

Understanding 3-Person Mechanics

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The use of 3 person mechanics is becoming more prevalent at all levels of play, from the international level down to the college and now U17 and high school games. Not only is it a more effective and efficient way to officiate and manage a game, it is adding longevity to the careers of many senior officials. What a great benefit to have these individuals nurture the “up and coming” group of officials that we are seeing in many countries. Unfortunately in some instances, when the concept of 3-person mechanics is not well understood, it may not result in anything more than having a 3rd official added to a 2-person game. When used effectively however, the credibility of the crew is enhanced, the call selection improves and the end result is a better officiated game. A more accurate understanding of each position will make the transition from 2-person to 3-person more accessible and effective. This article is directed towards those individuals who are new to these mechanics or only have limited experience. Sometimes we are taught where to stand and where to go, but without a comprehensive explanation of the purpose. Hopefully, we can shed more light on that, help you understand why, and increase your level of comfort in using this set of mechanics.

Lead Official

As with 2-person mechanics, the Lead official’s prime responsibility is to referee the post play. Whether right after the opening toss or during transition, when moving to the set-up position, the Lead needs to observe the post players as soon as possible in order to see the entire play and ensure neither player is being displaced. The initial set-up position should be a good meter off the baseline and in the best spot to observe play and see the space between players. The Lead official should not be more than a step or two on either side of the FIBA key and on ball side. Always “referee the defense”. This is critical in the Lead position whether the ball is passed into the post or if the defensive post player leaves his initial assignment to become the secondary defender on another opponent. Any time the Lead official makes a call, he/she must determine whether or not the defensive player established legal guarding position. When a double whistle occurs, the Lead official should take the call since it is likely the play is coming towards him/her and he/she has probably seen the entire play. The Lead official sets up on the same side of the floor as the Trail official so he/she is usually on the ball side. The Lead official has the responsibility to initiate rotations and there are a few triggers to key on, with the location of the ball being the main element. The Lead should “mirror” the ball. In other words, if the ball is near the side line on their side of the floor, positioning should be just outside the key and when the play moves towards the middle of the floor, he/she should move closer to the basket. The first key for the Lead official to initiate a rotation is when the ball moves to the opposite side of the floor. When the Center official is refereeing more than 2 players and the ball is on that same side, this is another situation requiring the Lead official to begin a rotation. The set-up position on the opposite side is exactly the same, approximately one meter off the base line and in the best position to observe play. It is important that all 3 officials anticipate when a rotation is to occur. In transition to the opposite end of the floor, the Lead official becomes the new Trail official and follows the play up the court.

Trail Official

In 3-person mechanics, the Trail position is not very different from what it is in the 2-person system. However, since an extra set of eyes is assisting from the Center position, the Trail can focus more attention on the ball carrier. When there is full court pressure, the Center official will cover play on the side of the floor opposite from the Trail, but the Trail official still has the responsibility for the back court count. As the ball moves up the floor, the Trail official follows the play as it moves into the front court. After a score, the new Trail should not leave the end line until the ball is thrown in and play begins to progress up the floor in order to always keep the play in front of him/her. The Trail official sets up on the same side of the floor as the Lead official so they are usually on the ball side, whether the ball is in the Trail or in the Lead official's area. The set-up position is at the edge of the Team bench area near the sideline. As the play moves towards the basket, the Trail official needs to penetrate and referee the play all the way to the basket and then be prepared for rebounding action. If the ball is passed into the post player, the Trail official needs to trust his partner and allow the Lead official to referee the play. Anytime the ball is in his/her area and the offensive player is being closely guarded, the Trail official must begin a visual 5-second count. When a shot is attempted from the Center official's area, the Trail official must observe play around the basket and be prepared to call basket interference if it occurs. If the ball moves to the opposite side of the floor, the Trail official must be prepared to rotate to the Centre official position when a rotation is initiated by the Lead official.

Centre Official

The Centre official position in the 3-person system really represents the most significant difference from to the 2-person system. The Centre set-up position is one or two steps below the free throw line on the opposite side of the floor from the Trail and Lead officials. The ball is usually on the opposite side of the floor so the Centre official has a prime responsibility for off ball coverage. In today's game, a lot of action takes place at the "elbows". Therefore, in this position, particular attention is required to observe illegal screening and bumping cutters. The Centre official is in an excellent position to referee play in the restricted area, particularly on jump shots and drives to the basket. This takes a lot of pressure and responsibility off the Trail official. When the ball swings to the Centre's side of the floor, the Centre needs to anticipate the Lead official rotating to his/her side of the floor and, if so, move to the Trail position. Anytime the ball is in his/her area and the offensive player is being closely guarded, the Centre official needs to begin a 5 second visual count. When the ball turns over in the front court or following a made basket, the Centre official needs to hold their position, read the play and not abandon the Lead official.

As with most things in life, experience is the best teacher. The more opportunity you have to use 3-person mechanics the better and your comfort level will increase. Even while learning these mechanics, you must remember the most important thing is to referee the game and not get caught up in your position....that will come with time. Because your area of responsibility is reduced, you can be more patient and eliminate some of the guessing that happens in 2-person mechanics because there is another official taking care of a blind spot on the floor.

By and large, the success of a 3-person crew is predicated on the following principles: teamwork, trust, respect, and patience. Referee your primary and allow your partners to take care of business in their respective area and be ready to help but only when needed. Trust and respect your partners as you expect them to have faith in your ability to make the correct calls. Be patient.

It may be that nothing is happening in your area for a while. Don't start poaching outside your area or looking for infractions. Observe play as it occurs. Be ready to intervene to help the game proceed with flow in the spirit of fairness.