

BOB DELANEY

Tales from the court

HEIDI KURPIELA | MANAGING EDITOR

The NBA ref shares his favorite stories from the sidelines and explains why he feels like George Bailey when he's at home in Lakewood Ranch.

Next to Dick Vitale, Bob Delaney is Lakewood Ranch's second most famous basketball insider. The 63-year-old New Jersey native served as an NBA referee for more than two decades, taking heat from every basketball great from Michael Jordan to LeBron James.

If that weren't fascinating enough, Delaney's first career as an undercover officer for the New Jersey State Police played out like a season of "The Sopranos." During the height of "The Godfather" era (the mid-1970s), Delaney spent three years masquerading as the seedy president of a trucking company in an effort to bust the Genovese and Bruno crime families. The riveting details of this experience (and Delaney's subsequent PTSD) can be found in his memoir, "Covert: My Years Infiltrating the Mob."

After hanging up his referee stripes in 2011, Delaney launched his consulting business — a vehicle for corporate motivational speeches and leadership seminars inspired by his time on the

court and in law enforcement.

In 2014, Delaney was rehired by the NBA to serve as vice president of referee operations. The job has plucked him out of his serene Lakewood Ranch neighborhood and put him back into the high-energy basketball world.

"I'm at a ball game 12 to 15 nights out of the month," Delaney says. "If I'm not at a game, I'm at the NBA Replay Center in Secaucus, New Jersey. I don't have a lot of downtime in Lakewood Ranch anymore." LWR Life managed to grab 20 minutes with the jetsetter while he was on route to a Brooklyn Nets game in January. He shared some snippets from his inimitable careers.

I can play basketball, but I chose not to. I was an all-state basketball and baseball player in high school and played in college. Once I started refereeing, my playing days were over. I still shoot baskets at carnival games or on the boardwalk in Jersey, but that's the extent of it.

Continued on Page 26

Continued from Page 24

I challenged Lt. Gen. Robert Brooks Brown to a shoot-out in Northern Iraq in 2009. We were visiting a base along the Syrian border and happened upon an old basketball hoop on the side of a building. We both shed our body armor and it was on. He won. That was the last serious competition I had as a basketball player. The troops enjoyed it.

The basketball court is a very peaceful place for me. The focus and concentration level has to be high. No matter what you have going on in your life, the only thing you can concern yourself with is what's going on between those two lines. It's actually a very quiet place. Emotionally all you're dealing with is the game. There's nothing else.

Lakewood Ranch has that small-town feel. There's an openness to say hello. You always run into people you know. During the Christmas holiday season, whenever I'm on Main Street I feel like I'm in "It's a Wonderful Life."

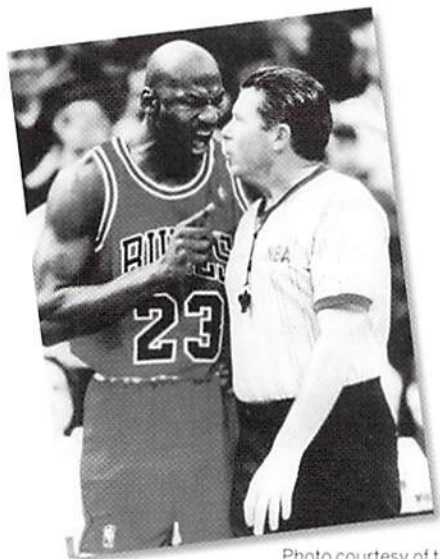


Photo courtesy of the NBA

As an NBA referee from 1987 to 2011, Bob Delaney took heat from many players, including Michael Jordan.

I believe we owe a debt to the men and women who serve this country. I'm from the Vietnam War generation, when a ping-pong ball decided whether you were drafted. My number came up 243. It was the back half of the war. I was in college. I didn't have to serve, but I had friends who served and they came home changed. We live in the land of the free because of the brave.

I could go on and on for hours talking about all the great things I've seen players in the NBA do. God gave these guys big bodies so he had a place for their big hearts. For some reason only the negative stuff comes out in our society.

Shaquille O'Neal has a tremendous sense of humor. He's one of the funniest guys in the NBA and by far one of the largest. One night Shaq came to me before the opening jump ball and said, "I know you know FBI Director Louis Freeh. Tell him I want to be an FBI agent." I told him he'd be excellent on surveillance.

I've never been a good judge of talent. I refereed Charles Barkley during his rookie year in the NBA. I had six offensive fouls on him in the first half of a scrimmage game. I said to the other ref, "This guy will never make it in the NBA." It goes to show you I didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

For a while the NBA kept my undercover work low-key. After the story went public, Grant Hill came up to me and asked if I was still wired. He patted me down, and I was still wired — for TV. One night, Karl Malone said to me, "Damn, you're the man off the floor and on the floor!"

Word got out that Dick Vitale and I live two miles apart in Lakewood Ranch. Marv Albert, who heard we were neighbors, asked before a game, "How far are you from Dickie V?" I said, "About eight-and-a-half million dollars, that's how far."

Coaches do not get angry with referees as individuals. They get upset with what they believe is getting in the way of their will to win. They get upset with the calls, not the people.



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