

Verbal Communication for Wrestling Referees

By Steve Wolfe

Hailing from the Land of the Midnight Sun, oft-published author and highly experienced Alaskan referee Steve Wolfe suggests that it is critical that high school referees not hesitate to use verbal communication with wrestlers.

High school wrestling referees are largely silent as they referee. It may be because they are somewhat reserved or shy, but I rather think it is because they have been schooled around football and basketball referees whose communication is done mostly by signals. Signals in basketball and football are mandated by distances and crowd noise, and communication to players is seldom if ever needed.

The NFHS Wrestling Rules Book mentions “verbal” or “verbally” five times. Three of those times concern communication between assistant referees and referees and only twice on verbal communication to wrestlers (cautioning wrestlers on potential dangerous holds) and a little-noticed and often-ignored phrase in (3-1-6) “verbally inform contestants and scorers when warning or awarding points to either wrestler.”

This rule authorizes the use of verbal communication to wrestlers. I believe it is critical that wrestling referees do. Let me give a few examples.

Wrestler A shoots a double-leg and drives Wrestler B to his hips. Wrestler B locks their arms around the body of Wrestler A to prevent the takedown. Wrestler A, in an attempt to secure the takedown, locks hands around the waist of Wrestler B and inches their way up the body. Soon, it is obvious to the referee that Wrestler A has control and, standing at the side of both wrestlers, signals two points for takedown. The problem is that neither wrestler knows for sure that it is a takedown yet. Neither wrestler, if he/she is putting their full effort into the struggle, can see the signal. One of two bad things happen because the referee has not verbally informed the wrestlers that there is a takedown.

1) There is no near-fall criterion; Wrestler A continues having his/her hands locked so the referee signals locked hands and Wrestler A is penalized for a technical violation.

2) There are criteria for a near-fall and because Wrestler B does not realize a takedown has been given, continues trying to counter the takedown while the referee is busily and silently counting near-fall points. Wrestler B, who would have bailed out and lost only the two-point takedown, is now down five points before he/she realizes it. This is not an isolated situation. There are so many situations similar that it would be difficult to count all of them.

I believe it is only fair to both contestants for the referee to verbally inform them when a takedown occurs, probably each time one occurs, but at least when there is a questionable situation. The referee in the previous situation, in addition to signaling that there are two points for a takedown, ought to have shouted so both contestants could hear: “Two, takedown.” Then, if criteria are met, he/she should, as he uses his arm to visually count the takedown, also shout out: “one, two, three” etc. Now, there is no question to either contestant what the situation is.

I believe most times it is important to verbally communicate reversals and escapes as well; however, I believe that verbally counting near-fall situations is critical. There are hundreds of situations where the defensive wrestler cannot see the referee and may not know he/she is in near-fall criteria and would not be if he/she knew they were, but because the referee is nearly always behind them signaling the near-fall, he/she does not know it.

The near-fall situation that is easiest to use as an example is the Pederson. The referee has to be in a position to see the near-fall where neither wrestler can see the referee. Quite often, neither wrestler knows if criteria are met, unless the referee vocally counts as he/she swings their arm to count out the seconds of the near-fall. The defensive wrestler needs to know so they can defend themselves and get out of the situation. The offensive wrestler needs to know if criteria are met so he/she can adjust the hold to get the near-fall or move to another hold to go for the fall.

Sometimes, I have felt like the Lone Ranger in a desert of silence because I am so vocal when I referee. However, every once in a while I receive a thanks for my vocal practices. It is almost always from the wrestlers. It gratified me as I watched the NCAA championships in 2007. Those fine referees communicated with the wrestlers almost constantly. “No takedown yet, no takedown yet, two takedown.” I hadn’t thought of being that verbal, but it was good communication. As referees, we have to communicate more with the wrestlers to keep them informed and make it fair for both. Unless we do, we are neglecting the very wrestlers that it is our job to serve.

I have found only one negative result to being so vocal. Sometimes, new referees that I have coached in this verbal communication have shouted out while counting the seconds on a near-fall: “one, two, three, four, five, six, seven —” much to their embarrassment. They quickly learned to stop at five.