

Being an effective Chief Judge

There is a first time for everything as a gymnastics official. Remember your first compulsory test, your first USAG competition, your first sectional or State Meet assignment? Anxiety, pride, responsibility and preparation are all part of the mix. This season will be my 27th year as a women's gymnastics judge. Through all my years of experience, there have been many changes, but one thing remains constant. It takes a great deal of hard work to be an effective chief judge.

The primary problem is there is an inherent need in each of us to impress our chief judge at some point during every competition. I can attest to that fact. Either with our vast array of knowledge, quoting of rules, identification of moves or quickness of scores, we simply don't want she/he to think that we are anything less than brilliant. That may be the case, but there is an appropriate time and place to convey all this information and brilliance. The most effective chief judges I have had the pleasure to work with are the ones that do the following: they listen, elicit opinion when necessary, appreciate my point of view when asked, make the gymnasts feel at ease, say thank you for a good job at the end of the meet but most importantly treat me as a colleague, not just as a subordinate or panel judge.

The most crucial point to remember, is that 99% of the time [excluding affiliation rules], the individual acting as chief judge is there for a reason, it's called experience. Do all judges make mistakes, miss elements, miss bonus connections, just to name a few? Absolutely. That's why there is more than one official. But when discrepancies arise in our scoring, it's important to respect the experience and opinion of the chief judge you are working with. It's protocol and good manners. The most effective chief judges will discuss, sometimes compromise and occasionally request an adjustment in your score. But keep in mind, they are ultimately responsible for answering inquiries, responding to the meet referee and efficiently conducting the event. Any conferences you are involved in should last no longer than 15-30 seconds.

Belligerence and argumentative confrontation only compound the issues. Comments from either side, such as: "where did you pull that score from", "are you kidding me", "you can't possibly be serious" won't be very helpful. No matter how well you know the other judge, you need to keep your emotions in check. Many chief judges have inadvertently embarrassed or damaged the budding careers of new officials by making flippant and humiliating statements. We have as much impact on each other as we do on the gymnasts themselves. Let's ponder a few more scenarios.

How many times have you walked into a competition and your event is suddenly changed. The Boy Scouts have it right – "Be Prepared!" You might become chief judge on a completely different event with only a moment's notice. So be ready and be prepared. By stating, 'I didn't bring any sheets' or 'I studied beam last night' is simply not acceptable anymore. We demand high levels of preparation from every gymnast we judge. They deserve the same level of preparedness from each of us.

Or, have you ever been assigned as chief judge at a competition over an official rated 3-4 levels higher than you due to affiliation, for example? Don't freak out, that higher rated official understands exactly how uncomfortable you are feeling. You can always rely on their expertise. Ask questions when necessary and be confident, but you should always defer to their years of experience and knowledge. This should be an excellent training experience for you, not an anxiety attack. Work together as a team.

A good rule of thumb to remember is this: 'Rome wasn't built in a day' and 'no judge ever became an expert by passing just one or two tests' either. It takes time, effort, study, practice and an ever-constant phase of learning to become a more effective chief judge. Whether it's your first time or your 100th, preparation is the key, cooperation the goal and enjoyment the end result.

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