



# NFHS News

National Federation of State High School Associations

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## Managing High-Tension Situations: Staying Objective and Professional

As we begin to transition into the time for state high school championships around the country, this article is meant to offer guidance for track and field officials during disagreements, protests, and other tense situations.

Track and field officials are responsible not only for enforcing rules and ensuring fairness, but also for maintaining order and professionalism—especially during championship or high-stakes meets where emotions often run high. Disagreements, protests, and high-pressure situations are part of the job. How officials handle these moments can directly influence the tone and integrity of the competition.

Does your state have a Jury of Appeals? Who hears protests after the meet referee has given a ruling? Knowing your state association procedures for the track and field championship series is the first step.

**Know the Rules—and Your Role:** The first step to staying composed in tense situations is having a solid understanding of the NFHS rules and your specific responsibilities at the meet. Confidence comes from preparation. When you know the rules and procedures, you're less likely to be shaken by a challenge or confrontation.

**Communicate Clearly and Calmly:** In moments of disagreement or confusion, how you communicate matters as much as what you communicate. Speak slowly, clearly, and respectfully as a calm tone can defuse tension. Avoid arguing or becoming defensive and always stick to the facts and the rules.

**Don't Take It Personally:** Coaches and athletes may react emotionally, especially if they believe a call impacted their team's performance. It's not a reflection of your character, it's a reflection of the pressure of competition. Maintain emotional distance from the situation while showing empathy. Acknowledge the intensity of the moment: "I understand this is frustrating; let's work through it." Avoid engaging in escalating behavior such as raising your voice, using sarcasm, or issuing threats.

**Use the Power of the Pause:** If a situation becomes heated, it's okay to pause before responding. A brief moment of silence gives you time to collect your thoughts and signals to others that you're handling things professionally. Take a deep breath before speaking. Ask for a moment to consult the rulebook or another official if needed.

**Lean on Your Team:** No official is alone on the field. Use your crew as a resource. If you are uncertain, consult your event lead, head field judge, or meet referee if there are more than one at your meet. Support each other by backing up calm, rule-based decisions, and sharing observations. After a tense situation, check in with your crew to debrief and ensure everyone is okay.

**Document When Necessary:** When a ruling is given, and a challenge or protest has been filed, the referee should review all filings and evidence permitted regarding the protest. The referee is directly in charge of activities during the meet and has the sole authority to rule on infractions except whether a start is fair and legal. In cases of formal protests or controversial decisions, documentation is essential. Make sure all umpires and event staff record what happened and who was involved. The referee should record what decisions were made. Each official involved should be objective in their descriptions—stick to what you saw and heard, not assumptions. If your state has a Jury of Appeals, submit any required reports promptly to meet management or the jury.

**Set the Tone from the Start:** A proactive approach can reduce the number of tense situations before they start. Be visible and approachable. If your state has a coaches meeting, make sure you or meet management reviews the protests procedures. Greet coaches and athletes professionally and make yourself available for questions. When officiating, be consistent and confident in your signals and rulings.

Officiating track and field is about more than making calls—it's about modeling professionalism. How you respond under pressure reflects on the entire officiating community. By staying grounded in the rules, communicating with poise, and leaning on your training and team, you help ensure that every athlete has the chance to compete in a fair, respectful, and well-managed environment.

Remember: In high-tension moments, the best officials don't just enforce the rules, they lead with calm, clarity, and integrity.

If you have a topic, you would like me to address in my NOC newsletter article, please reach out to me: [jcochran@nfhs.org](mailto:jcochran@nfhs.org).