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**BUSINESS OF LIFE**

# Low pay, no respect: Who wants to be a referee?

By DANNY ECKER |



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**On a Monday morning in September**, Bill Topp opens an email attachment sent to the customer service address of the National Association of Sports Officials. It's another video clip of a football game, just like the ones the chief operating officer of the Racine, Wis.-based sports referee trade organization gets every week in the fall. This one shows what the incensed sender is certain was an illegal block made by an offensive player in the game he had attended the day before. "It was a game played by 10-year-olds," Topp says, recalling the email from an angry parent imploring NASO to help chastise the ref. "That's today's world of 'a pound of flesh,' if you will. They want to exact some sort of revenge on someone."

Topp is used to receiving such vitriol in his inbox. But it's more than just a disturbing trend. As the scrutiny gets more intense, it's becoming a lot harder to recruit and retain referees. Spurred by worsening personal harassment and increasingly higher stakes in youth athletics, organizations from kids sports leagues to high school athletic associations are facing a historic shortage of sports officials. In Illinois, the number of high school referees has fallen by 11 percent over the past five years as older officials aging out of their roles haven't been replaced by enough younger talent.

The downward trend, exacerbated by low pay and the proliferation of camps and travel leagues



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creating more games to be officiated, is forcing high school sports officials statewide to redouble their efforts to find refs and, in the meantime, fill gaps with inexperienced ones. "It has kind of been a self-sustaining hobby or activity over decades, and for some reason not as many people are getting into it," says Sam Knox, assistant executive director of the Illinois High School Athletic Association.

Some sports are in better shape than others. Latin School of Chicago Athletic Director Tom Bower says there are basketball referees in spades, but field hockey and soccer games can't be rescheduled for Tuesdays or Thursdays because of a lack of officials. Other local athletic directors struggle with wrestling and lacrosse. And in some parts of the state, even football—where participation among kids has dropped—is grappling with finding enough qualified referees for varsity games. "Their numbers are diminishing," Bower says. High school conference officials charged with assigning games to refs "just don't have a large pool of extra officials to move around."

Youth and high school sports officiating jobs historically have been filled by college students and former players looking to make extra cash and retirees looking to stay active and close to a game they love.

But the number of younger officials is dwindling. Research from the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations shows that only 2 in 10 new officials return to ref games after two years. The average age of sports officials has gradually risen to about 53, according to the NASO. More officials today are also specializing in one sport as club leagues have made many sports year-round.

On top of that, more kids are playing sports, meaning more games to fill. The number of kids ages 6 to 17 playing a team sport increased by 11 percent between 2013 and 2015, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association.

Verbal assaults and threats are at the core of the referee drain, says NASO President Barry Mano. A recent survey by the association of more than 17,000 officials nationwide showed that 57 percent of respondents thought sportsmanship at all sporting events is getting worse. And the threats aren't just verbal. The NASO says it receives between five and 10 complaints of physical assault from officials nationwide each month. Its \$109 membership fee includes a \$4 million liability insurance policy and a program to help referees with medical expenses and legal fees if they are attacked while officiating. "The expectations of the men and women working at the youth or high school levels have greatly increased," says Mano, "so it's not unreasonable for someone today to say, 'Do I really want to do this?'"

## **RAMPING UP THE SCRUTINY**

Scrutiny has intensified as parents spend more money on private lessons, club fees and tournaments for their kids with an eye on lucrative—but often far-fetched—athletic scholarships. Even school administrations aren't immune: Fenwick High School infamously filed a lawsuit last year to have its loss in the Class 7A football state semifinal game overturned because of an incorrect call by the officials at the end of the game. The lawsuit was dismissed.

Technology is a culprit, too, Mano says. Fans used to seeing replays during broadcasts of professional sports have heightened expectations for referees' accuracy. Plus, social media makes it easier than ever for fans to personally threaten officials.

And officials aren't getting paid more to deal with that intensified harassment. While demand has risen, cash-strapped school districts aren't raising their rates. The returns are diminishing even further for refs who have to travel long distances to games. A varsity football official, for example, is typically paid \$60 to \$70 per game. But some drive an hour or more on their own dime to get to their assignment. "And if I have to come downtown and park and, God forbid, have a burger and a beer after the game, I'm losing money," says Bill Jones, who has officiated Illinois High School Association football for the past 20 years.



Photo by Visual Images Photography

Retention is a challenge: Research shows that only 2 in 10 new officials return to referee games after two years.

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Sportsmanship erosion also feeds on itself. Young former high school athletes are often jaded by seeing officials get berated and don't want to subject themselves to such harassment. And with fewer officials to go around in certain sports, some games that call for two referees or umpires only have one or use an underqualified official to fill in.

"Unfortunately that leads to a bad experience for everybody—for the teams who have an inexperienced official and for the official who is not comfortable," says the IHSA's Knox, a former athletic director at Lincoln High School in Peoria.

Sports administrators nationwide are trying to address the shortage. The National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations launched a website in April for those interested in officiating to sign up and get connected with their state's high school athletic association. The site got more than 1,100 submissions in its first two months.

The IHSA's primary recruitment tool for the past several years has been a program in which every high school athletic director statewide can select two students age 17 and up to become licensed officials without paying the \$50 application fee. But it does not formally track how many of those waivers are used.

More recently, the athletic association has discussed adding incentives for its officials mentoring program, which puts experienced whistle-blowers and younger refs through joint training. The IHSA has discussed giving those who complete the program financial grants as well as extra credits toward a performance score that raises their chances of working postseason games.

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But addressing the abuse is vital to bulking up the referee ranks, says Gary Grohovena, a 30-year baseball and football official in Illinois and recruitment chairman of the Inter-Athletic Council of Officials, a group of 17 local organizations. "I think there are going to be some significant issues in a few years if this isn't reversed," says Grohovena, who teaches an umpiring class that deals with "how to act like an adult when adults are acting like kids, teaching 13- and 14-year-olds how not to be intimidated."

Officiating jobs could also help fill a need for underprivileged students in Chicago Public Schools, says Vinay Mullick, former athletic director at Perspectives Charter Schools. Chicago Public League administrators could do more to promote training for students in different sports, though he admits the funding for such programs is difficult to find. "We need to treat it like youth football . . . developing some sort of feeder system modeled after a lot of the major sports in some capacity," he says. "That's where you'll start to see some strides."

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