

TOP STORY

## The disappearing high school referee

By Jeff Steers Sports Writer [jsteers@the-messenger.com](mailto:jsteers@the-messenger.com) Aug 12, 2018



Veteran football referee Robert Littlepage, left, of Madisonville, works with a younger official during the Union City/Hopkins C Central football scrimmage on Friday.

The lack of high school sports referees and umpires is reaching a crisis point, according to local officials, school administrators and governing organizations.

Madisonville multisport referee Michael Bone said games are going to be canceled due to a lack of officials in some sports. It's already happening in Kentucky High School Athletic Association Region 2, which includes Hopkins County.

Madisonville North Hopkins High School Athletic Director Brent Gibson said a couple of region soccer matches have been canceled due to the lack of officials.

But it is not just in Madisonville, Western Kentucky or in the state. Officials in a number of sports are decreasing while the number of high school participants is increasing. KHSAA numbers show a decrease in officials of 4 percent from 2016-17 to 2017-18.

"We are in dire need of officials," Bone said Friday. "The older officials' years are numbered and the younger guys are not coming out."

A large study makes key points

A 2017 survey by the National Association of Sports Officials examined the state of officiating. A total of nearly 17,500 officials participated in the survey -- from all over the United States.

Some of the findings were:

The average age of officials in the sports of hockey, soccer, lacrosse, basketball, football, rugby, baseball, wrestling, volleyball, softball, field hockey, swimming, tennis and track and field is 53.3 years old.

Hockey has the "youngest" at 48.4 years old and track and field the oldest at 58.7 years.

A total of 47.9 percent of male respondents have felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player or spectator behavior. More than half of the officials responded (57 percent) that sportsmanship is getting worse while 15.9 percent said it was getting better. The rest said it was about the same. Parents (39.5) and coaches (29.6) were noted as those causing the most problems with sportsmanship. Youth competition levels (36 percent) is where officials noted the worst sportsmanship is present.

Nearly 45 percent of officials were asked by an official, coach, or sporting organization to be a referee or official.

Participant numbers keep increasing

The number of students participating in high school athletics is increasing, according to the High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations. The survey from 2016-17 states the number of high school participants has increased for the 28th consecutive year with nearly eight million participating.

Seven of the top 10 boys sports registered increases from the previous year, led by soccer with an increase of nearly 10,000 players.

That is going to put a stress on local officials, according to Bone.

"We have a total of about 60 officials to cover three regions ... including Region 2," Bone said. "Of those 60 soccer officials, approximately 25 are in their 50s. We've got to get some of the younger folks out for this sport."

Football remains the No. 1 participatory sport for boys at the high school level by a wide

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margin. Track and field is second, followed by basketball, baseball and soccer.

How to increase the numbers of officials

Ask that question and officials and school administrators will give a number of solutions.

Gibson said he makes a point to talk to graduating athletes about the possibility of becoming officials.

"Every meeting we attend, our sports assigners bring up the point of the need for new officials," Gibson said. "I reach out to graduating seniors and let them know how officiating will help the next generation of sports athletes."

Local volleyball and softball official Chuck Standiford said he would start in the schools with an officials class.

"We need to start working with them in middle and high school with a class," Standiford said. "We can get them started doing simple things like running a clock, working the books or just learning the rules of the game."

Standiford - who has refereed softball for 30 years and volleyball for 20 - said students are put off by poor sportsmanship.

"We have one and maybe two generations who don't like conflict," Standiford said. "We have to start early."

Bone said most officials participate for the love of the game, not the money.

"If you refereeing for the love of the money, you are doing it for the wrong reasons," Bone said.

"There is a nucleus of local officials who want to recruit younger officials and mentor them. We will do all of the training and shadow new officials."

Webster County High School Director of Special Programs Matt Bell has seen the number of baseball umpires fluctuate over the years. He is the assignor for area baseball teams.

"Actually our numbers for baseball have increased over the last couple years and we've been in really good shape," Bell said. "However, just a few years ago we only had 18 umpires and I had to manage that for our region so it was difficult."

### **How to get started**

Individuals interested in learning more about becoming a high school official can do so at [www.HighSchoolOfficials.com](http://www.HighSchoolOfficials.com) or by licensing online through the Kentucky High School Athletic Association at [khsaa.org/officials/officiating](http://khsaa.org/officials/officiating) information.

"It is really a step-by-step, easy process," Bone said. "Each of the sports has a booklet that explains the rules and there is a test."

Officials must be registered through the state and pay dues and association fees for each sport he/she referees. There is also a cost for uniforms and equipment.

Pay ranges between \$60 to \$105 for varsity contests.

"I will walk out of here tonight with \$105, but I had to referee three matches," Standiford said while working the Madisonville North Hopkins match Thursday. "That is for six hours."

He noted there are also scrimmages volleyball officials need to attend and meetings. The officials receive no pay for attending, but receive training.

"I am not crying about the four scrimmages I attended (for free) or the meetings," Standiford said. "This is how you get better as an official."

Bone said anyone interested in becoming an official may contact him at 270-903-3297.

"We have got to get some new blood in here," Bone said. "Some of us are not getting any younger."

### **Kentucky High School Athletic Association numbers**

**Last five years** - *Numbers based on KHSAA registered officials in baseball, basketball, field hockey, football, soccer, fast pitch softball, swimming, track and field, volleyball, wrestling and competitive cheer.*

#### **Total officials**

2017-18: 3,986

2016-17: 4,145

2015-16: 4,171

2014-15: 4,179

2013-14: 4,276

#### **Baseball**

2017-18: 842

2016-17: 859

2015-16: 877

2014-15: 881

2013-14: 935

## **Basketball**

2017-18: 1,790

2016-17: 1,855

2015-16: 1,864

2014-15: 1,886

2013-14: 1,902

## **Football**

2017-18: 974

2016-17: 1,016

2015-16: 1,010

2014-15: 1,008

2013-14: 1,032

## **Soccer**

2017-18: 566

2016-17: 554

2015-16: 571

2014-15: 573

2013-14: 564

## **Softball**

2017-18: 742

2016-17: 758

2015-16: 754

2014-15: 741

2013-14: 765

## **Swimming**

2017-18: 198

2016-17: 211

2015-16: 201

2014-15: 193

2013-14: 175

## **Track and field**

2017-18: 134

2016-17: 155

2015-16: 146

2014-15: 141

2013-14: 157

## **Volleyball**

2017-18: 562

2016-17: 547

2015-16: 558

2014-15: 541

2013-14: 519

## This Week's Circulares



A circular advertisement for Good Neighbor Pharmacy. The top features the pharmacy's logo and the text "A Good Neighbor Pharmacy". Below this, it says "AUGUST MONTHLY SAVINGS" and "GOOD NEIGHBOR PHARMACY". The central image shows a family of four (a man, a woman, and two children) smiling together. At the bottom, there are logos for "Hot Prices" and "Pharmacy OTC".

Hover for Circula



A circular advertisement for JCPenney. The top features the JCPenney logo and the text "LEVI'S LOWEST PRICES OF THE YEAR". Below this, it says "BUY 1 GET 1 FREE" and "ARIZONA JEAN CO.". The central image shows a man in a white shirt and black pants, and a woman in a black shirt and blue jeans. At the bottom, there is a "50% OFF" sign.

Hover for Circula



A circular advertisement for petco. The top features the petco logo and the text "nutrition in harmony" and "Natural Balance". Below this, it says "56.99" and "10 weight gain". The central image shows a dog and a cat. At the bottom, there is a "56.99" price tag.

Hover for Circula



A circular advertisement for meijer. The top features the meijer logo and the text "Why Pay More? Low Prices across the store". Below this, it says "88¢" and "5.99". The central image shows various food items like bread, meat, and produce. At the bottom, there is a "5.99" price tag.

Hover for Circula