

## It's Black and White For Nichols

By John Feinstein  
Sunday, February 10, 2008

PHILADELPHIA Midway through the first half of George Mason's 75-65 victory over Drexel on Thursday night, the Patriots' Dre Smith lost control of the basketball near the top of the key. Thinking he couldn't pick up the ball again because a pass to himself would be traveling, Smith stared at the ball for a moment until he realized that Drexel's Scott Rodgers was about to pick it up and take off the other way for an easy basket.

Thinking a violation was better than a fast-break layup, he reluctantly picked up the ball and waited for the whistle.

There was none.

Sitting five rows up in the stands, Henry O. Nichols, retired chairman of Villanova's department of education and human services, was elated.

"You see that?" he said as the baffled Smith threw a pass to Folarin Campbell. "The kid doesn't know the rule. But my guys know it. You can dribble and then fumble and pick the ball up as long as you don't dribble again. A lot of times people get confused about that call. My guys got it right."

Nichols's guys were the three referees working the game: Roger Ayers, Mike Eades and Paul Faia. There are about 700 men across the country who referee Division I basketball games. They are known to most in the game as "Hank's guys."

That's because, for the last 22 years, Nichols has been the NCAA's supervisor of basketball officials. That means he has been responsible for the way games are officiated, for how rules are interpreted and for which officials work the NCAA tournament.

"When I was offered the job, I told my dad that I'd been asked to try to straighten out college basketball officiating," Nichols said. "He said, 'Take that job because you'll have it for life since there's no way you'll ever get them straightened out.'"

It didn't stop him from trying.

"When Dave Gavitt came to me with the idea in 1987, the goal was to try to get guys across the country to officiate the same way, not have the ACC be different from the Big Ten and the Big Ten different from the Pac-10," he said. "We wanted to teach guys to ref

better, to try to get them to be more consistent. We didn't want them to be another factor when teams played on the road. We wanted them to stand tall and figure out tough situations. I think a lot of that has been accomplished."

That is one reason why Nichols, who is 70, is comfortable with his decision to retire at the end of this season.

"I think 22 years of being in charge of bad calls is enough," he said, smiling. "In truth, it's just time. I want to have more time for my grandchildren."

It certainly isn't because Nichols has lost his enthusiasm or his desire to see his guys ref better. Watching George Mason-Drexel, he kept a keen eye on all three officials throughout the game. He was pleased when Eades instantly called a pushing foul when a Drexel player tried to fight through a screen and bumped the ballhandler.

"You see some people will say, 'Why call a foul 30 feet from the basket?' " he said. "But the kid with the ball [Campbell] got bounced backwards and had to go backwards and reset the entire play. That's an advantage for the defense. You call that foul. When Syracuse played Georgetown a few weeks ago, Syracuse was holding for the last shot, and the same thing happened and my guys no-called it. They should have called it."

Nichols began officiating in the mid-'60s, when his older brother Bob persuaded him to work high school games with him in the Buffalo-Niagara Falls area, where Nichols was teaching and coaching. Their dad had been a referee, so it seemed a natural thing to do.

"One of the first college games we worked together was a freshman game at Niagara when Calvin Murphy was a freshman," he said. "We ended up fouling Calvin out with about six minutes left. A woman in the stands stood up and hollered, 'One thing I know for sure: Two Nichols are *not* worth a dime!' "

Nichols smiled. "I thought that was a pretty good line," he said.

He worked his way up to the ACC by the early 1970s and worked his first Final Four in 1975, including the championship game between UCLA and Kentucky, which was John Wooden's last game.

"Early in the game I had to 'T' David Myers up because he slammed a ball in frustration," Nichols said. "Coach Wooden couldn't believe it. He was up screaming. I was already hopped up -- first final and all -- and I might have given him a tech if Bob Wortman [the other official] didn't get to him first. Imagine if I'd given John Wooden a tech in his last game."

As it turned out, Nichols worked nine more Final Fours before becoming the boss in 1987. Every year before the season, he puts together a tape for coaches telling them points of emphasis for the season. Then he does clinics with all the officials.

"Two years ago, we decided we had to stop guys from palming the ball all the time," he said right after Faia had called a palming violation. "Now, the kids are actually starting to dribble the ball correctly again."

Of all the things Nichols is proud of one that might surprise people is this: "Refs today don't care who wins games," he said. "When I started that wasn't always true."

"It wasn't that they were dishonest. But guys knew that if certain coaches lost games they worked too often, they'd probably end up bounced from the league. Coaches had way too much influence back then."

Nichols has maintained the respect of basketball people in part because he's been good at what he does, in part because he's always kept his sense of humor.

"One night I had a Wake Forest-North Carolina game," he said. "I called the captains to midcourt and said, 'Now you know, fellas, it's an absolute fact that we refs get 96 percent of our calls right. You can go to the library, and it's right there in the book on reffing. Your job as captains is to keep your guys off us on the other 4 percent of the calls.'

"Buzz Peterson was Carolina's captain. He looked at me and said, 'That book is in the library?' I said absolutely, and he shook his head and said, 'Well, one thing's for sure: If that book is in the library, it's in the *fiction* section.' "

Nichols always has enjoyed telling the story about the night Jim Valvano asked him if he could give him a technical for what he was thinking.

"No, Jimmy, I can't give you a tech for what you're thinking," Nichols told him.

"Good," Valvano said. "In that case, I think you suck."

"The thing about coaches is they *never* forget," Nichols said. "I mean never."

Example: In 2006, Nichols was in Hawaii, in charge of the officials for the tournament in Maui. North Carolina was playing and Dean Smith was there watching. Nichols introduced a friend to Smith in a restaurant one night, and "Dean shook her hand, pointed at me and said, 'You know, he let Len Bias double-dribble.' "

The alleged double-dribble had taken place in 1986.

"I really don't think I got that one wrong," Nichols said.

He got very few wrong. And because of his work the last 22 years, his guys have gotten a lot fewer calls wrong.

"We're a long way from perfect," he said. "But we're definitely better."

And all of them are proud to be known as Hank's guys.