

'We need help': Umpire shortage is causing high school programs to cancel games



The Los Angeles Dodgers had a scout coming to Lebanon on Thursday afternoon to watch right-handed senior pitcher Garrett Harker, a

potential draft pick in June's major league baseball draft with a 95-mph fastball.

At 2 p.m. Thursday, Lebanon athletic director Phil Levine sent out a message that the game against Western Boone was postponed despite the clear skies and 50-degree temperature. The reason for the postponement? Not rain. Not sleet. Not snow.

An umpire shortage.

"I don't think I really realized how bad (the shortage was) until (Thursday)," Levine said. "We really need to figure out what we're going to do in the future because it's a problem. If we have to cancel games, we're hurting teams and kids."

It is not an isolated incident. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened an already declining number of qualified umpires. There are more than 1,400 umpires registered with the Indiana High School Athletic Association this season, according to IHSAA assistant commissioner Robert Faulkens. But that number includes many who opted out this season due to the virus, Faulkens said.

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Several area programs have been forced to cancel freshman and junior varsity games or run them with just one umpire. Greenwood canceled a junior varsity game against Decatur Central on Thursday, which became a packed date on the schedule due to postponements earlier in the week due to weather.

"Fortunately, our people understood that was a possibility when we had to move the game due to rain and snow," Greenwood athletic director Rob Irwin said. "That doesn't make it any easier. We need to get more people involved and we need parents to realize that they need to stay off the umpires and officials in all sports or we're going to lose more games. We need to start appreciating them so we can keep them around."

If not, games will continue to be canceled, particularly at the sub- varsity levels. If games are routinely canceled, eventually those teams will be eliminated. For a sport that ranks fourth in the country in participation for high school boys behind only football, track and field and basketball, according to 2018-19 numbers provided by the National Federation of State High School Associations, the thought of canceling games – and teams – due to a lack of umpires is a significant problem.

"You feel bad for the kids," said Center Grove athletic director Jon Zwiitt. "They are sitting in class, thinking about playing a game that day and all of a sudden the freshman or JV coach says they aren't going to be able to play because there aren't any umpires. You hope it's not a trend. But we're calling umpires out of retirement to come work games. We had to do that (last week)."

Pandemic compounds existing umpire shortage

This spring, in particular, has been rough due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the pandemic only shined a light on an already-emerging issue. The retention rate of younger umpires has not kept pace with the older umpires retiring. According to the IHSAA, the average age of

officials across all sports is 56 years old.

The problems are easy enough to identify, starting with poor treatment from fans, parents and coaches. A [video from a basketball game at the Pacers Athletic Center](#) went viral earlier month when a fan and referee exchanged punches and the referee was wrestled to the ground. While issues to that level are the exception, the verbal abuse is more constant. A survey conducted last year by the National Association of Sports Officials of more than 17,000 officials showed 47.9% of male officials and 44.7% of female officials have "felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player or spectator behavior."

More: [Brawl erupts at travel girls basketball game in Westfield, ends in ref being body slammed](#)

More: [Coaches on hot seat: Youth sports, social media, parents have changed the job](#)

Greg Wright, 52, has been umpiring since 1998 and consistently at the high school level since 2008. He said his tactic in dealing with complaints is to take the comments from fans as "comic relief" and not engage in any back and forth. He also understands that coaches have a rooting interest and "are going to fight for their kids."

"Their job may be on the line if they fail," Wright said of coaches. "But when younger kids start out and people start yelling at them, whether it is fans or coaches, they don't know how to deal with somebody right in their face. With fans, you have to have the personality that you find it funny. A lot of them don't know what they are talking about. But for a younger umpire, once they get that they say, 'You know what, this isn't for me.' Then they get out of it. Most of us doing it are 40-plus and

there are quite a few who are 60-plus. We need more people to get involved. Without adult participation, the kids don't play. The word needs to get out because it is a critical issue in our sport."

Umpires typically make \$65 for a high school game. Not exactly big bucks once you factor in equipment costs and gas money. Wright estimates he has about \$1,000 invested in equipment with different gear needed for various levels of games from little league to college.

Mike Mann has been umpiring for 36 years. "I got into it for the love of the game," he said. "I grew up playing sports, have always been around it. It's a way to make a little extra cash and give back to a game I love." Mann, 66, did not plan to have such a jam-packed schedule this spring. He anticipated working maybe three days a week. Instead, he has been working six days.

"I'm supposed to be part-time," he said. "But it hasn't been that way at all."

Mann, who also works football and is chairman for football for the Fall Creek officials association, said baseball is unique because an umpire has to be comfortable crouching behind a catcher with an 80-plus mph fastball coming in your direction. Mann teaches an officiating class at IUPUI and has difficulty getting students interested in umpiring baseball.

"There's not really any way of convincing those kids to do the job," he said. "They aren't interested in it." He had a hands-on clinic where "I had them look at pitches for baseball. They all said there was no way they would get behind a catcher and watch pitches. If you're not used to it, 75 or 80 miles per hour is pretty fast."

Convincing baseball players to someday become umpires

That is why Alex Skandalis believes it is imperative to invest in young people who are currently playing baseball. Skandalis, the chief executive officer for United Travel Umpires and executive vice president for United Collegiate Umpires, oversees the umpires at Grand Park in Westfield among other duties, including assigning several college conferences.

Skandalis thought as the country got into a better place with the pandemic this spring that there might be a boost similar to what happened during the recession of 2008. But so far, that has not happened. Grand Park hosts travel team tournaments every weekend starting in March with roughly 80 % of the umpires coming from out-of-state, Skandalis said. But some states, like neighboring Illinois, are playing high school football in the spring, which cuts into the pool of umpires who do both sports.

The pandemic has also pushed back the baseball season in some areas.

"All of those things have led to different availability issues that would be a problem even if we had a supply of umpires that we've had in the past," Skandalis said. "Which we didn't. We were already headed down a path of the umpiring community being older and not replenishing that bottom end. A lot of people have pointed to conditions with baseball community, like umpires being yelled at – I think that's part of it."

Skandalis, 37, believes there is more to it, though. He started umpiring at age 14 instead of mowing lawns. At that time, travel baseball had not

exploded to the extent it has now. Kids ages 14-18 who might have been looking for a part-time job umpiring games and staying involved in baseball in the summer now have their own games to fill up their schedule.

Skandalis, who partners with tournament organizers such as Bullpen Tournaments and Prep Baseball Report at Grand Park, is actively looking to tap into a database of players who come through the facility and train them to become umpires.

"It's new for us to attack it this way," Skandalis said. "This will definitely be the first year we are doing this and soliciting those guys specifically. We'd always worked to get a younger generation of umpires involved, but this is almost like a formal campaign with targeted emails and targeted training. We've had umpires who are high-school age on the field already with umpires who are training them. We're definitely going to do more of that for the 9- and 10-year-old (playing) level to get them involved."

On Tuesday night, 24 high school-age players signed up for umpire training at Pro-X on the Grand Park campus. Some of the fathers of those players have also signed up for training.

"In addition to the (24) who signed up, we probably had another 100 responses from people who want to get involved," Skandalis said. "But you have to build a huge number because at the end of the day, a lot of those kids are going to be playing. There has to be more travel baseball from ages 9 to 14 in Indiana than any of the non-hotbed states like Florida, Texas, California or Georgia. There weren't enough umpires in Indiana when Grand Park was built. And now, it's just harder and harder. We have to try to find answers. We need some help from the

whole community."

Other issues facing baseball umpires

The bigger the pool of candidates, the better. Eric Harmon, a baseball assigner for 15 Indiana high schools and 28 small-college programs in the Midwest, said it is not always something directly related to the game that keeps umpires from staying in the game.

"Some of them decide it's not worth what they are getting paid for for three or four hours," Harmon said. "They might be newly-married or have a young family and you would rather be home than standing behind the plate. But this has been by far the toughest year. It puts a burden on the guys who are doing it because they are so in demand."

Lebanon's Levine said some schools are paying \$15-20 extra per game to make sure they have an umpire locked in for a game. He would like to see a standard maximum amount to keep schools from outbidding one another. Levine, after talking with other athletic directors and baseball coaches, has a few other ideas:

*A time limit of two hours on junior varsity and freshman games or a 10-run rule, whichever comes first.

*Mandatory JV/freshman games are worked only with a home plate umpire until overall numbers of umpires grow.

*Limit the licensing procedure so a new umpire can get a temporary license for a year and work JV/freshman games. If they like it, they can complete the licensing process to be certified to work varsity games.

The IHSAA has made a push in recent years to get younger and new

officials involved in all sports. But Levine and other area athletic directors are concerned that is an issue that may not heal itself after the pandemic unless changes are made.

"I'm afraid it's going to get worse," Greenwood's Irwin said.

Wright is working college games at the NAIA and Division III level for the first time this spring. "I don't have delusions of grandeur," he said. "I'd like to work a Little League World Series and a state championship in high school."

Like an umpire Superman, Wright always keeps his uniform and equipment in his car. When his son was playing little league, he was occasionally called into service in a pinch.

"You never know, especially now, when you are going to get the call," Wright said. "We need adults and parents to understand that while it's great to be a parent, we need you to participate and not just be a spectator sometimes. If we're going to have the games, we need help."

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