

# The NFL's officiating crisis is hurting youth sports | SI.com

Justin Harrison was sitting on his couch at home Gainesville when NFL referees [blew the call](#) in the Saints-Rams playoff game in January. His heart sank.

*Here we go, he thought.*

Harrison isn't a Saints fan. He supervises the officials in the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSA). He's done that job for nearly eight years. And he knows that when there's [a controversial decision](#) in the NFL, he gets calls and emails from around the state, complaining about his refs.

"It's whenever there's more complaining about the pro level," Harrison says. "It's whenever it hits the news—even though our season is over."

Sure enough, the complaints came in ... from folding-chair coaches and metal-bleacher experts.

The talk of the football world during Super Bowl week was [what to do about the refs](#). NFL commissioner Roger Goodell was asked repeatedly about it. [New Orleans staged multiple boycott events](#) because of the one missed pass interference that Saints fans felt robbed them of their title dreams. And the discussion only intensified in the months after, culminating this week with the approval of [a dramatic change](#)—making pass interference calls and non-calls subject to coaches' challenge. It's [far from the first time](#) that NFL

officiating has sparked outrage, cries for action and league reaction.

But the real referee crisis is out of the national view, far from the mammoth stadiums. It's in cities and towns across the country, in Florida and elsewhere, and it's getting worse with each year. The number of registered officials for scholastic sports in the Sunshine State, for example, went from 8,352 in 2014-15 to 7,792 in 2017-18.

As FHSAA executive director George Tomyon puts it: "We are running out of officials."

The FHSAA has had to adjust in football—and all sports—moving some of the Friday Night Lights to Thursday or Saturday in places like Miami-Dade County. There's a distant but growing fear that more drastic steps might be needed in the years ahead.

"It may get to a certain point," Harrison says, "if the trend keeps going the way that it is, that you have to limit the number of games you can play."

That scenario is not imminent, for now, but one thing is clearer each year: National outrage about officiating at the elite level only worsens things at the rest of the levels.

"We are concerned," says former NFL head of officials Dean Blandino. "If we don't get quality people at the ground floor, eventually that will trickle up and affect the overall quality."

For years, technology has been seen as a solution, relied upon to improve officiating and correct errors. But what if it's also corrosive? As fans feel closer to the action, through replay and even social media,

they also feel more empowered to criticize. This is showing up in football and all sports. "When soccer went to instant replay," says Florida youth soccer referee Ryan Hayes, "players, coaches and fans at all levels definitely started complaining more."

The question is, what to do about it? And the answer may be that nothing can be done. [Humans are fallible](#), and humans are also increasingly intolerant of fallibility. Neither of those two things will change.

"The standard is unreasonable," Blandino says. "The officials are the only group that's held to a standard of perfection."

The crux of the dilemma was summed up by Denver Broncos cornerback Chris Harris in an interview at the Pro Bowl in Orlando. When he was asked about the NFL reviewing pass interference calls, a proposal that would [pass at the March league meetings](#), he said: "The offensive guys push a ton. They don't call it. Hopefully they fix it."

But when asked how the referees did this past season, Harris said, "It was a little inconsistent this year." Asked why he thought that was, he said, "Maybe the rules changes."

The two valid points run in totally opposite directions. On the one hand, officiating needs a "fix." On the other hand, officiating consistency was probably hurt by last year's fixes. Remember the [what-is-a-catch](#) debate/debacle that irritated fans and players alike? That was a "fix" that made the issue worse—and replay arguably exacerbated the problem.

Blandino himself is another example of the conflict. After serving as

director of officiating for the NFL from 2013 to '16, he became [an analyst for Fox](#). That means he's now both an educator of fans and also a sometimes-critic of his former employees. He's helping the cause, and, to a lesser extent, making the cause harder.

"There's no question it's a positive and a negative," Blandino says of his analyst job. "When I was in that role [as head of officials], I really liked a lot of what Mike [Pereira] was doing [as a TV analyst] but there was also a downside. He has a knowledge that most people don't have. He can point out things people don't notice. My job is to educate, teach, highlight mistakes, and that's not necessarily a good thing for officiating as a whole. That negativity, when it's presented the wrong way, that has a trickle-down effect."

"Trickle-down" is the exact phrase used by the Florida officials. They stress that the abuse doesn't often escalate to the breaking point—about 1,800 student-athletes get ejected each year in the state across all sports, out of 400,000 participants—but when moms and dads arrive at the game already talking about what an NFL ref got wrong, it's almost natural to call out the mistakes they think they see in front of their own eyes.

"People say, 'If this former player or coach can do that, then it's OK for me to critique the ref at my 9-year-old's football game,'" Blandino says. "Whether it's players or fans, they emulate what they see."

Tomyn co-wrote [an open letter](#) in January, telling families to "cool it." The letter includes this statistic: 80 percent of young officials quit after two years or less because of "adult behavior."

"Yelling, screaming and berating the officials humiliates your child,

annoys those sitting around you, embarrasses your child's school and is the primary reason Florida has an alarming shortage of high school officials," the letter states.

Florida high school refs get about \$65 for a football game. That's a little north of \$20 per hour, and officials in other sports make less. Driving Uber is usually a better deal: You don't get rained on, and you're only hearing one person complain at a time.

"It's getting much worse," says Al Summers, a 25-year-ref and president of the Mid-Florida Officials Association. He told of a recent incident when a mother at a basketball game cussed out a referee for calling a foul on her son. Imagine dealing with that and still having to call another game or two that night because of a ref shortage.

"Some parents try to influence your call," Summers says. "If you're not a seasoned official, some will go along with them just to get them off your back."

That's far less likely to be a problem at the NFL level, but it doesn't mean there's no morale issue there.

"You make one bad call, and then [if] you try to make up for it, you make two bad calls," says former NFL official Jim Daopoulos. "It's very tough for these guys; they are very conscientious about it. There are a lot of sleepless nights."

Blandino echoes that:

"I do think it wears on some game officials. When I was in the role [with the league], that was a big part of my job—managing

expectations. That was a tough part of the job. It wore on me at times."

And that's at the very highest level. At the lower levels the stress of second-guessing, along with the stress of yelling parents, isn't worth taking home at night in return for a payment that could buy you maybe a pair of sneakers.

Imagine, for instance, working a high school basketball game and being followed off the court and berated by one of the most famous figures in your state. That's what happened in February in Pulaski, Wisc., when Mike McCarthy, former coach of the Green Bay Packers, launched into a ["verbal tirade"](#) at refs after his stepson's team lost a playoff game.

Lyle Livengood, the athletic director at West Port High in Ocala, Fla., calls the officiating situation "quite dire." He stresses football will be "fine" because it has such entrenched popularity, but adds that sports like basketball concern him and "soccer is scary."

"The worst-case scenario is FHSAA steps in and says, 'You're not playing 25 games; you're playing 15, because we don't have any officials.'"

So what's the solution?

One of the best things you can say about officials is they always want to get it right. So most of them welcome instant replay as a backstop. Harrison is mulling the addition of instant replay for playoff games in Florida, something several states [are already experimenting with](#). The new Alliance of American Football has been using a "sky judge," or an extra referee to watch replay and spot on-field mistakes, including

late-game pass interference. (That idea didn't gain any traction with the NFL's competition committee this year.) It's all part of an effort to make calls more reliable and accurate. But it will also make mistakes even less tolerable.

"I don't think more replay is the answer," says Blandino. "We have to think big picture. There are mistakes that are made in the game. We agree that [the missed call in Rams-Saints] was PI. For every play like that, there are going to be judgment calls that are not going to be clear-cut. If we open that up to instant replay, we're replacing one person's judgment with another person's judgment. This pursuit of perfection—I don't know if that's the best thing in the game."

Daopoulos puts it even more simply: "At some point it's going to become a slippery slope and it will get out of control with replay."

It's possible we're already careening down that slope. When game-changing mistakes lead to tweaks in the rules or in replay, at what point does it stop? High-definition video isn't going away. Social media isn't going away. And now major sports are cozying up with the gambling industry more than ever, so the stakes are higher than ever. Perfect is the enemy of the good, and good is never good enough.

"I'm worried they will look at too many things," says Daopoulos. "Do we want to review offsides, holding calls, roughing the passer? Where do you draw the line? It's a game played by humans, and there are going to be errors."

He'd get some agreement from Lions defensive back Darius Slay, who wasn't looking for any changes this offseason. "It makes the game longer and softer than what it is, in my opinion." He added: "The refs

are doing a great job, the best that they can. There's some plays they can't see."

Slay's point resonated two weeks after he said it, as a decision went upstairs to the booth during the first week of the AAF. Cameras rolled as an official watched the replay and ruled no-catch, then changed her mind and ruled catch. It was a nicely transparent moment—and a reminder that relying on technology won't take all the error out of the game.

Relying on humans allows a game to move organically, in a way machines don't understand. "I like a group [of officials] that lets us compete," Slay says. "A terrible group calls everything."

A seasoned official might let players play, or clamp down when things get out of hand. A rivalry game may call for a different feel, and different standards. (See: Steelers vs. Bengals.) That doesn't excuse glaring gaffes like what we saw in New Orleans in January, but communication between refs, players and coaches during a game does bring a kind of credibility that doesn't show up on Twitter.

"There are things that happen on the field that you only get to see if you're on the field," says Blandino. "You get a sense of the tenor of the game. 'Is this game under control?' Those are things you're never going to be able to gauge off the field."

If you do a word association with fans and say the word "refs," you're likely to get something negative. Yet the 2012 referee lockout showed in [pitiful, painful relief](#) how good NFL refs are at their jobs.

How soon we forget.



"It's always bad for the refs," says Slay. "It's a passing league. Every guy wants a call. Sometimes the refs gotta be hard."

That's not a view that will get a lot of applause or retweets. But it is a perspective that might do a lot more for the quality of refereeing in your town than another NFL season of outrage.

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