

Stripes

A day as an official whistle blower.

By Dave Reardon

The third team on the basketball court just can't win. Literally and figuratively. Whether they're up against players, coaches, fans or even the IRS, everyone loves to hate the ref.

Today at the Kaimukī High School gym, I have a chance to not only puncture my inflated ego, but also make a mockery of a perfectly good profession, and worse yet, screw up a game for a bunch of 11- and 12-year-old kids.

Fortunately, my two partners are equipped to carry me, er, I mean, teach me everything I need to know to pull my own weight. They are experienced refs, and both played the game in high school.

Tony Tyler, varsity coach and athletic director at St. Francis School, was a high school teammate of former NBA great Isiah Thomas. I forget all of Tony's pregame tips when he shows me the shiny whistle I get to use.

"Don't blow it, heh, heh," says Tony. Funny guy. He didn't know I'd take him literally.

Linda Fischer, an Army MP in her day job, lends me the requisite striped shirt, albeit a couple sizes too small.

Whistle? Check. Shirt? Check. Clue? Can't seem to find one, and the game starts in two minutes.

Miraculously, I don't make a bad call the entire first half as I follow the boys and girls up and down the court. Actually, I don't even make a call. These kids play clean—anti-Rodmans.

Or do they? Basketball officiating is subjective. Go strictly by the book and you can call a foul almost every play. Do we let the kids play, or do we whistle everything so they learn the rules? I decide to pretty much let them go, short of escalation to Wrestlemania. I draw the



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line when two boys in the key elbow each other. Not knowing which to tag with a foul, I simply threaten both with one if they don't knock it off. They do.

"Gee, no fouls on my side of the court," I say to Tony and Linda during intermission.

"Yes there are," says Linda with a laugh. "Don't worry, we've got you covered."

As we work the second half, I actually blow my whistle a couple times and awkwardly make the call to the scorer's table. Even though I'm a karaoke ham and love to crack jokes in front of groups, *this* center stage is scary.

My teammates acknowledge my correct calls with a nod and give me small-kine stink eye when I miss one. Only one fan gets on my case—something about a tight shirt restricting my ability to blow a whistle. Before I know it, it's over. Parents and coaches thank us.

Most people become refs because they love the game and want to be a part of it. Linda tells me she also does it for therapy, to help her recover from a sexual assault.

"I used to be a volcano," she says. "This is good for learning to control your emotions. I've also found I can contribute by helping kids learn sportsmanship."

Hey, even in a no-win situation, sometimes you just can't lose. **IS**