

# Kenny Mauer: 33 NBA Seasons and Counting



*From his recognizable signals to his well-known hairstyle, **Kenny Mauer has been one of the most notable figures in NBA officiating** for 33 seasons. Having officiated approximately 2,000 games, including 200+ play-offs and 19 finals (including 2 finals as Crew Chief), the numbers speak for themselves.*

*From signals to sports nutrition, from discussing previous legends to life as an NBA official, Kenny was generous to share with me his life on the road.*

*Here is the article derived from a 3-hour long enriching and fun conversation with the longest tenured active NBA referee.*

## Background

Coming from an athletic family, his father is a Minnesota Hall of Fame coach and referee, his cousin Joe is a three-time American League batting champion, and his brother Mark quarterbacked the Nebraska Cornhuskers in the 1982 Orange Bowl against Clemson.

Kenny himself was a three-sport athlete and got introduced to refereeing while watching his father as a youngster. In college, he took an officiating class, and little did he know at age 18, that one day he would referee at basketball's largest stage, the NBA finals.

## Officiating: Art & Challenge

“I fell in love with the *art and challenge* of officiating.” – begins Kenny. This challenge was comparable to what he did as a competitive athlete. Officiating would be no different. He would officiate the same way he competed as an athlete, striving to be the best he could be.

Now, after officiating 45 years (33 in the NBA), that same spirit is still there:

“I enjoy the thrill of refereeing the perfect game even though I know it will never happen...”

Always a lover of watching NBA games, it was not long into his refereeing career, that Kenny realized he could do something he truly loved for a living.

## A Flashback on NBA Legends

Kenny began his officiating career in the NBA in 1986 when the likes of Earl Strom, Darell Garretson, Jack Madden, Jake O'Donnell and Ed T. Rush were the ones who were setting the tone for the young referees to follow. And Kenny has always been one who has respected those that have come before him.

“I loved the way how Earl handled games. Among others, Earl, Darell, Jack, Jake and Ed T. were those who set the tone and they still do. While officiating is indeed about getting plays right, there are so many factors that determine a good referee. How does one handle the crowd, manage players, handle coaches and just plain help make one's partners better. The ones that do all of that set themselves apart from the rest.”

Earl had the reputation of being a great road ref, which meant that he couldn't be intimidated by the home crowds. Darell forgot more about refereeing than most people would ever know. He was a referee's ref, and cared about making young people better. He was also first to protect them in front of the League Office.”

The one thing he particularly loved was that these greats, despite setting the tone during games, helped their partners on what and how to call. They gave the younger refs a sense of security and a feeling that you are able to do a great job with them.

“As I'm maturing, I'm trying to do the same thing: I try to make the younger referees better than me!”

## It's a Team Effort

For Kenny, it is very important to make sure his two partners are comfortable with him, both on and off the floor. As the crew chief, he tries to ensure that the crew is on the

same page, always asking their partners' opinion about not only their calls, but his calls as well. He makes it a point to include them on the decision on what hotel they will be staying at, what restaurant will they be going to, as well as who will be renting the crew car. It is important for the crew chief to remember that it is not about him, it is about the crew. And if we sincerely believe that, we will referee the game better that night.

"The game of basketball is basically the same at every level. There are still fouls on jumpshots, players still travel, people lose their composure and there are technical fouls. But we are evaluated on things like verticality, rhythm, speed, balance, quickness, all of which may be talked about differently, but they mean the same thing."

## Handling Tension: Kenny's Tips

Conflict management is always a popular topic of discussion. What can we do when there is tension on the floor?

When asked about the little tricks that we can do, Kenny seemed like a lexicon of basketball officiating to me as he shared so many scenarios that can possibly happen.

"Some games just go smoothly and some are not as easy."

"There are so many things that can lead to tension; one team is starting to pull away from the another, one guy just lost his mind and it has an impact on the entire team's morale. Or maybe there is bad blood between 2 players because of a previous game, or one team might be fighting for a playoff spot, the other is not. **You have to prepare and be aware of all these things.**"

"The best way to handle these situations is to realize them **early**. Often times, there is chaos and we don't know why it happened or how to fix it. Therefore, being able to catch it early before it gets out of control and knowing why it is happening are two important factors in being able to control it."

*"I didn't handle people well at first, mainly because when I was young, I either didn't know what to say, or when I did say something, it came off the wrong way. Then I used to use the technical foul as a weapon instead of a last resort. When you are young, most players/coaches don't buy your talk anyway. As you get older, they start to remember you and usually start to accept you. "*

*"Unfortunately, there is no magic wand that can solve all conflicts: it all comes with experience and with learning from others. However, we should never regret our mistakes, but learn from them."*

As Kenny explains, he even had to change his facial expression and manerisms during the game. Even when you as a referee are frustrated, never let your facial expressions show it. Always keep your emotions inside.

## **The Human Side: Building Relationships**

It is nice to find a common topic at the right time and build the right relationship that will avoid an unnecessary conflict – explains Kenny.

“My father and several family members are all coaches, and I have always had an extreme respect for coaches.”

“Sometimes you let the players/coaches talk, while other times you interrupt, or you just walk away. There may even be times when you yell back, but never out of disrespect. Certain times, you try to solve it with humor. The key is to know which approach works best at each individual interaction. I’m now better at doing it because I have made so many mistakes. Along the way, I learned from greats like Joe Crawford, Ed T. Rush and Earl Strom.”

Usually he doesn’t talk first, explaining that we can a learn a lot by listening and not by talking. Darell Garretson taught him that a lot of times the coaches are right, therefore we should consider their complaints and remarks for a moment. It is good that they now have video so they can give real-time feedback after halftime.

“Admitting your mistake at the right time builds respect.”

“We, as officials, are not always perfect. Nobody, who has a fair sense of rationality, can expect a human being to be perfect all the time. But what we must do is make those that are competing trust us. I’m not the best referee in the world and I will make mistakes. But every night on the floor I try to be fair.”

By being honest and fair instead of making up explanations or telling them what they want to hear, we can help the players what we are trying to do.

Kenny remembers a great story when Patrick Beverley (who currently plays for the Clippers) came up to him before a game and let him know that he had read some information about him on the internet. “It’s great if you can incorporate humor with people who you interact with on a nightly basis.”

“He approached me two years ago and said: *‘Is this really your 31<sup>st</sup> season?’* And I said *‘Yes!’* And he then said *‘You know, I wasn’t even a thought in my mother’s womb when you started refereeing in this league!’* Patrick and I just started laughing and it was so hilarious. – laughs Kenny. “But that’s the rapport you strive for. When they know

they can talk to you as a human being and not as a policeman in a gray shirt, ***you have made it.*** At least you are accepted!”

## **Handling People: Something That Comes Along with Experience**

“Handling people the right way doesn’t happen overnight.” – reveals the 64-year-old veteran. “Young referees expect that but it just won’t happen.”

**“You just got to work. Don’t be arrogant. Discipline people when it is necessary. Be strong but don’t be unapproachable. Treat everybody the same way and it will all come! Sooner or later it is going to come. They will be looking up to you. Don’t ever think you are better than you are. Every referee thinks he is. We aren’t as good as we think we are. Every day it is just an honor to be refereeing.”**

## **Signals and Selling Calls**

“I believe that signals and mechanics are very important. Sometimes, when a call is so obvious that someone even in the top row can clearly see it, there is no need to sell that call. But, there are some, like the block-charge, that may need to be sold.”

Kenny reveals that it is good to learn from TV and from others and this is something they do in the NBA. “It is not about always being right or wrong. It is about learning from each other and implementing something that will make our game better.”

Kenny also believes that the way we carry ourselves on the court greatly contributes to our acceptance. “I think Mike Callahan is a great example of this. The way he walks, his signals, the way he carries himself on the floor. All are examples of ways he makes himself bigger than he truly is.”

## **Life as an NBA Official**

“When traveling, we are free to organize our flights. We can choose which airline we wish to fly and at which class. We can also choose our hotel. After so many years, I have my favorite places, but I always talk with my colleagues. Again, it is not about me but about us. I’m happy to try new places.”

Before the season, their preparation begins with a 5-day camp in New York where they meet with the management and they also do a 50-question rule test. They also go through physical examination alongside with stress, eye and blood pressure tests. They also do a crew chief meeting, meet with the media, discuss rule changes and receive their uniforms.

Their rules knowledge is supported by a 5-question quiz every week on the internet during the season. On game days, the crew meets at 11 in the morning and they also watch video tapes, go through potential match-ups and so on.

## Diet – Mauer Sports Nutrition

At the age of 64, Kenny is a prime example on how to keep in shape for so long.

“My physical preparation includes doing aerobics, elliptical training, running, stretching, weightlifting, **but most of all: diet.**”

To many, long-time NBA officials are idols not only because of their capability to referee the world’s best players, but also because of their capability to run with them up and down the floor.

All through these years, Kenny has been subject to all sorts of protein bars and energy shots that athletes consume to fuel performance and support muscle recovery. He sought more information on these products out of curiosity.

He started to read labels more closely, which revealed most sports nutrition products are made with artificial preservatives, refined sugars, and even GMOs (genetically modified organisms). But what does all of this mean?

After years of reading, speaking with scientific researchers, and devoting his time to understanding proper nutrition, Mauer completely changed his diet. But he quickly realized clean eating can be difficult for those of us who lead a busy lifestyle, so he took matters into his own hands.

*“We wanted to start something that we believed in – something that we were passionate about. It needs to be something that is good for all people. What can a mother give her 8-year-old? What can a high school kid eat? How about a professional athlete? How about an NBA referee? How about the working class men and women who deal with stress every day? Something for everybody.”*

Therefore, Kenny founded his own company with the intention to give everyone healthy and nutritious sports bars.

In 2005 and 2019, he also had surgeries and now keeping in shape is even more important for him to protect his knees.

“I’ve learned a lot on nutrition, and still have a lot to learn. To me, being fit is 80% diet and 20% proper workout. I believe that if somebody doesn’t watch what he eats, sooner or later they are going to have problems.”

## **So what does Kenny's diet look like?**

A lots of **NOs**: no sugar, no glutens, no GMOs, no candies, no preservatives and it has worked really well for him.

And a lot of **YESes**: protein, carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables, fish and good fats. Good fats that digest well are great and might even be underappreciated!

This is what works for him at that's why he started his company.

Find out more on Mauer Sport Nutrition's [official site](#).

## **Coming to Peace with Yourself: Evaluations**

The end of our conversation took a rather philosophical turn. I tried to get a general idea on the improvement as an official from a mental standpoint. Along the way, we all face criticism and receive evaluations. It is important to re-conciliate with them to have inner peace and be able to continuously improve. Here's Kenny's take on that:

"There are people who are rating you and you will receive criticism with which you may or may not agree. That doesn't mean that you quit or get angry... You get up and take their criticism. We are highly criticized. You know how it is: everybody seems to have an idea on how to make a ref better... every coach... every fan... At times, it might get a little ridiculous if you listen to it all the time at let it fester you. You just need to roll it off your shoulders."

"There are certain people who you have to listen to, who sincerely want you to be better. Some people's criticism is always about failure. It is a subjective and often negative profession. Some officials at lower levels might put an emphasis on some things that are not really important. Never get into the small things. Officiating is a profession we love and we are passionate about. As for evaluators: at times, it okay to say '*hey, nice job today!*' without any further ado."

## **The Philosophy Behind Being a Great Ref**

Apart from talent, education and opportunities, there are some other points that factor into officiating. Kenny shared with me that in his opinion, a person needs to be driven and passionate to become a very successful referee. One who loves officiating and works hard and...

***..is not afraid of failure!***

"To me, the true test of a man or woman is how he or she handles setbacks."

Of course, most people seem to enjoy success, but the true personalities come to the surface when someone is getting dropped or having a setback. Handling these situations well is imperative to become an elite ref.

“You’re competing with people in one regard but in another, you are really not... you are competing against yourself and trying to bring out your best. It is important to set goals and have priorities in life... ask yourself: what is more important?”

It is OK to pick up mannerisms and signals from other referees, but you have to incorporate it into your game and always stay true to yourself.

Not being first doesn’t mean you are bad. Not refereeing the championship game in your season is not a failure. Thinking like this is detrimental to your maturing and also, at the end of the day, success might mean different things for different people...!

One final exclamation point:

“As you are progressing as a referee, remember to respect those that came before you as well as where you came from. Always appreciate the game and consider officiating an honor. Don’t ever forget what it was like when you were young, because when I started officiating, I was a young guy just like many of you.”