

# ETHICS OF SWIM OFFICIATING

Joel Black  
USA Swimming Officials Committee  
© 2009 Joel Black

In the usual course of events in presenting an introductory clinic of instruction to prospective 'swim official' candidates, we as clinicians/instructors concentrate upon the basic technical aspects of the rules and their application. However, in order to adequately prepare our apprentices for the rigors of the deck, they must also be well grounded with a sense of values and ethics. By definition ethics are "a set of moral principles affirming a specified form of conduct." Other words often associated with ethics are "morals", "values" and "ideals." USA Swimming has devoted a section of the Rules and Regulations to a standard of ethical behavior entitled the "CODE OF CONDUCT" (Article 304). This section applies to all members and non-members of USA Swimming, be they athletes, coaches or volunteers. While the "CODE OF CONDUCT" outlines some specific areas of conduct and misconduct, there are no specific guidelines within the body of the rules for ethical values or ideals in regard to officiating.

Historically, clinicians and mentors taught deck ethics to their apprentices without a formal structure by giving examples of situations, and by the old fashioned school of experiencing some situations first hand. While these methods should not be devalued or abandoned, we should take more time to discuss the ethics and values of officiating before we arrive on deck. Those who have been certified officials for some time should also review and reflect upon the ethical aspects of officiating. The basics of ethical officiating are common in all sports. We frequently hear many slogans in regard to officiating. "The benefit of the doubt goes to the swimmer." "Call what you see, not what you don't see." "Call what you see, and see what you call." "Always make swimmer centered decisions."

Slogans and 'buzz-words' can be helpful, but we should focus on a practical approach to the philosophy of ethical officiating. There are four basic tenets surrounding the foundation principles of ethical behavior that are taught by the YMCA. Those four principles are "**Honesty, Caring, Respect and Responsibility.**" The YMCA stresses these ideals to all of their members, and as an integral part of their programs. It is a philosophical approach to life for parents, coaches and athletes. Any person who aspires to become a swimming official should be imbued with these four attributes whether he or she is a member of a local YMCA or not. These four "character traits" epitomize a sense of ethics and should be adopted by every swimming official whether he/she officiates YMCA, USA Swimming, NCAA, High School or local summer league.

We must **Care** for the sport of swimming and the athletes we serve enough to devote hours to learning our craft, the study of its rules, volunteering time to be on deck and making that commitment to stay for the relay events even though our child is not on one of those relays. We must show **Respect** to our meet hosts and fellow

officials by being prompt for meetings, agreeable to accept any assignment requested of us and understanding that coaches are often emotional advocates for their swimmers. It goes without saying that must show respect for the athletes we serve, regardless of their age or personal abilities. We are **Responsible** when we prepare ourselves by reviewing the rules prior to a meet and when we make “athlete centered decisions” for the good of the entire competition. We also show responsibility when we take into account the fact that when we are “on duty” all 300 or more kids on deck are “my kids” and I am responsible for them all if I am the referee. If I am a stroke judge I am responsible for making sure the competition in my jurisdiction is according to rule. If I am the starter, it is my responsibility to see that each swimmer in every heat receives the best start he or she has ever had.

Finally, and most important, we show our **Integrity** (Honesty) by making the “tough calls” when it involves our own child or someone we know well, when we made an error and ‘owned up’ to it, and when we were honest and forthright in all our dealings with coaches, colleagues, swimmers as well as parents.

These are only a few examples of how ethics come into play, and each of us can imagine many more. Perhaps you have already been involved in some of these tough circumstances. Whenever the occasion arises during an event to make a rule interpretation, or make a “call”, responsibility and honesty are directly involved in the decision, followed by dealing with the issue in a respectful and caring manner. In initial training and recertification we should frequently refer to the USA Swimming “Situations and Resolutions” training aids. Each situation will use the four basic principles presented here in order to bring about an equitable resolution.

Integrity was listed last for a specific reason of emphasis, for without it our foundation as an official crumbles. Without integrity there is no trust. The coaches are not able to trust us or depend upon us for honest and truthful treatment in any aspect of the competition. Without integrity the swimmers cannot rely on us for a fair and honest judgment of their swims, nor an accurate and honest recording of their times.

With ethics as our foundation we can be proud of our designation as an “Official.” The body that issues us our credentials can then be confident that they are certifying, actually attesting to not only a level of rules knowledge and competence, but also a high level of integrity and ethics. Each person’s goal should be to become not just a USA Swimming Official, a “Y” Swim Official or an NCAA Swim Official... but a **“SWIMMING OFFICIAL.”** We should be known as a Swimming Official who happens to officiate on occasion for the YMCA, USA Swimming, high school or colleges and universities. We should be known for our dependability, knowledge of the rules, fairness and absolute INTEGRITY.