

# Game Management & Impact Penalties

## Introduction

“Feel for the game” or “game management” is one of the most important skills an official can bring to the ice. It is also one of the most difficult to evaluate and instruct.

**The rule book tells us what actions are punishable. The rule book does not tell us exactly when to apply those rules to effectively manage the game. Deciding when to call a penalty, and assessing the impact it will have on a game, are the keys to effective game management.**

Here is a hard truth about refereeing hockey: we cannot call every penalty. Hockey is a contact sport, even at those levels where body checking is not allowed. It is fast, fierce and often chaotic. Assessing every penalty that occurs in a hockey game – without regard to its seriousness and impact on the game – would ruin the experience for players, coaches and fans.

But how do we determine the penalties that must be called, and those that are so insignificant that they should not be used to interrupt the flow of the game?

The simple answer is that officials must become good game managers. They must make calls that promote safety and fairness in all aspects of the game. They must read complex situations quickly and confidently, and establish a clearly defined standard for what is allowable and what is over the line.

## The Principles of Game Management

Many officials believe that a thorough knowledge of the rules is the most important attribute. Knowing the rules is very important. However, we must not overlook “feel for the game.”

The foundation of “feel for the game” is built on two equally important principles: games must be **fair**; and they must be **safe**. We ensure fairness and safety by focusing on the timing, type and frequency of penalties.

Let’s look at some key questions that many officials ask as they attempt to grasp the principles of game management.

## **When does effective game management begin?**

Officials must apply the principles of game management early in the game to establish clear standards for what infractions are unacceptable and which minor infractions will be permitted to keep the game flowing.

Establishing these standards early makes the game safe and fair for everyone. Officials that wait too long to call penalties may find that they lose control of the game. Once a game is out of hand, it is too late to start trying to create a standard of safety and fairness.

## **How do I recognize an ‘IMPACT Penalty?’**

Penalties that threaten the safety and fairness of the game are called “Impact Penalties.” As the name suggests, these penalties have a direct “impact” on the standards set by the officials.

Some impact penalties are easily recognized and must be called every time they occur. These penalties include checking from behind or any penalty involving head contact, stick infractions, roughing after the whistle, or any action that qualifies as reckless, unsafe or that involves intent to injure another player.

With other penalties, the line between impact and non-impact is harder to spot.

A tripping penalty can be an impact penalty if the infraction leads to a change in possession or possibly a scoring chance by the offending team. Or, if the trip clearly denies a scoring chance to the player being fouled. However, a player who is tripped well away from the puck may not be worth calling, as long as there was no injury and no clear threat to his/her safety.

*Remember: Assessing Impact Penalties send very clear messages to the players, coaches and the entire arena about the type of play that will be permitted and what is unacceptable at all times.*

Remember, teams will adopt their style to the penalty standard of the referee. Therefore, it is part of the job of the Referee to focus on those infractions that have the most IMPACT rather than those infractions that are inconsequential.

## **The key to good game management: self-evaluation**

During a game, referees should always reflect on how players responded to a particular penalty. Did it make the game fairer and safer? They should ask themselves, ‘was that an impact penalty? Is that a penalty I want to enforce consistently throughout the rest of the game?’

This kind of self-reflection will prevent a referee from falling into the trap of calling too many weak penalties too early in a game and then, realizing that you've called the game too tightly, having to change the standard of your calls later. That will enrage players, coaches and fans.

### **Refereeing is like holding a bird...**

If you squeeze a bird too tightly, you can kill it. Hold on to the bird too loosely and it will get away. The same holds true for managing a hockey game.

You need to maintain a firm enough grip on the game to ensure that it is safe and fair. However, you do not want to squeeze the game so tightly that every time two players bump into each other you have to blow your whistle.

The key is balance; holding the game so it is in control, but not squeezing it to death.