with athletics rules (e.g., at school meets).
- ▶ Athletes appearing stressed or hurried during warmups.
- ▶ Meet situations where officials are not at their best (e.g., fatigue at end of long day, insufficient volunteer help).
- ▶ Pre-judging an athlete with whom one has had a previous bad experience (e.g., "oh no, not him again..").

Once Conflict Begins, What to Do?

- ▶ Express sympathy/compassion if the athlete appears angry or upset (but don't get all sloppy about it ... ☺).
- ▶ Hold your ego in check; this is not the time to tell the athlete/coach how important you are or to deny them access to reasonable avenues of appeal.
- ▶ Inform the athlete or coach how and where they can appeal. Suggest meaningful solutions that allow the athlete an option as well as move the meet along with the least disruption. For example:
 1. "You can appeal to the referee; her name is _____ and she is over there." Appeal to Referee is Rule #146.4a.
 2. "You can run under protest and lodge your appeal with the track referee immediately after the race." In the absence of a referee, running under protest can be authorized by highest ranking official.

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If Conflict Escalates

- ▶ Deflection (e.g., politely tell the upset athlete or coach who to talk to about their concerns - referee, meet director); i.e., pass the buck but also allow the athlete to take some time to cool off on his way to the referee.
- ▶ Distancing
 - ▶ Politely ask the athlete/coach to leave the competition so that the meet can proceed.
 - ▶ If necessary, politely walk away to attend to your other duties so that it is harder for the athlete or coach to continue the conflict.
 - ▶ If the athlete/coach does not leave the competition area as requested or pursues the official, assertively but in a non-threatening manner call for back up (e.g., tell the referee or meet director by radio that you have an athlete who needs to talk to him).

Example 2: Physical Intimidation on the Start Line

- ▶ You are the starter.
- ▶ In a club meet, a nationally competitive senior hurdles athlete is called for a false start and thus disqualified.
- ▶ The athlete protests loudly and strides in an intimidating and animated manner toward you, rather than leaving the track per usual protocol.
- ▶ What do you do?
 - ▶ Step 1
 - ▶ Step 2
 - ▶ Step 3

Example 3: Demand for an Apology

- ▶ You are the Chief Starter's Assistant at a late season club meet.
- ▶ A competitive sprinter looking for a qualification time for a national championship finds his blocks malfunctioning as he is setting them pre-race.
- ▶ You replace the malfunctioning blocks but the athlete continues to appear distressed while warming up.
- ▶ Following completion of his 400m race, the athlete approaches you in the starts area and demands an apology because "you guys screwed my chance".
- ▶ What do you do?

In Closing.....

- ▶ Athletes will (rarely) get angry, obscene, and/or threatening.
- ▶ The official's job is to
 - ▶ Facilitate a fair and reasonably problem-free competition,
 - ▶ Reasonably shield athletes, spectators, coaches, and volunteers from abuse, threats, or other unseemly behavior,
 - ▶ Enforce rules, including unsportsmanlike behaviour that may violate parts of the BC Athletics Code of Conduct,
- ▶ Offer upset athletes reasonable suggestions for solving problems,
- ▶ Distance yourself interpersonally for safety and defuse the situation
- ▶ Know where your referee is and/or remember your yellow and red cards in your rule book.