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Meet Marla Denham: Denham calls 'em as she sees 'em



March 16, 2014 7:30 am • By [Bob Meseroll](#)

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OGDEN, Utah – Marla Denham watches a basketball game a little differently than most.

She's more interested in the three people wearing black-and-white stripes than the ones in the home or visiting uniforms. Denham is the coordinator of basketball and volleyball officials for the Big Sky Conference.

Denham, in her 18th year with the conference, was in Ogden, Utah, on Thursday to evaluate officials at the Big Sky men's basketball tournament, then flew to Grand Forks, N.D., on Friday to do the same at the women's tournament.

The former probation officer in Arizona's Maricopa County for 13 years, Denham has officiated in two world tournaments, the Olympic tryouts and the pros. She was the "Official of the Year" in 1997-98 in the ABL, a forerunner to the WNBA.

Denham took a break from the action in Ogden to talk with the Missoulian.

Q. Were you an athlete in either high school or college?

A. I was in four sports as a high school athlete, then I played volleyball and basketball at the college level. I played at Mesa Community College because Arizona State wouldn't give us (scholarships) in 1981. Because I was a local kid, they wanted me to walk on. I had been recruited to USC with Cheryl Miller, and KU and up here. I was a homebody. My dad had died when I was very young, so I stayed close to home.

Q. Why did you decide to get into officiating?

A. I was one of those players who always had something to say to the referees. The guys in charge when I played in high school suggested when I was a student-athlete in college, 'Hey, you

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can ref high school and play in college.' During those days you could make \$20 or \$40 a night. I refereed a church league when I was 14 or 15, because the guys couldn't get along. When I was at Mesa Community College we went to nationals, so I had the experience of being in a national tournament. When I went to Arizona State my junior year I got hurt. I was like, 'This is not a lot of fun any more.' It was really fun my freshman and sophomore years. Then when I went to ASU it was like I could sit on the bench, or I can start doing other things, so I started refing. I was refing Division I at 23. I did go to the dark side for two years and coached high school. It just was a better fit (to referee). I don't know how Division I coaches do it with being gone to recruit and things. Now officiating has turned that way too, it's year-around to keep up and competitive. Twenty-five or 30 years ago it was a part-time thing people did.

Q. I find it funny that your college degree is in criminal justice. Do the referees represent the long arm of the law on the court?

A. I have a criminal justice degree and a special ed minor. I've been introduced like, 'you decide which one is for players and which one is for coaches.'

Q. Tell me about your duties with the Big Sky.

A. I am literally in charge of every aspect of the officiating from recruiting, training, assigning, evaluating, dealing with administrators, coaches, sometimes players, officials and all of their dynamics, so it is a year-around process, not just during the season.

Q. What does the training involve?

A. The training for basketball during the offseason involves attending different camp settings where we're able to break it down, go into lots of video, go into lots of the psyche of officiating, going to communication. You can be a 90-percent accurate play-caller and never have to talk to coaches. But the average referee might not be 90 percent, so now you have to be able to explain what you did or didn't do. The travel in the Big Sky alone is as difficult as anywhere in the country. We spend a lot of money getting people into lots of places. I don't think a Southern California official understood what it was going to be like to go to North Dakota. At the same time we have to go into some of the areas that are not as big, the Idahos, the Montanas, even into Colorado and literally start grassroots (teaching) block-charge, communication, off ball – all the little things that separate the average referee from the better referee.

Q. Is the training for beginning officials, or seasoned veterans?

A. Last year was an exception, I went to nine different trainings in 11 weeks where I was speaking on the floor, in the classroom, one-on-one with officials and some of them were brand new and developmental people like student-athletes. At ASU, we had an officiating course we could take. ... We don't have that anymore. The people I put together for our trainings have all worked in the pros, the NBA and WNBA, or they've worked in March Madness, NCAA men or women. My claim to fame is I have more people in the pros than any other person in my position as a coordinator in the entire country. I also have one-on-one time with the officials.

Q. What's the toughest call for an official to make?

A. Right now in men's basketball it's the block-charge. It so messed up. There was a real push this last year by the rules committee to have more points scored. Now the offense now has a little more latitude given than the defensive players are given. I think we're 50-50 (accurate) on block-charge calls in the men's game. I think we're not any better than we were a year ago. Now the defense touches and it's a foul. The offensive player knocks the heck out of somebody and we continue to play because we want them to score.

Q. What's the most common complaint you get from coaches?

A. They won't talk to me. This is my 18th year doing the women, my 16th year doing the men and I cannot tell you in all that time the coaches don't talk about traveling, they don't talk about the block-charge. They talk about so-and-so wouldn't talk to me during the game. So-and-so had an attitude. So-and-so didn't even acknowledge I'm coaching. That's part of the training we do during

the offseason. We've had coaches come in and talk, players come in, successful referees come in because the biggest thing for me, outside of play-calling, is can you sell swamp land, can you talk to a coach when they're emotional and volatile sometimes and bring them down and say, 'talk to me' without adding fuel to the fire.

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