The primary communication tool for a referee is the whistle. An effective referee learns how to make the whistle talk for them. The players, fans, and coaches know from the tone, volume, and length of the whistle whether the foul is a simple foul, a misconduct that will result in a booking, or even a penalty kick.

Choosing the Right Whistle – There are many things to consider when choosing a whistle. Fortunately, there is not a consider cost difference between a simple whistle and a “professional” whistle. There are two key attributes that need to be considered when whistle shopping.

- **Form** – Manufacturers are making two basic forms of whistles: (1) the traditional-style whistle that is typically used with a lanyard, and (2) the fingergrip whistle that allows the referee to carry the whistle without a lanyard. I have used both types over the years and have settled on the traditional whistle with a wrist lanyard that I wrap around my hand in a manner that imitates the fingergrip whistle. The fingergrip style is a good whistle for new or inexperienced referees because it tends to get the whistle out of their mouth. A referee who keeps a whistle in their mouth invites inadvertent whistles and a “quick” whistle which is not conducive to the application of advantage. Personally, I found that the fingergrip whistle did get in my way while writing in my book or issuing a card. I would have to first put the whistle in my pocket, write in the book or show the card, then find the whistle in my pocket and restart play.

- **Tone** - The tone of a whistle can be very different from one type to another. Some are very high-pitched and shrill while others are more sharp or penetrating. I recommend experimentation with a few different whistle types and find out which one works the best for you. “Best for you” means find the tone that makes the players respond to your whistle. You may find that the shrill sound does not fit your quiet and independent nature while the deep penetrating or sharp whistle fits your communicative and approachable style of refereeing. I also recommend that you do not limit yourself to whistles that are used by other soccer referees. Check around with officials of other sports. Hockey whistles are usually very high pitched and shrill to assure being heard while basketball whistles are loud and penetrating.

- **Pea or Pea-less** – When I first started as a referee, I dug around in my stuff at home and found an old metal whistle with a cork pea and quickly learned that I had to blow my brains out to be heard and I had to position the wide mouthpiece precisely to make the air actually go through the whistle body and produce a recognizable sound. A fellow official recommended that I try a pea-less whistle which requires less air and produces a very loud sound. I quickly
became enamored with the new whistle and used it for many seasons. Personally, I moved back to a pea whistle when I found that I could not “talk” with the pea-less whistle very well. Every tone was loud and strong, even when I wanted a softer sound.

- **More than one** - Fortunately, all the expense and effort that you have gone through to try out various whistles and find the one that fits your personality is not wasted. I recommend that you carry two different whistles when you officiate. This is a good idea not just because you may drop your whistle or it may be broken unexpectedly, but also because you may find it necessary to switch to a whistle with a different tone. For example, if you are working a match near other fields and the surrounding officials are using the same tone whistle as you, you may be well-served to change to a different tone that will help the players know when you are using the whistle and when the neighboring official is using their whistle. Sometimes weather can affect the tone of a whistle and you may find that your favorite whistle just isn’t working the way it usually does. Some referees carry multiple whistles on one lanyard and switch from one to another as needed. Personally, I prefer to have one style in use and the other whistle in my other pocket, if I decide to employ it.

**Choosing When to Blow the Whistle** – Like every type of communication, use of whistle must be saved for a time when it is most effective. If the situation can be better handled by your voice or a simple signal then the whistle may be unnecessary and better used for a different situation. Referees tend to go through swings in their use of the whistle. Early in their career, referees are often hesitant to use their whistle and draw attention to their decisions. Later, they tend to use the whistle exclusively for every situation. This use of the tool for trifling events weakens its effectiveness when it is used for a major event. Not to mention, the constant tweet of the whistle upsets players, coaches, and fans. Finally, the referee learns when to blow the whistle and how to make it communicate effectively.

- **Informational Whistle** - A few short tweets of the whistle is used to inform players that they need to follow specific instructions. For example, a player is taking a free kick or throw-in from the wrong location and you want to let them know that they need to move to a different location. A variation of this whistle technique is used for major incidents like fights or bench unrest. In this case the same short blasts are used by with considerable more volume and intensity.

- **Minor Offense** - A single short blast is used to inform players of minor offenses like a push or trip that was not reckless or violent but still needs to be penalized with a free kick. Another example is the obvious offside whistle. For some organizations (i.e., NFHS), a whistle is required to re-start play for specific events, like throw-ins. This same style of whistle is used for these obvious situations.

- **Misconduct** - If a foul escalates to misconduct requiring the issuance of a caution or send-off, a long and hard whistle is used to make sure everyone is aware that you have seen the offense and are going to take care of it. This type of whistle brings play to an immediate stop and often stops potential retaliation or further misconduct. The length of the whistle varies with the distance the referee needs to travel to reach the point of the misconduct.
- **Penalty Kick** - Perhaps the most intense whistle is for a penalty kick. This whistle is usually extremely loud and long with the referee sprinting to the penalty mark to indicate the penalty kick. If this offense takes place late in the match, the referee’s fitness will be tested by the extended breath required to blow the whistle while sprinting to the penalty area.

Remember that the whistle is the referee’s primary tool of communication and an effective referee finds a whistle that meets their style of officiating and quickly learns how to make the whistle talk for them. Every player, coach and fan should be able to tell what event has occurred and what the repercussions of the event will be by simply listening to the referee’s whistle.

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