

Behind the scenes with an officiating crew who worked Duke-Kansas

By Dana O'Neil (/author/dana-on... 2h ago



NEW YORK — It is 5 o'clock on a Tuesday evening in midtown Manhattan. Three men walk to a door beneath an awning, each dragging a small wheelie suitcase behind him. In most circumstances, they would blend into the crowded sidewalks, a trio of anonymous businessmen among the multitudes getting on their way at rush hour. This is not any Tuesday, nor any street in midtown. It is the first Tuesday in November, which also happens to be the first day of the college basketball season, and this is the intersection of 8th Avenue and 33rd Street, at the employee entrance to Madison Square Garden. In two hours, the Champions Classic will tip off, the top four teams in the country squaring off in a pair of marquee matchups. That means the streets are teeming with fans — very knowledgeable fans. As much as the men try to fade into the backdrop, they can't. “Hey,” someone says. “Call 'em right tonight, fellas,” as Roger Ayers, Mike Roberts and Doug Sirmons duck into the Garden and report to work.

The goal of every official in every sport is to be anonymous, to call a game so perfectly no one remembers he or she was even there, much less be able to be picked out of a crowd. It is not a goal frequently realized. The job has never been easy — “what other profession, when we walk

into work, no matter what we do, half the crowd is going against us?’ Sirmons says — but camera phones and social media have conspired to make every play and decision instantaneously reviewable and questionable. “How many people are willing to subject themselves to this?” Sirmon adds. “I think we’re all a little loony.”

To better understand the level of loony, *The Athletic* spent before and after the Duke-Kansas game with Ayers, Roberts and Sirmons, digging in on how they prepped for the game, their postgame analysis and why on earth they have, for decades, toiled in one of the most thankless jobs in the country.

In June, officials across the country received a four-page explainer on the rule changes they’d be enforcing for this season. On paper the rules made sense: The shot clock will reset to 20 seconds instead of 30 after an offensive team corralled a rebound, and floppers will be charged with a player delay, resulting in a warning for a first offense and a technical for a second. Sitting in their locker room (an unusually spacious two-room layout, with sofas, a small tray of snacks and coffee and a big-screened TV), Ayers, Roberts and Sirmons discuss the practicality of enforcing them.

It is 5:30, the three having arrived from various points (Ayers from Roanoke, Va., Roberts from Atlanta, and Sirmons from Virginia Beach) that morning. For fear of travel delays, they took the earliest flights they

could grab, necessitating pre-dawn wakeup calls, followed by the urban maze that is LaGuardia Airport construction. Restorative naps ate up much of the morning, followed by light lunches and last-minute reading. It's a long day, with another early wake-up call awaiting on Wednesday — each official would have another game to work that night. Sirmons has changed into shorts and a T-shirt and waits for an athletic trainer to stretch him, a preventative practice he instituted about seven years ago. Sirmons and Ayers are still in their dress clothes.

Like the rest of college basketball, they have waited eagerly for this night, and they approach the game with the same giddy anticipation as players and fans. "Not nervous at all," says Ayers. "Excited." The idea of an offseason is nearly as much a misnomer for them as it is for the players, their post-April days filled with messages, conference calls, clinics and closed-door scrimmages to prep for the season.

But it is the June missive from the rules committee that is the top priority. The officials are fully in favor of the changes; it's the enforcement that has their attention. "People are going to go crazy," Ayers says. It is up to them to make sure, for example, the clock is reset; it is up to the shot-clock operators to reset the clock. In preseason scrimmages there were, shall we say, glitches. Now it's time for a real game, in front of real fans and the pressure-filled lights of the TV cameras. "We don't want to be over there 10 times reviewing the shot clock," Ayers says.

Reviews, shall we say, are not popular. Fans want the games called accurately; they also want them called quickly. Those two things don't necessarily go hand in hand. Officials typically aren't given the same replays fans see on TV, relying instead on the cuts from DV Sport, the in-house company that also splices the games together for the refs for immediate postgame reviews. Officials don't immediately see what the viewer sees, or even what's presented on the Jumbotron. Sometimes they stare for precious seconds at blank screens while the technician searches for the proper replay while exasperated fans boo their displeasure. The possibility of multiple reviews for shot-clock fixes, needless to say, is nerve-wracking. "Most shot-clock operators, they're just guys," Sirmons says. "You get 20,000 people watching them, the TV camera, millions more on TV watching and this guy was just a schoolteacher or an accountant this afternoon. They get nervous. I don't blame them."

The flopping call, on the other hand, is entirely in the purview of the three men; that doesn't make it any less complicated. Prior to the season's tipoff on Tuesday morning, NCAA supervisor of officials J.D. Collins left a voicemail for all of his referees, offering simple instructions: "If you call flopping in November, it will stop by January." By the NCAA's definition, a flop isn't merely an Oscar-worthy collapse to the floor; it can be as little as a fake head bob, as if a defensive player was pushed by a cutting offensive opponent. But it is a very subjective call, up to the officials to determine if the intent was to draw a phantom foul, or merely shy away from action. "I'll tell them before the game starts, like at the

captain's meeting, if you haven't been told, we'll warn you and then it's a technical," Robert says of his intention to ensure the players understood the severity of the consequences.

The trio has spent weeks prepping for all of this, exchanging text messages and phone calls during the closed scrimmages to see if the calls have come up and how each has handled the whistle. They aren't worried so much as cognizant of what their duties are. As they bat around ways to handle unique situations, a Garden employee sticks his head in the door. "Your favorite person is here," he says.

He has the paychecks.

Recently
retired after a
career in
sales,
Sirmons is in
his 31st year.
(Rich
Graessle/Icon
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“This is not stressful,” Roberts says as he leans back in a chair. The man has a high threshold for stress. Roberts played college ball at Kent State, where he was a decent point guard. At the end of his college career, an official suggested he give refereeing a shot, explaining that as a point guard tasked with seeing the court, he was especially made for the job. “I was like, Referring? No way,” Roberts says. Eight years later, he started. He has been at it for 22 years now, and until 2012 he juggled the gig with his full-time job as a police officer and detective in Ohio.

Of his caseload, he says he dealt with “everything,” and by that he means felonies of the worst kinds: murders and rapes and burglaries. Defusing tense situations, dealing with the worst humankind has to offer, it certainly makes even a Mike Krzyzewski death glare seem small potatoes.

Nearly 25 years ago Ayers exited a burning building for the last time. The one-time Firefighter of the Year in Roanoke, Ayers and his partner were nearly killed when a ceiling collapsed on them in a house fire, Ayers escaping only when he was able to blindly search for the hose line in the dark to lead him to safety. Weeks later, Ayers called a friend asking to become an official. “You know, the adrenaline rush is the same,” he says. “You’re at the first house and you hear those bells go off for a structure fire, and you’re jacked up and you go. This place tonight, 20,000 people, it’s the same rush. I’m still in a fire.”

By comparison, Sirmons had it easy. He comes to officiating after a far more pedestrian line of work, spending 28 years in sales, the last 18 with BSN Sports, a sporting goods distributor. He just retired.

Officiating is more a side hustle than a full-time job, college referees working as independent contractors of the various leagues rather than as full-time employees. Most work as many as three to four games a week, answering to the leagues they work for, those particular supervisors of officials and ultimately to Collins, who is in charge of who works the coveted NCAA Tournament gigs. Most are drawn to the job by a love for basketball, more than a quest for riches, rising up the ranks from the high school game to the upper echelon of Division I.

Professionalism and experience are their calling cards, decades of calling games (Ayers is in Year 25 as an official, Sirmons 31 and Roberts 22) earning them both the respect from coaches and the confidence they've seen almost everything. Over time, they have learned to have no ears instead of rabbit ears, ignoring the catcalls from fans in the stands, and the screeches from coaches on the sideline. They have come to accept that they are human and thereby prone to make mistakes, and above all else they've learned how to handle their errors. "Admit it," they all say in unison when asked what to do when they realize they've blown a call. Just last week, Sirmons explains, he worked an exhibition game at Marshall. He blew his whistle on what would have been at best, a no call, and at worst an offensive foul. Instead he signaled a Marshall player for a block. He knew instantaneously that he had blown it. "The kid walked over to me and I just said, 'Bad call,'" Sirmons says. "He high-fived me. It happens. What are you going to do?"

But their claim the job is stress-free is not entirely true. They are keenly aware of the responsibility they have, not to mention the impact they have on the game. Each has a horror story, a blown call they wish they could take back, and getting over it isn't easy. Tonight, for example, Ayers will almost maniacally count how many guys are on the floor at all times. The same man who fearlessly entered burning buildings once failed to see a Louisiana-Lafayette player tucked in the corner. This was in 2012, during a January game against Western Kentucky. Ayers was the experienced lead official, working with two younger guys, and he took it upon himself to make sure everything went smoothly. It did, until the waning seconds, when the Ragin' Cajuns scored on a layup with 3.6 seconds left in overtime — and with six guys on the court. Ayers didn't see the extra man until it was too late, and since the error was not reviewable, the play stood.

Two days later, Ken McDonald was fired at WKU. At the time, the Hilltoppers were just 5-11, but other than a stint with the Austin Spurs, the San Antonio G League team, he has never been a head coach again. He most recently served one year as Frank Haith's assistant at Tulsa. "That night, I didn't shower. I didn't eat. Nothing," Ayers says of his gaffe. "I didn't sleep that night and for months, even tonight, I'll be convinced sometimes I see six guys on the court. I know the team was struggling, but what if he wins that game? Maybe they get a win streak going, who knows? It crushed me."

The final buzzer sounds and the officials head through the narrow chute alongside the stands to the exits. No one says anything — no boos, no “you suck” screams, nothing. This is what you call a win.

The game between Kansas and Duke was tight and down to the wire, but without drama. Just one shot-clock reset, just one monitor check for a potential flagrant foul. No flops, no major controversies, no head coach tirades. The one “issue” the crew had to address was picking up a bat left strewn on the court from a dizzy bat competition during a timeout. “People were screaming, that’s how we knew,” Roberts says with a laugh. That required a quick fix to the game clock. “At first I thought they meant a real bat was flying around the arena.”

Back in the locker room, Ayers, Roberts and Sirmons gather while the trio for the next game heads out to the court. They know they were not perfect, citing a preponderance of bang-bang out-of-bounds plays that they’re certain they didn’t get exactly right. But all in all, it’s been a good day’s work. Ayers’ daughter and a friend pop in to say hello — they’ve taken a \$10 Greyhound to New York from the University of Virginia and will be on the 1 a.m. back to campus — as the officials stretch and plot their exodus.

Ordinarily, they’d grab their iPads and head back to the hotel to review their performances. Even after a good game, they double-check positioning and specific calls, all in an effort to make sure they’re better for the next night. But because the Garden is an NBA arena, they don’t have the cuts available to them. This game will go immediately to the memory bank, and they will go back to their hotels for a bite to eat. New

York, of course, offers more than a few late-night options, but the refs tend to refrain from going out, regardless of where they are. “If I go out and have a beer tonight and someone snaps a picture, they’ll say tomorrow I was having a beer before the game, forget that it wasn’t the same night,” Sirmons says. “I do miss the fellowship we used to have after games, where you could have a nice dinner and talk. But it’s not worth it.”

Adds Ayers, “I guarantee I’ll get on the elevator tonight in the hotel and someone will ask, ‘Hey about that one call ...’”

Like this city, wronged fans also never sleep.

(Top photo of Roger Ayers: Rich Graessle/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

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writer, covering the Final Four, the Super Bowl, World Series, NBA Finals and NHL playoffs. She has worked previously at ESPN and the Philadelphia Daily News and has been honored with multiple writing awards. Her book, Long Shots, chronicling Villanova's journey to a national championship, was published in 2017. Follow Dana on Twitter [@DanaONEilWriter](https://twitter.com/DanaONEilWriter) (<https://twitter.com/DanaONEilWriter>).



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Marc E. 1h ago

I enjoyed the story. But one question I have always had – and no one I know seems to be able to answer – how much do referees get paid? I assume it is different depending on the league they ref in.



1



Michael A. 1h ago

Really enjoyed this piece.



Dustin G. 39m ago

Great work and a really interesting piece. This is why I subscribe to the Athletic.



Owen B. 18m ago

Hard to make the argument they don't do it for the money when Yahoo Sports reports that going rate for referees is \$1500-\$2000 per game with ACC and Big East paying almost \$3000. Let's not act like they're doing community service!



Christopher K. 7m ago

Roger Ayers, not Randy Ayers. Good piece.



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