

Memo to Parents: Stop Criticizing High School Officials

By Cody Porter

Parents of high school student-athletes who regularly criticize, harass and abuse contest officials were put on notice in January thanks to the blunt message delivered in an editorial by NFHS Executive Director Karissa Niehoff and state association leaders: “Dear Mom and Dad, Cool it.”

The message comes as a response to the shrinking number of high school officials, creating a shortage of those who remain an integral part of the interscholastic experience. A recent survey by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) reported more than 75 percent of all high school officials quit due to adult behavior and, furthermore, 80 percent of new officials step away after only two years of officiating.

“The message to parents to ‘cool it’ is a strong message, but we wanted it to be because it’s a big problem,” Niehoff said. “On many levels, this type of sportsmanship is not getting controlled. There are incidents that aren’t just verbally abusive, but physically abusive, so our office needed to be pretty direct.”

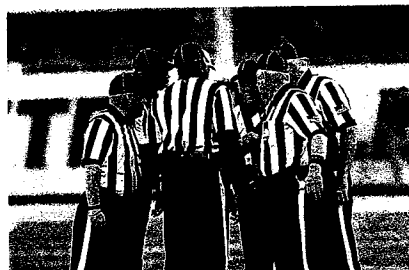
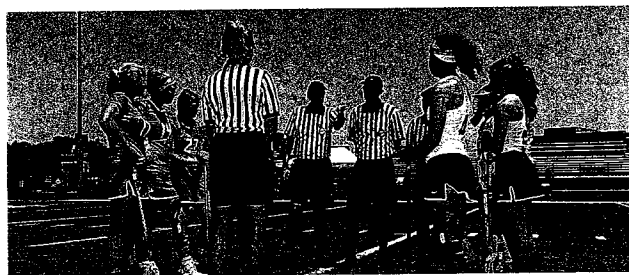
As part of its commitment to addressing officiating issues, the NFHS continues to promote the positives of officiating through its #BecomeAnOfficial campaign. The campaign, which is in its second full year of operation, exists to raise awareness for an officials shortage that is at the point of “critical mass,” according to Niehoff.

“Some states are moving games to Thursday nights because if they all play on Friday, they don’t have enough officials and chain gangs to play football,” Niehoff said. “You would think football, above all other sports, would never have a shortage.”

In its first iteration, the #BecomeAnOfficial campaign targeted college-age intramural athletes looking to stay connected to sports after their competitive careers. The current audience is first responders, such as policemen, firemen and emergency medical technicians (EMT). Those interested in joining the avocation are encouraged to sign up to become a licensed official at HighSchool-Officials.com. Specific information of the prospective official is forwarded to the applicable state association to begin the process.

The campaign has attracted more than 1,000 individuals who have expressed interest in becoming a registered official. Equipped with an officiating background, Mark Uyl, executive director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA), believes newcomers have reason to be optimistic about the future of officiating.

Included in the optimism is nearly 60 years of MHSAA data that suggests that the ebb and flow of economic times dictates the



state's officials count. At its darkest economic times from 2007 to 2009, Michigan had an all-time high record of officials. However, in the present, the MHSAA's diminishing number of officials correlates to a widespread issue whereby they are being driven away due to treatment by coaches and adult spectators, as revealed in an association survey.

"The cultural thing that I personally find frustrating is that, in many respects, officiating in general has never been better than it is today," Uyl said. "There are a lot of different ways that we have to communicate with people. A lot of our officials' groups across Michigan have Facebook groups with officials constantly sharing plays, videos and rules questions. The community of officiating, in terms of how we're communicating, educating and training has never been better."



Uyl collaborated with Southern Nevada Officials Association (SNOA) President Vince Kristosik for a workshop presentation on recruiting officials at the 2018 NFHS Summer Meeting in Chicago. The two find themselves in the same company as countless other organization leaders fighting the trend that is decreasing officials. As part of

their presentation, Uyl and Kristosik cited data collected from the 17,487 officials who responded to a recent survey conducted by the NASO.

Much of the data revealed in the NASO survey "showed that our assessment of the landscape was pretty much on the mark," Uyl said. Uyl echoed the efforts of the #BecomeAnOfficial campaign and NASO data with his belief that getting new officials on the field, court and mat is going to be the most effective training they receive. Although the classroom has its place for training, he said in his experience it's important within that first hour to have prospective officials on the competition surface to run through positioning, mechanics and basic fundamentals.

"As with anything in life, if you want to learn how to get better, it's not sitting and listening to someone talk about it," Uyl said. It's getting out there and receiving that real-world experience where you can immediately go through some trial and error.

"The example I've often used is how I was once a Division III baseball player and a three-sport student-athlete in high school. As a three-sport athlete, I always had my next game to look forward to, and then again as a four-year athlete into my late teens and early 20s. Over the past 20 years, officiating college baseball has given a 44-year-old guy with a wife, three kids and a job his next game to look forward to. That burning desire that we once had as athletes is something that officiating can keep going."

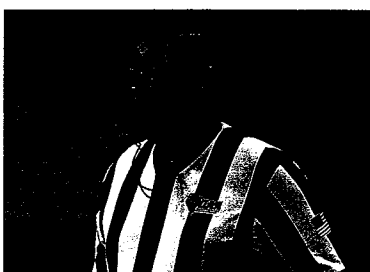
In Las Vegas, Kristosik's group has attempted to recruit officials in several ways - from its website - *SNOAOfficials.com* - to radio commercials and its Facebook page. Yet, one of the most inventive methods stems from Kristosik's own past. In the fall, Kristosik and Marc Ratner, who is the UFC vice president of regulatory affairs and former executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, successfully relaunched an officiating course at the University of Las Vegas-Nevada (UNLV) in which Kristosik was previously enrolled.

"It's a one-credit hour course toward graduation. We just finished our first semester in early December that resulted in seven students registering with their local officials association," Kristosik said. "We teach them the rules, watch videos and have guest speakers. Some of the guest speakers included college and professional officials."

Kristosik said additional efforts have been made to reach younger officials at the high school level through both graduating seniors and new teachers. While it's proven helpful to have Nevada Interscholastic Activities Association (NIAA) Executive Director Bart Thompson use email to request school administrators promote the profession to graduating seniors, the SNOA has also had a presence at the Clark County School District's new teacher orientation that kicks off the school year.



"We set a booth up at the orientation and promote ourselves. We have officials' pictures, magazine articles and representatives at the booth to encourage new teachers to sign up," Kristosik said. "That's been pretty successful. Really, the new teachers make the



best officials because of their availability. When they're teaching, school is in session. When they're done teaching for the day, that's when the games are going on."

New, groomed and diverse officiating talent is needed and should be rewarded, Niehoff said. State associations can continue to advocate for the profession with annual awards, thank you dinners and public acknowledgement.

No matter the recruiting tactic, the common consensus remains that attempts to retain officials will be a challenge until proper sportsmanship is consistently displayed by multiple parties. Uyl and Kristosik's presentation included NASO data that revealed 42.8 percent of respondents agree that most new officials quit within the first one to three years.

While the NFHS and NASO have continued to address sportsmanship through their multiple messages, Kristosik said it's simply a "culture thing."

"It's everybody; coach and parents included," Kristosik said. "They have to realize if we keep losing officials like we are, and it's proven that it's due to sportsmanship issues in these games, we're eventually not going to have officials unless we really tackle these issues."

Right now, answers to sportsmanship issues include athletic administrators going above and beyond for officials, according to Niehoff. She firmly believes in a need to improve the officials' experience including arrival and departure logistics, security, coach, captain and state crew introductions, as well as read and reinforced

sportsmanship guidelines.

"I think officials know when they get into the profession that people are going to voice their opinions about their calls. I think we have a lot of administrators who need to step up and get on it sooner," Niehoff said. "I also think parents need to police one another. In the preseason meeting with parents, athletic administrators need to reinforce that sportsmanship includes how to properly treat officials. They need to be paid on time. They need to be thanked. They need to be provided a safe escort from the building. And they certainly do not need to be berated in the media."

Niehoff noted the rules of select state associations prohibit school administrators from criticizing officials. Penalties from such rules are areas that she said need to be amplified.

When speaking with groups, Uyl said he poses a challenge: "Find me one other endeavor in American society where we accept and tolerate one adult treating another adult the way that we allow spectators and coaches to treat an official."

Simply put, there isn't one. Or, according to Uyl, at least not one that wouldn't require police presence. **HST**

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