

"Officially" in Trouble

When officials make a tough call against your team, they are the target of boos, hand gestures and maybe even more. When they are at their best you don't even notice them. However, if recent trends continue we will all notice when they are gone. Head Football coach at Central York, Gerry Yonchiuk says, "It's affecting our game completely. I'm fearful in 10 years the game will dry up."

According to the PIAA, in the three years between 2019 and 2022, the number of officials dropped from more than 17 thousand to just over 14 thousand. That's almost a 20% drop. No sport gained officials in that time, and in just one year 2021-2022 600 basketball officials left the job. Some sports like football, are already making adjustments. In the Mid Penn conference, there's not enough officials to play all the games under the traditional "Friday night lights". Glen McNamee is the longtime head coach of the Central Dauphin Rams. He says, "Last year we had a Thursday night game, this week again, we have a Thursday night game, & that's different you know, you have school the next morning."

Kevin Bevenour has been an official for two decades. At 55 years old, he's often the youngest member of his officiating crew. He says, "We try to get guys, we say, if you give us 3 years, we can get you hooked."

Yet getting them to the field in the first place is part of the challenge. Fees like background checks, and purchasing liability insurance can add up to hundreds of dollars before the first paycheck. The PIAA and referees we spoke to say the biggest reason for the recent drop is the

Pandemic. Many officials never came back. There are some fees that can be waived for younger refs.. but the PIAA is pushing the state legislature to waive more. What are some other possible solutions? Yonchiuk believes we're looking at the wrong people. He says, "What I really hope is women get involved. Look at the Big Ten and there is some tremendous female officials, and I hope women get involved in this to save the sport."

There has been some progress this year in recruiting. 300 basketball officials are back in the fold. Also, there's a promising "Cadet Program" for high school students. They can be paired with a veteran official and get paid to work middle school games.

And we can all remember the shortage the next time we have an urge to yell at the refs. If you think you could do a better job.. there are plenty of openings. Bevenour says the number one reason most refs leave the profession within a year or two: Parents.