

Unruly soccer fans are driving away refs

By [James Yodice / Journal Staff Writer](#) Monday, September 30th, 2019 at 12:05am

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It may be the beautiful game, but apparently it's being bogged down by some ugly parents.

And the state's top high school athletics administrator is sounding alarm bells in a strongly worded warning letter.

With embarrassing incidents in the rearview mirror involving high school football fans and high school basketball fans, the New Mexico Activities Association – as part of its efforts to legislate what it believes is escalating displays of poor behavior at its sporting events – is now fixing its sights on mouthy prep soccer fans.

A recent letter from NMAA executive director Sally Marquez, addressed to state coaches and athletic directors, describes the situation as a "crisis."

And as a result, games are being canceled and the sport is losing officials, according to the letter.

"In the past two weeks, I have received countless emails about fan

behavior in soccer," the letter begins. "Along with a couple of emails from officials who have resigned. We are at a crisis."

Just in the metro area – or central region – the letter says, seven varsity and 10 junior varsity matches have been canceled or rescheduled due to a lack of officials in recent weeks. And more have been altered in the state's other four regions.

"I am very concerned that if the behavior of the parents continue (sic), then next year, we will have to cancel more games, especially those games that start at 3:00 or 4:00. The fans are brutal! The cussing and screaming, coupled with the threatening comments has to stop," Marquez wrote in her letter.

This letter also includes a scathing commentary from an unnamed veteran official who has, in fact, recently resigned.

"Soccer parents: you are absolutely 100% the reason that we have a critical refereeing shortage and games are being canceled left and right," the official wrote. "And you are at least a part of the reason I'm done here. The most entitled among you are the ones that scream the loudest."

NMAA Commissioner of Officials Dana Pappas said there are more soccer officials in New Mexico, both in the central region and statewide, this year over last year, but added that the data doesn't reveal an underlying problem.

"We do have a few more officials, but it's because they're brand new," Pappas said. "We're losing veterans."

The central region, which is primarily the metro area but stretches

south to Socorro, has 88 officials, two more than last year. Statewide, there are 248 officials this year versus 243 last year.

The official who penned his opinion was said to be a veteran of 20-plus years.

"One of the best officials I've ever worked with," said Robert Sanchez, president of the Central New Mexico Soccer Officials Association and himself a longtime high school official. "He just couldn't take it anymore."

Sanchez backed up Marquez's assertion that parents are tainting the sport.

"It's become pervasive," Sanchez said. "It's parents. Ninety percent of this is parents. What is happening is, parents are trying to compensate, in my opinion, for what they think is a disservice to their children."

Sanchez said he has observed players yelling back at their parents to keep quiet during games. "Multiple times," he said.

What is most disconcerting, Sanchez said, is that the attacks from fans, who are often very close in proximity to the officials, are straying into the personal, rather than the professional.

"It's not fun. My sense is, it's been a slow increase over 10 years, but it's been a definite uptick over the last five," Sanchez said. "I honestly think these parents don't think they're doing anything wrong."

Dave Lauben, the NMAA's chief assignor of officials for the central region, and also a 14-year high school veteran, said he doesn't

personally receive many derogatory comments, but acknowledges that it is a problem.

“And, I’m quick to say with our newer officials,” Lauben said, “the fan behavior is awful. My bigger concern about this is that it’s scaring off the potential for new people to come into our organization.”

The NMAA is trying to enlist the help of the schools and the teams themselves to do some policing before it has to step in and perhaps bring a more substantial penalty.

“It’s an overall, statewide issue,” Marquez said in an interview. “Fans are driving stronger, better officials out of the game.

“If (the bad behavior) continues,” she added, “we will not have officials and we will not have games.”

Pappas said other issues are in play, as well, such as an increase in local soccer venues – Eldorado and Cibola have new fields, and eight of APS’ 13 schools play games on their campuses – meaning larger workloads for both veteran and newer officials. Lauben said this is a “huge issue for me.”

“They’re being overworked,” Pappas said, adding that this is also leading to an increase in injuries among officials who are working many games each week.

“It gets to a point where they just run out of passion for it,” Pappas said. “It’s definitely driving some of the veterans out.”

Regarding the sniping from fans, individual fans can face a 365-day ban from NMAA events. But punishment can extend further.

The NMAA in the last several years has made a pointed attempt at cracking down on schools whose fans act out of line.

Last fall, fans of the Española Valley football team were barred from one of its home games because of this, and fans of the Estancia boys basketball team were banned from its first-round playoff game last March. In both cases, it was a small handful of fans that got the entire fan base banned from a game.

"It has gotten more caustic," Lauben said of verbal abuse from fans. "And in certain areas, certain games, it's dreadful. And it's hard as a veteran official to watch this. ... The parents largely don't understand the effect they are having."

Are not enough fans getting the message about minding their manners, Marquez was asked.

"We're going to continue to do it until everyone understands that we are serious," Marquez told the Journal.

Sanchez said coaches and schools are doing what they can to rein in the problem.

"But," he said, "it's almost not acceptable to not be outraged if something bad happens on the field."