

Referee shortage hamstrings high school sports

Verbal abuse, low pay and long hours are driving high school sports officials off fields and disrupting athletic schedules.

Participation in interscholastic sports has increased for the past three decades, but a lack of officials has led to game cancellations and some schools even dropping certain sports, says Barry Mano, president of the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO).

"We're playing just as many or more games, but we just can't put striped shirts on the field and court," Mano says. "You have games on unusual days because there are simply not enough officials. It's not good for high school sports."

The verbal abuse officials receive from parents, spectators, and sometimes coaches and administrators tops the list of reasons why referees quit, says Scott Smith, director of the master's in athletic administration program at Ohio University.

SIDEBAR: [Recruiting referees](#)

"Officials have always been vulnerable to abuse from the sidelines, but it's much worse today than it's ever been," Smith says. Students and parents sometimes harass officials on social media after games.

Nearly half of officials say they have felt unsafe due to administrator,

coach, player or spectator behavior, according to a 2017 NASO survey. Some 57 percent said sportsmanship has deteriorated.

The industry is also graying, the survey found. In the early 1970s, the average age of a new official was about 21. Today, it's 43.

Low pay remains an issue as well: Per-game rates range from just \$35 to \$91, depending on the sport and location, according to an Ohio University report.

Enforcing sportsmanship

The playing field is an extension of the classroom, NASO's Mano says. However, behavior that would never pass in front of a teacher often goes unchecked by administrators during a game.

Administrators should never allow coaches or players to abuse officials, even if a wrong call is made, Smith says.

Addressing behavioral issues from fans in the stands is a more difficult task for school leaders, though many have implemented game management policies and sportsmanship assemblies, he adds.

"The athletic director and principal can be very blunt and say, 'We're not going to tolerate this, and you'll be asked to leave,'" Smith says. If the behavior continues, let parents and spectators know they will be banned for a certain number of games, he adds.

Preseason meetings with student athletes and parents, which are mandatory in most states, can be a good place to start encouraging sportsmanlike behavior.

Cultivating respect

National and state official associations have taken a number of steps to recruit more referees, which schools can also adopt, NASO's Mano says (see sidebar).

Ultimately, it comes down to creating a culture of respect, Mano says. "The men and women who officiate are the very basis for high school sports," he adds. "Without us, it's just recess. The rules are just ink on paper."