# The Hypocrisy of NBA Officiating

(Spec work)

By Grant Simms

All serious sports fans are aware that refereeing is an extremely difficult job, and most of the time, when refs make what is perceived to be a bad call, they are just doing the best they can in the moment. They are trying to follow their league's rule book to the letter. Unfortunately for them, it doesn't do them any favors if their sports rule book is completely, incredibly, and undeniably absurd. If you're wondering what league I'm talking about, it's the NBA.

I want to see Scott Foster get punched in the face more than any person on planet earth. And I shouldn't. You see, Scott is just doing what the NBA tells him to do. It's why he's still employed. If the NBA says, "Scott, call a technical if a player smiles at another player," that's what Scott does. It's not Scott's fault the NBA's rules are the way they are (although he does seem to enjoy the power he has a little bit more than others). Scott's not alone however, almost all NBA referees make calls that leave fans, players, coaches, announcers, really anybody with a brain, completely dumbfounded.

Let me give an example, during the first game of the second round of the Western Conference Playoffs between the Denver Nuggets, and the Minnesota Timberwolves Anthony Edwards drove to the basket and scored on Reggie Jackson. Edwards then proceeded to stare down Jackson, and was immediately called for a technical...Are we serious? Watching calls like that make my blood boil. I've seen so many similar calls like that take place in recent years, and it only seems to be getting worse.

But it's not the ref's fault. I shouldn't want to punch Scott Foster in the face. It's not his fault. It's the NBA's. It's Adam Silver's. That's who I should want to punch in the face. But,

when I'm watching a ref give out a tech because a player flexed, or because he decided to hang on the rim, I ask myself "NBA, why do you want me to feel like I need to punch someone in the face?"  The answer to that question is complicated, but it has to do with Ron Artest, Rush Limbaugh, and the way America views young black men.

In 2004, the famous "Malice at the Palace" brawl happened.  During it Ron Artest famously went into the stands to fight a fan.  It was one of the craziest nights in NBA history, and led to some of the longest NBA suspensions we've ever seen.  A couple years after the incident, during the 2006-2007 NBA season, the NBA put in place what became known as the "no tolerance rule".  Refs had more power than they ever had before, and were giving out technicals like candy bars on Halloween.  From then on it was a new game.  These changes led to more fouls being called.  The league became more skill based, and more offensive.  It was great basketball to watch. Overall these changes were a good thing...except for the technicals.

Although during the 2023-2024 NBA season there were rumors that the NBA began allowing the game to be a bit more physical, I highly doubt the league will ever relax its stance on technical fouls.  The league would likely say that calling technicals reduces complaining, and keeps players focused on playing instead of fighting with one another.  This of course, is complete BS.  Players complain now more than ever, and if you've been paying attention this season you'll know that fighting is anything but non-existent.  In fact, one could argue with Draymond Green in the league, it's been on the rise.

So what's the real reason? That is best personified by Rush Limbaugh.  The conservative radio host suggested after the "Malice at the Palace" that the NBA be renamed to the Thug Basketball Association.  It's an unfortunate reality that Limbaugh had the same perception of the NBA as did many Americans.  Even before the "Malice at the Palace" the NBA had a reputation of being a gang league.  After the fight took place that perception was at an all time high, and David Stern did whatever he could to change that.  He implemented a dress code, allowed country music stars to perform during the 2005 NBA All Star Game,

instituted an age requirement to make the league seem more responsible, and of course, changed the way the game was officiated.

These days fouls are called far more frequently, and while that does make for a more skillful product, a product that is very fun to watch, all of the superfluous technicals have the opposite effect. Nobody likes seeing Nikola Jokic thrown out of a game because he barely says anything to a referee (which happened this year by the way). I think everyone agrees it's time a change took place. We have already seen some of Stern's over reactionary rules be relaxed. The dress code isn't enforced anymore, and hip-hop is now embraced instead of shunned. This "give a guy a tech if he looks at me the wrong way" attitude should be the next thing to go. It should be. But it won't be.

The NBA may be willing to let athletes dress how they want, listen to the music they want, but I'd be shocked if they ever let athletes talk trash and be physical again. The NBA is too scared of how easily it would be for everyone to start perceiving them once again as a thug league. They know basketball would be better if they let the players be more emotional. But the racial characteristics of the NBA, and the way many Americans perceive those characteristics make that impossible. Don't believe me? Look at the NHL. They are a predominantly white league, and have had far more fights than the NBA. To this day they allow fighting. They have even had a fight in which almost the entire Bruins team went into the stands to fight fans, and only two Bruins players were suspended. One for 8 games, and one for 6 games. In comparison, Ron Artest was suspended for the entire NBA season. Referees don't even try to break up fights in hockey. They just let them go on fighting. The NHL has tried to clean up their game over the past 2 decades, but fights most certainly still happen, and there has never been near the public outcry, nor the public criticism, that the NBA received during the early and mid 2000s.

In the end, it all comes down to hypocrisy. The NBA claims to be in support of social justice, and to be at the forefront of combating racism. But God forbid Anthony Edwards talks trash, or stares someone down! Christians in Alabama might think we're gang affiliated!

God forbid we allow athletes to get emotional on a basketball court! What are all the people like Rush Limbaugh gonna think!

Each day the NBA tells Scott Foster to make another horrendous technical foul call, the league is simultaneously allowing its game to be played exactly how Donald Sterling, the NBA's worst owner ever, would have wanted it to be.  Adam Silver, do better.