

JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT

Officiating isn't all that tough is it? It certainly seems a simple proposition when talking with NFL umpire Ron Botchan. As you will read in this issue, Ron is the best umpire in the league and has been for some years. His playoff record is spectacular, and that is a clear statement of just how good Ron is.

I met with Ron at his house in the San Fernando Valley area, north of Los Angeles. I began my interview with a simple question: "What has made you so successful in officiating?" He gave me a two-word answer, without hesitation or equivocation:

"I'm coachable."

I asked him what the heck that meant. He said,

"The League tells me what it wants me to do and I go out and do that."

The starkness and simplicity of that answer really struck me. He is a ref who states he's successful because he is "coachable." Piece of cake - listen to what the league tells you to do and just go out and do it. Man, what could be easier?

He's right, but I dare say many, if not most of us, do not follow that advice as well as we should. Officiating begets strong personalities, or maybe it is the other way around. In any case, those with strong personalities don't take direction real well. They have need to inject themselves into the event. The concept of "the best refereed game was one in which you didn't know the ref was there" is completely foreign to them. It sure was to me.

During my career as an official, I never thought in terms of my being coachable. I will admit to having a need to do certain things my own way. Many times, a league or conference I worked for would issue a memo on certain procedures and most of us, me included, would take the memo in an advisory way rather than as mandatory. Many officials still work that way.

And then you have Ron Botchan articulating a complete officiating philosophy in just a few words. Wow, I sure could have used that advice in my younger days! I bet I would have graded higher and achieved more if I had put into practice exactly what Ron does on a weekly basis during the NFL season. Sure, the officiating minus the "frontier marshal" aspects probably would have been less fun, but the leagues hired me to carry out their mandate. They did not hire me to develop my own persona during their games.

Years ago, personality in officiating was the coin of the realm. Having a personal style was expected and it was rewarded, or at least it wasn't penalized. However, during the past two decades, that coin has come to far less value. Now those officials who want real achievement, acceptance and accolades will do well to follow Ron's footpath. It ain't tough. All you have to do is listen up.

*Barry Mano
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NOTE:

Ron Botchan began officiating in the NFL in 1980 and retired after the 2001 season. He played in the AFL with San Diego Chargers before it merged with the NFL. Over his officiating career, Ron has worked in an amazing five Super Bowls (XX, XXVII, XXIX, XXXI, XXXIV) and numerous playoff and conference championship games. Before joining the NFL, Ron worked in the Pacific 10 Conference. He is a graduate of Occidental College and taught Physical Education at Los Angeles City College where he was also the head football coach. He currently serves the NFL Officiating Department as a Trainer, working with the umpires.

*Other former NFL officials who graduated from Occidental College with a degree in physical education:
Gordon Wells (Umpire / 2 Super Bowls) & Jim Tunney (Referee / 3 Super Bowls).*