

NIAA faces referee shortage that could affect fall season



Referee Joe Molinaro flips the coin to decide kickoff between the Green Valley captains, left, and the Sierra Vista captains, right, at Green Valley High School in Henderson on Friday, Aug. 31, 2018. Green Valley won 26-21. Brett Le Blanc Las Vegas Review-Journal

Arbor View football coach Matt Gerber said he has heard for the past few years that the number of officials for high school sports has been slowly dropping.

But the numbers the coaches heard at the Southern Nevada Football Coaches Association meeting Thursday set off alarm bells.

Nevada Interscholastic Activities Association assistant director Jay Beesemyer said the organization will need 700 registered officials statewide for fall sports of cross country, football, boys

and girls soccer, boys and girls tennis, girls golf and girls volleyball.

As of Sunday, that number was 361. The fall season begins Aug. 19.

"We're going to be hurting this year, for sure, if the early sign-ups are any indication," Beesemyer said. "The big red flag is that people aren't coming back to officiate. They either got jobs, moved away or got away for a while and aren't in a rush to get back in. It's a perfect storm for having major problems."

Southern Nevada Officials Association president Vince Kristosik said there were 292 officials for football, 104 for soccer and 97 for volleyball in the 2019-20 school year. As of Sunday, those numbers were 121 for football, 28 for soccer and 46 for volleyball.

"As you can see, we're under 50 percent for all sports," Kristosik said.

Anyone who wants to be an official can find information at niaa.com under the "officials" tab or at snoaofficials.com under the "become an official" tab.

For football games, the SNOA provides five on-field officials, the sideline chain crew and a press box team that runs the clock, among other duties. For volleyball, it's a four-person crew that includes up-and-down officials and two calling lines. Soccer uses three officials.

There are mitigating factors the SNOA will consider, such as reducing the number of officials and having schools fill in the

auxiliary crew.

But the ultimate concern is that games could have to be canceled or rescheduled if the numbers don't improve.

"It's a bad situation right now," Gerber said. "We'll do whatever we need to do to get games in for these kids, especially after missing last year."

Shadow Ridge football coach Travis Foster took it a step further, saying he doesn't care if there's "three officials, two officials, coaches with whistles, they've just got to get on the field."

Foster said he's concerned about the potential for games being eliminated because of the shortage, especially since there are no guarantees COVID-19 won't force cancellations.

Desert Oasis boys and girls volleyball coach Nick Porter said he is encouraging subvarsity coaches to get certified as officials so they can at least call lines. He also has reached out to former players.

Porter said he hopes the SNOA will take the competitiveness and importance of games into account when assigning officials. If it's a game between two highly competitive teams, there "better be two refs." For matches with lower-level teams, one referee would suffice, along with the line-callers, he said.

Porter, the Southern Nevada Volleyball Coaches Association president, saw the effects of the shortage in the spring season. Teams had to play doubleheaders at times, which meant for long, tiring days.

"I was happy we had a season, but it was super short and super weird," Porter said.

While Porter said COVID-19 has forced everyone to become flexible, he isn't open to having games rescheduled or canceled.

"If the school district does have schedule changes, they'll have a mutiny on their hands," Porter said. "And I don't mind saying, I'll be leading that mutiny. We can't be messing with schedules this late."

Kristosik said the minimum age to officiate for the SNOA is 14, and schedules are flexible. While he would be thrilled to get some officials to work five days a week, he's not in a position to be picky and would happily accept anyone who wants to officiate one day a week.

"We're going to take whoever we can get, train them and get them on the field in about three weeks," Kristosik said.

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Nevada is experiencing a statewide officials shortage for high school sports. In the fall of 2019, there were about 700 officials. That number is 361 for this fall as of Sunday. Here is the breakdown of the difference in the number of officials from 2019 to 2021. Numbers provided by Southern Nevada Officials Association president Vince Kristosik and Nevada Interscholastic

Activities Association assistant director Jay Beesemyer.