

A 'crisis mode' at all levels: How technology put officials in a tough spot



Drama unfolded in the Southern Lakes (Wisconsin) Conference wrestling tournament this year with a controversial officiating decision, one that disqualified the reigning state champion. As they do so often these days at sporting events, fans responded by screaming obscenities at one referee. Another official threatened to throw out unruly parents. And, of course, video of the commotion soon emerged.

But then came the twist, one that portends a new era in video-based sports officiating. The [cellphone video](#) was submitted as evidence in a court case that allowed the wrestler, Waterford High School's Hayden Halter, to bypass a state rule mandating a one-game suspension for any athlete disqualified from a competition. Halter went on to win the Wisconsin state championship at the 120-pound level, but the case remains on appeal. Although Circuit Judge Michael Piontek wrote in his opinion that "the court is not substituting its judgment for that of

the official," he declared that the video corroborated the testimony that Halter had not violated match rules.

The Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA), along with the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), are funding the appeal to avoid a national precedent that allows courts, empowered by video, to weigh in on the administration of sporting events.

"This is a case where we would see a total knockdown of the authority of the official, who we actually think did the right thing during the match," said Barry Mano, founder and president of NASO. "We look at that video and see that the young man did in fact violate the rules. But regardless, this can't stand for courts to get involved just because someone says they have a video that shows what they want it to show."

The case is a stark example of the intrusion into sports officiating of video, a useful tool that can quickly metastasize and engulf traditional administration at all levels. Postseason games in nearly every major United States-based sports league this year were marred by calls that could be questioned via slow-motion replay. And for the first time in its 145-year history, the Kentucky Derby saw its outcome [overturned based on video review](#).

Officials in pro sports often express gratitude for the safety net that video review can provide, but a growing legion of sports participants frets about its impact on expectations and wonders if it has helped fuel the toxic environments found at youth and amateur sporting events.

Brian Barlow, a soccer referee in Oklahoma who has worked every

level from youth to semipro, was harassed for more than a year by fans touting a sideline video of one of his calls.

"They attacked me personally and they attacked my family," Barlow said. "I run into some of the parents and they still trash-talk me to my face. And it's all because of the video, which if they knew the rules, they would know it shows that I was right.

"I really think technology has done more bad than good at all levels. In my case, the fact of the matter is I got the call right. But the other fact of the matter is that video has absolutely weakened the position of the referee. There was a time, 20-25 years ago, when if you were watching a football game, and the referee said the running back fumbled, you would accept it and move on. There wasn't room for all of this video debate. I hate it and wish it didn't exist."

"The pressure has always been there at the top level to substantiate calls. The only difference is that technology is much better now. It has heightened the pressure so much for the top guys to get these calls right." *Dr. Tom Webb, coordinator of the Referee and Match Official Research Network*

Supporters say video delivers much-needed transparency to a profession that has long avoided it. But in many cases, the desired accountability comes with diminished net returns. Barlow has grown into a national sports celebrity through a [Facebook page](#) that encourages fans to send video of adults reacting violently to perceived officiating mistakes at youth sporting events. The feed is stunning for its daily volume of verbal and physical abuse directed at officials who

receive as little as \$30 per day for their work.

High school associations around the country report officiating shortages so severe that basketball schedules are being condensed and football games are being shifted to Thursdays and Saturdays. A [2017 NASO survey](#) revealed that 70% of new officials quit within three years, pushed off largely by abuse.

A TED Talk by Zach Altman, a 19-year-old basketball referee in Texas, went viral when he said: "The way we currently treat referees, it's despicable. It's disgusting. And above all, it's disheartening."

(Editor's note: After he was interviewed for this story, [Altman was arrested](#) on June 13 and charged with indecency with a child, the San Antonio News-Express reported. Altman was released from jail on June 14 after posting bail.)

Video is only one of the factors involved, but the rise in its availability and use has coincided with what many now view as a calamity at some levels of officiating and game management. Dana Pappas, commissioner of officials for the New Mexico Activities Association, said, "In the past five years or so, we've really gone into crisis mode."

'Tough to challenge a judgment call, Mom'

The instinct to seek post-play review is not new. Dr. Tom Webb, coordinator of the United Kingdom-based Referee and Match Official Research Network, has spent nearly two decades studying the issue, particularly as it relates to international sports such as soccer, rugby and cricket. In an interview, Webb pointed to the 1932 FA Cup final as

one of the first examples of an attempt to use visual evidence to dispute an officiating call.

Newcastle scored the final two goals in a 2-1 victory over Arsenal, but the first came moments after a disputed call on the goal line. Referee W.P. Harper ruled that the ball remained in play, allowing Newcastle to retain possession and score. But a photograph published in local newspapers appeared to show the ball out of play.



Newcastle United's Jack Allen scored twice in the 1932 FA Cup final, and his first goal came on a controversial call. *Barratts/PA Image/Getty Images*

"There were still shots of the ball on the line and still shots of the referee and his angle," Webb said. "Even then the coverage was extensive. So the pressure has always been there at the top level to substantiate calls. The only difference is that technology is much better now. It has heightened the pressure so much for the top guys to get these calls right. And most of the time, they do."

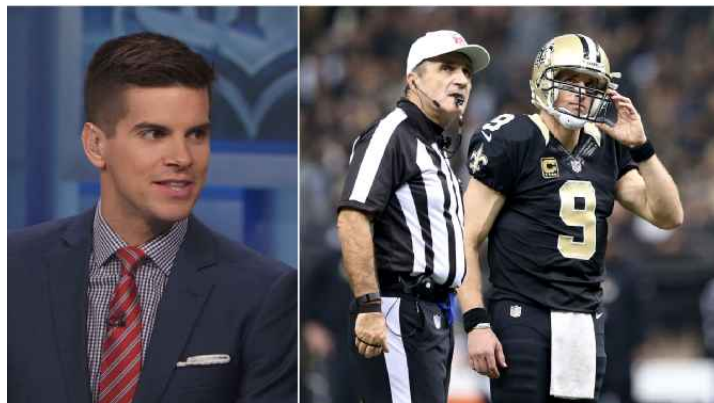
Thirty-nine years later, television's "The Brady Bunch" aired a prescient [episode about the allure of video evidence in football](#). After the receiver of a potential winning touchdown was ruled out of bounds for his local high school, Greg Brady complains to his father, Mike, that

the "referee made a rotten call."

Fortunately, Greg had been shooting photographs of his girlfriend on the sideline, and one captured the receiver in the background. "That looks like a good catch," Mike says. "You know, if you enlarge this, you might be able to tell if he was in bounds."

Sure enough, the enlarged photo shows the receiver's foot in bounds. He should have been awarded a touchdown. Mike and Greg rush back to school to show the coach. Aired for the first time in the fall of 1971, the scene ends with Greg saying to his mother, "It's pretty tough to challenge a judgment call, Mom. But I think it will give the coach some pretty good ammunition to fight with."

It took only five more years before the NFL began experimenting with instant replay. The first incarnation was established in 1985. Today, most major professional and college-level sports leagues have some degree of video review. And now this fall, the NFL will for the first time [review some judgment calls](#).



play

2:00

Yates: The human element of officiating will never go away

The NFL Live crew is on board with new replay rules, but they have some concerns over officiating ruining the flow of the game.

Clear and obvious?

For the most part, every review system is charged with correcting some version of clear and obvious mistakes. Despite the simple meaning of both words, the Canadian Football League issued a [422-word replay standard](#) this month that seemed designed to reassure anxious fans.

"Simply put, you shouldn't have to watch something several times, or watch at different speeds, if it is clear and obvious," CFL commissioner Randy Ambrosie wrote. "Why is clear and obvious our standard? Why not strive to get every single call right, even if the error was less than clear and obvious? We want to keep the length of Command Centre reviews reasonable. We do not want video review to slow the pace or flow of the game. We especially do not want it to adversely affect our fans' enjoyment of the game."

Often, however, that guiding principle has bogged down into granular examinations of slow-motion video. A famous case occurred in the 2013 Masters Tournament, after a television viewer noticed that [Tiger Woods](#) had made a nearly imperceptible illegal drop and contacted tournament officials. Woods was issued [a two-stroke penalty](#). And the past few months have provided a fair share of instant-replay

controversies:

In the 2019 NCAA men's basketball championship, officials awarded Virginia a key possession in overtime after a video review. Viewed in slow motion, the replay showed that although Virginia's [De'Andre Hunter](#) knocked the ball from the hands of Texas Tech's [Davide Moretti](#), Moretti was the [last to touch the ball](#).

Reviews in Major League Baseball this season have routinely examined bang-bang plays at second base.

In the NBA playoffs, viewers were treated to replays exploring whether [defenders had invaded the shooter's space](#), most notably involving [Houston Rockets](#) guard [James Harden](#) during the Western Conference semifinals.

Chaos erupted in this spring's Stanley Cup playoffs when [St. Louis Blues](#) fans realized that [hand passes are not reviewable](#) after a missed call that allowed the [San Jose Sharks](#) to score the winning goal during Game 3 of the Western Conference finals.

Standards that limit the types of reviews seem to offer little relief, however. Whether reviewed or not, broadcasters can be counted on to replay most plays. Millions of fans were outraged in the fourth quarter of this January's NFC Championship Game, when one of the NFL's top officiating crews [failed to call pass interference](#) against [Los Angeles Rams](#) cornerback [Nickell Robey-Coleman](#); the play contributed to the Rams' 26-23 overtime victory over the [New Orleans Saints](#). At the time, NFL replay was barred from reviewing pass interference calls or no-calls. (Owners voted [31-1 this spring to change that](#).)

Both technical reviews and the inability to review obvious mistakes produce a level of angst at the pro and college levels. But a more damaging consequence might have traveled downstream.

"The whole replay technology area has been beneficial to the highly televised theatrical sports," Mano said. "But what has happened is, down at the lower levels, certainly down at the high school level, it has caused expectations to rise, and unfairly, because they don't have replay and they're not likely ever to have it on a large scale."



The St. Louis Blues weren't happy with officials' apparent miss of an illegal hand pass in an overtime loss during the NHL Western Conference finals. *Dilip Vishwanat/Getty Images*

Those expectations have coincided with what author Michael Lewis calls a national recalibration of our understanding of fairness. In a podcast called "[Against the Rules](#)," Lewis suggests that those who are asked to "maximize fairness" in life -- be it sports referees or law enforcement or government regulators -- are "under attack."

The Wisconsin case is a perfect example. Halter was winning the conference final match that would allow him to advance to a second consecutive state tournament. But toward the end of the match, referee Michael Arendt issued an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty on

Halter for what he later said was use of a profanity. Arendt then issued a second penalty after the match, in response to what he said was a taunt directed at opposing fans. The disqualification triggered an immediate one-match suspension, which in effect would have prevented Halter from competing in the state tournament. Halter denied using a prohibited word and said the taunt was in fact a celebration directed at his father.

Halter's family did not accept the ruling, nor the WIAA's support of it. After hiring an attorney, Halter's father successfully petitioned Piontek to place an injunction on the suspension so that he could compete and sort out the suspension later. In the decision, Piontek acknowledged the sound quality of the video was poor but also said he did not hear a profanity. He weighed in on the apparent taunt, writing that "the video appears to support Hayden Halter's version."

Piontek went out of his way to say he "is not a 'Monday morning quarterback,'" nor was he "opening the floodgates to 'second-guessing' referees or officials." But even if the case is overturned on appeal, and Halter's state title is stripped, there is every reason to imagine a continued growth in the power of amateur video to drive sports debate.

'\$60 to go get yelled at'

For a larger case study on the downstream impact of impatience with officiating, consider New Mexico. In 2001, state legislators enacted one of the country's most exhaustive pieces of legislation to protect sports officials. It criminalizes the act of threatening, much less

assaulting, officials, and allows prosecutors to levy charges all the way up to second-degree felony when warranted.

And yet the state still struggles to attract enough officials to work its network of high school games, even with the help of a national branding program called #BecomeAnOfficial run through the National Federation of High School Sports. Pappas -- the NMAA commissioner of officials -- jumps through considerable hoops to staff games on a weekly basis. She has begged schools around the state to reschedule football games from Friday night to Thursday or Saturday so existing crews can cover multiple games. In some cases, crews work two games in one day. Last fall, between seven and 10 officials drove five hours each week to reach their Friday night games.

Pappas has traced a number of factors into the shortage, including the migration away from officiating by teachers whose added responsibilities at school no longer allow them to double as officials. The low nationwide retention rate has led to a graying of the ranks -- the average age of officials at all levels is 44, according to Mano, nearly 20 years older than it was in 1976 -- and many states are actively targeting first responders, police officers and firefighters to fill open positions.

"People are going ... 'Do I really want to take a half day off work to go make \$60 to go get yelled at for two hours and then end up on the news because somebody had their cellphone?'" *Dana Pappas, commissioner of officials for the New Mexico Activities Association*

The New Mexico Activities Association approved raises this year for

most officials, from an extra \$5 per game for football to \$16 per game for basketball. But in the end, public inertia has proved powerful.

"It doesn't help that there is so much negativity in the press about officials," Pappas said, "and about officials being assaulted. They're so scrutinized now because of the way technology is. People are going, especially at our level, 'Do I really want to take a half day off work to go make \$60 to go get yelled at for two hours and then end up on the news because somebody had their cellphone?' That added scrutiny just makes it a difficult sell to get people into the avocation of officiating. I know people think these stories are exaggerated. They're not."

Rather than being tolerated as instances of human imperfection, mistakes at all levels are increasingly met with an assumption of bias, an intentional infliction of harm.

"What we find," Pappas said, "is that it's always somebody else's fault. It's a clear scapegoat mentality. I don't understand it, but that's been my observation in 22 years in this job. Everyone thinks their kid is going to be the next big thing and it's like, no, your kid is a 5-foot-2 point guard that isn't going to play in the NBA. People think they don't have to go through a process. They just want to point the finger."



According to the NASO's 2017 survey, 64% of active officials at all levels have had to remove a spectator for bad behavior. *Jake Roth/USA TODAY Sports*

Barlow, the soccer referee from Oklahoma, calls it "recency-bound validation." Parents in particular, he said, seem to equate the quality of their child-rearing with success or failure in youth sports.

"Officials are put on this huge pedestal of expectation that's unrealistic," Barlow said. "We are never going to be 100 percent accurate at any game at any level. Calm, cold rational people are quick to figure that out. It's the people that are entitled, it's the people that are needing complete validation on social networking or going to their job and bragging that their team won, those are the people that need to understand that this will be the case until we're replaced by robots.

"This is where we are, and we're ruining the experience for kids because of how we behave on the sideline. That's my biggest argument. As a parent, as a referee and as a coach, I simply want to say across the pitch, 'Shut up. Stop. This moment isn't yours. It's not your moment. Stop making it about you.'"

Lowering the temperature

According to the NASO's 2017 survey, which included more than 17,000 responses, 64% of active officials at all levels have had to remove a spectator for bad behavior. Another 57% had been forced to break up a fight. Just under 50% had felt unsafe or feared for their safety on the job due to bad behavior, and 13% reported being the target of a physical assault.

So what is the answer? Barlow's joke notwithstanding, it won't be robots. Even as baseball experiments in the minor leagues with automated strike zones, and technology improves annually, Webb's research shows that games would be fundamentally altered without a human authority figure.

"It's really important to maintain the authenticity of the match official," he said. "In my view and certainly from the work we've done, you need a presence. You need a figure that oversees and upholds the laws of the game, no matter what the sport you're playing. Players need that as well. The advancements are fantastic, and if they can help get the correct calls, that is important, particularly in high-level sport where there is so much money involved. But we need to maintain the authority of the on-field match official. That's important in the laws of the game."

On the other hand, a source of officials' diminished authority isn't going away. As NBA commissioner Adam Silver said in 2016: "You can't turn back the clock on transparency."

According to Barlow, the eventual solution will be grounded in changing culture rather than technology. It should be the responsibility for each organizing body, he said, to establish a high standard of

respect for officials based on an understanding that most -- but not all -- calls will be correct.



James Harden and the Houston Rockets had several disagreements with officials during the Western Conference semifinals. *Lachlan Cunningham/Getty Images*

Soccer leagues in the United Kingdom launched a Respect program in 2008, which requires parents to sit out of earshot of the playing field. Barlow points to the strict rules for spectators at the Masters, which prohibits everything from cellphone usage to sitting on the grass.

"There is a level of expectation there on how to look and behave," he said. "My first year there, I made a mistake. I laid back on a foothill on the course, and within 10 seconds, I had three security guards on me telling me I needed to sit up or I was going to be expelled from the property. These are the richest, most influential and powerful people in the world, and for seven days when they walk onto that property, they are being told and demanded that they will act a certain way, and if not, they will lose the privilege. And guess what happens? They act accordingly.

"Why can't that work on all levels? If you tell Sammy and Sally's mom and dad that they don't get to watch Sammy and Sally play soccer

unless they behave accordingly, guess what? They'll behave accordingly."

The NASO estimates that 90% of fouls, penalties and game-administration decisions are accurate, and about 80% of decisions not to call a foul or penalty are accurate, across all levels. So at least some of the angst, NASO leaders reason, is based on an incomplete understanding of the rules and interpretation of video.

"As referees, we have to understand that it would be extremely boring if we went to a game and no one was cheering," Altman said in an interview after his TED Talk. "If everyone was silent and nobody was saying anything on the court. Nobody was happy. Nobody was mad. There were no emotions. It would be so boring. ...

"But we have to be aware what we're teaching our kids if we don't have the emotional intelligence at the heat of the moment. It scares me for what we're teaching kids, that that's OK. That they're growing up in this culture that it's OK, that it's part of sports to disrespect officials. It's part of sports to not agree with officials' calls, and I get calls wrong all the time. I'm not perfect, nobody out there is. But it should not be part of the culture to swear, to curse, to threaten, none of that."

Change won't be easy considering the ubiquitous presence of technology and mobile devices.

With a laugh, Altman recalled stepping into an altercation between a coach and an officiating colleague during a recent AAU game. As the two were arguing loudly, Altman noticed a woman moving down the bleachers toward the court. It was the coach's wife. Altman hoped she would lead her husband away. Then he feared she would escalate the

confrontation.

Instead, she stopped, reached into her purse, pulled out her phone and, of course, started shooting video.

ESPN senior writer Mike Sando contributed to this report.