

When official walks everyone loses

Written by Mark Dukes

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When an official walked off the court and effectively cancelled a youth basketball game earlier this month, a healthy debate about responsibility ensued.

In Iowa City at the Spring Fling tournament, an official became upset about the rough play and apparent trash talk between the Iowa Barnstormers and Wisconsin Force out of Madison. As the official left the court, he looked toward the Force bench and said, "I'm not dealing with it. You guys can't play basketball. You don't deserve to be here."

With that, the game was over with 3:07 left in the first half and the Barnstormers' 17-and-under team leading, 20-15. The two teams exchanged handshakes and backslaps and one player was heard saying, "Well, it was fun while it lasted."

I did not attend the game but I have seen enough video to draw a couple conclusions.

For one, this is AAU basketball, a broad description of competition outside of high school. Many of these teams belong to the Amateur Athletic Union and compete under its auspices, but many others do not. AAU basketball often is highly competitive and, in the case of 17-and-under players, involves boys and girls competing for college scholarships. It can be very intense competition, indeed.

My first reaction to reading the story and seeing video was that the official did not handle things properly, no matter how much pushing and shoving and swearing there might have been. I do not know the young official's level of experience or expertise, but suffice to say it is not the caliber of an Ed Hightower. The official should have given both benches a warning, issued a technical or brought the coaches together.

Instead, he left the court and said the game was over. He later returned and tried to speak with Wisconsin Coach Craig Everson, but play did not resume.

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Upon reflection, I think the blame is widespread. The responsibility should be shared by players, coaches and officials.

No matter how heated the game, players must be taught to control emotions. If they don't, they need to go to the bench to cool off. Some coaches can be overzealous, too, although I don't know that to be true of Everson or Barnstormers Coach Jamie Pettigrew. But many youth coaches feel they're more important than they are and some derive a certain measure of pleasure in one-upping the other team.

Officials have an awfully difficult job, and it gets more difficult as the caliber of play gets better. Ever worn stripes and blown a whistle yourself? Still, officials must be in control of competition with even-handed calls and stern handling of players and coaches who cross the line.

In the case of this basketball game, an official's action resulted in no winner in the championship game of the Spring Fling. In fact, everyone involved essentially lost.