



Leon Lopez

August 11, 2015

Split-second decisions

As the final 2014 New Mexico Basketball Championship game for the Class 5A high school girls is about to begin in the University of New Mexico's "Pit" arena, the "Hawks" from Albuquerque's Volcano Vista High School and the "Trojans" from Las Cruces' Mayfield High School nervously shuffle about, while the Service Innovation Division's Leon Lopez gets ready to referee, just as he has for 37 years during his spare time. The Volcano Vista team sports black jerseys, and the Mayfield girls wear white.

"Today's final is special for me," Lopez says, "because I am not only overseeing the match as such, but I'm also supporting a young man, Anthony Cisneros, who has never officiated at a state championship before. Few sports officials even reach this level of game."

Anthony Cisneros himself is special to Lopez, because Lopez has known his family a long time. Cisneros' father, Cliff Cisneros, was a teaching assistant in the first sports officiating class Lopez took many years ago, and Cisneros' grandfather, Larry Cisneros, mentored Lopez when he first began refereeing.

"There is no substitute for experience in basketball officiating," Lopez explains. "You have to develop impeccable judgment, and the ability to make good decisions in split seconds, in order to provide a fair game environment for the players. Making such fast calls in a 15,411-seat sports venue like the Pit—and with TV and video cameras rolling—adds additional pressure and excitement. There isn't much room for mistakes."

Before Lopez, Cisneros and the game's third referee—Gene Strickland from Clovis—run to their positions, Lopez gives Cisneros a few quick words of encouragement.

Game time

Once the match is underway, the three referees are on the lookout for incidents that violate basketball rules, such as illegal personal contact or blocking. Lopez also makes it a point to talk to Anthony Cisneros during time-outs and to listen to any concerns or questions Cisneros has.

At one point, Cisneros sounds a very short whistle call after a player turns for a shot and is hit by an opponent.

When Cisneros runs toward the scorers' table to report the foul, he passes Lopez, and Lopez compliments him on the good call. But Lopez also quietly suggests blowing the whistle a little longer next time.

The Volcano Vista girls shoot an impressive 67 percent during the first quarter and by half-time lead by 32-27. The three referees do a brief lessons-learned during the break to make sure that their calls have been consistent and correct so far.

At the start of the fourth quarter, Volcano Vista is ahead by 45-36 but then begins to lose ground. By the time the game is almost over, Mayfield leads by a point and the entire stadium is holding its breath.

Then, as the clock races toward zero, the Mayfield point guard takes more steps than are allowed by the rules. Lopez catches the mistake, blows his whistle and makes the appropriate hand signal for the violation. After he points to the Volcano Vista side of the court to indicate that Volcano Vista will receive the ball, the Volcano Vista girls use the opportunity to regain their lead.

With only moments of game remaining, Mayfield's best shooter manages a successful shot but not in time. Her basket is a fraction of a second too late, and Volcano Vista has its second title in three years with a final score of 54-53.

As the three referees run up the ramp to their dressing room, Lopez replays his final call in his mind's eye but concludes that he decided correctly.

The referee evaluator, who meets with the men for the usual post-game evaluation, agrees. He congratulates Lopez, Strickland and Cisneros on how well they worked as a team and achieved consistency in their calls. The men hug and are proud and excited but tired.

Growing and expanding

Originally from Pecos, Lopez competed in a variety of sports during high school and college and started to officiate because he wanted to stay involved.

For the first two decades of his officiating career, Lopez refereed football, baseball, basketball, softball and volleyball games, then switched to refereeing only high school and college basketball challenges. The Volcano Vista-Mayfield match was his fifteenth state championship basketball final.

“Working as a referee evenings, weekends and during vacations may seem quite remote from my responsibilities as a Laboratory manager,” Lopez says, “but the activities complement one another and allow me to continuously grow and expand. At Los Alamos, I have to make all kinds of small and large decisions on a daily basis—some of them with very little advance notice—and I also spend a lot of time mentoring other decision-makers in my organization.”

Helping young people grow into well-rounded, ethical, fair-minded people capable of making sound decisions on the basketball court, at work and in other settings is part of Lopez's attempt to give back to the community for the mentoring and friendships he has been blessed with in addition to his family's support.

“Frankly, I learn as much from the younger generations as they might from me,” Lopez says. “Because young people look at things with fresh eyes, they often are the ones who come up with innovative ideas and reach for the next level.”

Lopez’s son, Leon Keith Lopez, is no exception. After honing his officiating skills during hundreds of high school and Amateur Athletic Union games over the span of five short years, Leon Keith Lopez now referees men’s college basketball and is working on his goal of becoming part of a select group of referees who officiate professionally.

Lopez

and Leon Keith Lopez (r).

Leon Lopez is the Service Innovation Division's division leader.

The first three referee photos of Lopez are courtesy of Marty Saiz.

Resource

- [Volcano Vista vs. Mayfield championship game](#) (Video, 1:30 minutes)

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