

Mom and dad need to 'cool it' with the referee abuse, KHSAA says

[Tim Sullivan](#) | Louisville Courier Journal Updated 26 minutes ago

Fearful that the whistle-blowing zebra is becoming an endangered species, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association is trying to protect stripe-shirted referees from their natural predators: parents.

Citing verbal abuse as the main reason for an “alarming shortage” of sports officials, KHSAA Commissioner Julian Tackett posted an open letter last week addressed to Mom and Dad (“and in some cases, school personnel”) that urges everyone to “cool it.” His concerns about conduct, he said later, are “moving toward pessimism.”

“We’ve created an environment in America where we no longer can just talk, we’ve got to shout ...” Tackett said. “There’s still an opportunity to nip some of this in the bud. (But) It’s time to do it, not think-tanking it, not talking about it, but doing it.”

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KHSAA records show that the state’s pool of officials has been steadily evaporating for six years and has now plunged nearly 15 percent since its 2012-13 peak. The total of officials across all sports has dropped from 4,299 to 3,678 during that span – the lowest level since 2002 – and their ranks are aging rapidly because of the scarcity of new

recruits. Though baseball and soccer have been the hardest hit among Kentucky high school sports, the state's 1,744 basketball officials are 159 fewer than were available six years ago.

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This pattern is consistent with national trends, and of sufficient severity that the National Federation of State High School Associations has co-authored and distributed letters like Tackett's in numerous states in recent weeks. Similar pleas were published earlier in January in the opinion pages of newspapers in Indiana and Ohio.

"Make no mistake about it," the shared text says. "Your passion is admired, and your support of the hometown team is needed. But so is your self-control. Yelling, screaming and berating the officials humiliates your child, annoys those sitting around you, embarrasses your child's school and is the primary reason (insert specific state) has an alarming shortage of high school officials."

The evidence on that score is mostly empirical. Though the National Association of Sports Officials' Dave Simon says 70 percent of officials decline to return for a third year, and that verbal abuse is the main culprit, the root causes may run deeper and in different directions than poorly behaved spectators.

"Our members are not leaving the profession because some dad is being a jerk in the stands," said John Jury, president of the Kentuckiana Basketball Officials Association. "They're leaving for a

number of reasons including low pay, injuries, retirement, transfer, (and) impatience at being promoted to more high-profile games.

"Is poor sportsmanship part of it? Yes. But it's not the primary reason that they're leaving."

Those who remain do not grow rich. The state's base rate for a three-person basketball crew is \$45 per game, which can be augmented by local associations, but barely exceeds minimum wage after travel time is calculated. If they are to endure, officials must derive some value that is not financial from their participation, and they must grow inured to invective.

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Dale Ramsay says his skin has acquired a rhinoceros-like texture after 37 years as a basketball referee, but he wonders whether he's part of a dying breed. He remembers one young referee taking so much heat from coaches on opposite ends of the floor during the same game that he quit that night "and we never heard from him again."

"I've heard it said – I don't know whether it's true or not – that this generation doesn't like conflict," Ramsay said. "Well, if you don't like conflict, you're sure not going to gravitate to officiating."

Jerry Hilpp, who retired last year after 40 years as a referee, says he saw coaches and crowds grow more confrontational during his career.

"People want to argue over everything," he said. "It doesn't matter if it's right or wrong. They want to pay their \$6 or \$7 and scream

anything that they want to scream.

"I don't know how you fix it."

Asked for his advice to younger officials, Hilpp replied, "If you get out there and you take care of business, it does get better. If you let things go, it doesn't get better."

Soon after their 2016 wedding, Erica Peterson accompanied her husband Justin to a game he was officiating at DeSales High School. Seated within earshot of fans of both teams, she listened in silence as spectators castigated her husband's competence, his eyesight, his judgment and his objectivity.

The University of Louisville communications professor subsequently posted a 1,446-word vent on social media, five times requesting that her readers, "Please stop complaining about the officiating."

"Being the wife of a high school basketball official is not for the faint of heart because being a high school basketball official is not for the faint of heart," she wrote. "I don't know if the game has changed that much in the last decade or if people have gotten harder and colder as the world has seemingly gotten harder and colder all around us, but I cannot help but wonder, as I sit in the bleachers of these gyms I don't know among people I don't know, how did we get so far off track?"

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Ramsay traces the decorum detour to "Fanatic parent syndrome," in which parents expect a tangible reward for their children participating

in sports.

"The tone of (Tackett's) letter was telling the parents to take it easy and hit the brakes," Ramsay said. "That's a message we've got to get out there. I don't know how much they'll listen. There's so much pressure to win and for playing time for the kids. But if Mommy and Daddy think Johnny's going to make it to the NBA, the odds are stacked against them."

Curiously, the further removed a player is from playing professionally, the more his parents are prone to misbehave.

"The younger officials tend to be introduced to the games in very hostile environments like middle school and grade school, where fan behavior is not very good," Jury said. "The younger the kids, the worse the fan decorum is."

Last Sunday, a referee was moved to eject an abusive spectator from an eighth-grade game at St. Edward. Though that's an extreme case, grade-school game conflicts can be exacerbated because many teams are coached by the parents of players, who may have more of an emotional attachment and less experience at throttling back in a tense situation.

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"There are a whole lot of John Calipari/Rick Pitino wannabes out there," said Rick Arnold, the retired homicide detective who runs the Catholic School Athletic Association. "I just see these guys acting like every game is life and death when, in reality, none of the games have

that kind of importance ...

"Our primary point of emphasis is acting like a civilized Christian. We're going to continue to pound that home. I've asked our referees to be more strict, have less patience. We have to set the standard."

Or else? Or else officials may demand more money or seek less stressful ways to moonlight.

"If it doesn't get any better, there aren't going to be any games," Dale Ramsay said. "They're just going to cancel games. No matter how bad they say we are, they can't play the game without us."

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Originally Published 8:07 a.m. EST Jan. 31, 2019

Updated 26 minutes ago