

Showing Officials We Care

It's no secret that there is an official shortage across the United States. High school interscholastic sports rely on adults willing to provide time and services as referees, because they play an integral part in offering fair play among millions of school-aged student-athletes. Simply put, games cannot be played without them! With fewer and fewer adults willing to don the refereeing stripes, athletic administrators have been forced to restructure game schedules, which may create more missed school time or later nights to accommodate the shortage. In times gone by, it seemed that many officials were teachers after hours, or other public service professionals, such as police and fireman, who perhaps had some flexibility to be at a contest in the late afternoon or early evening. That demographic has changed. It takes some courageous individuals who know the game, are in shape enough to run with today's bigger, stronger, faster 14-18 year olds and who can handle the pressure of being scrutinized on every split-second decision.

The Washington Officials Association has now joined forces with the National Association of Sports Officials to complement their Retention, Training and Observation program (RTO), all in an effort to get more officials, help them improve and keep them coming back. Officials can earn a little compensation, but for all intents and purposes, they will not get rich being a middle school or high school official. To truly enjoy the work, the referee usually needs a love for the game, have an appreciation for the camaraderie, likes the rush of the game through being close to the action, or, perhaps, they love a challenge. It could be the knowledge and reward that they are giving back to their community and our youth, as they reinforce life skills through sport. Regardless, efforts need to continue to attract, maintain and retain officials, or high school sports will be in jeopardy.

So, what can athletic administrators and schools do to help in this process? Are there former coaches in the school house or community who still have a passion for the game, but don't necessarily want the grind of practicing every day or riding the bus anymore? Administrators can encourage those individuals to hook in to the local association. Can a school offer a sports officiating class, where high school students can get registered and certified, while making a little money, so they can officiate middle level sports? This helps take the burden off the association to find adults available for a 3:30 PM contest, which, in turn, can bolster numbers for the future. Local assigners can be a resource as well, pointing interested people to sites such as www.nfhslearn.com which can also provide some courses and curriculum to get the rookie official on his or her way. Are there connections at the local community college or university who may know of former high school athletes that would be a good fit for the job? The WOA homepage, for example, has a simple form to get them in touch with the local association.

Besides helping recruit more officials, there are other efforts high school athletic departments can take to show officials that schools care. Tough conversations need to take place with coaches, students, athletes and fans when their behavior is less than the highest of what is expected. Are fan expectations posted in your venues, for both the facility and the whole

league? One simple idea is to create and disperse fan “red cards” to discourage or encourage appropriate sportsmanship. Is a sportsmanship statement read by the public-address announcer prior to all contests? Has there been a meeting with leaders of the student section to explain appropriate behavior? Is there a written policy to reinforce coaches’ expectations towards officials? When things go awry, are there guidelines or actions taken to have the student/athletes or coaches reflect on their behavior and search for improvement?

Small efforts that can be taken to improve relations with officials could include league or local school districts allowing card-carrying members of the WOA and a guest, free entry to a contest. This would allow encouragement of “off-duty” officials to learn by watching other crews to support their growth as an official. As game managers, one should take the time to greet officials by name (Arbiter names who is coming) and show them to an acceptable dressing facility. Meeting prior to the contest to address any game management procedures, discuss protocols of a protest and to explain the plan should a sportsmanship issue arise, all help to run a successful event, and let officials know that the game management team is there to work with and for them. Facility managers should ensure the officials’ valuables are in a locked clubhouse, as well as make sure they are escorted back to the facility at halftime and post-game, especially if a game is hotly contested. While gifting of public funds may be an issue in creating a big hospitality spread like a Major League Umpire’s clubhouse, supplying water or a small snack to the game officials who are working contests through the dinner hours is a safety issue, and necessary. A booster club could supply funds or work with a local business to obtain donations for such a gesture.

A strong local example of promoting and thanking officials occurred recently when The Columbia Basin Big 9 League embarked on an “Officials Thank You” campaign this winter, where the league publicly thanked all officials who worked home games during one week this winter, with a public statement at the contest, a Thank You Card signed by school student leaders and a complementary gift card. The league has also implemented a post-contest officials’ feedback card, seeking responses for such things as how they were treated, issues the schools need to address and generally, how can the schools better serve our officials in the future.

These are all relatively simple ideas that can be implemented to genuinely show appreciation to the referees for their commitment to the sport they officiate and their dedication to our student-athletes.

About the Author

Loren Sandhop, CAA, has been the Athletic Director for the Moses Lake School District since 2000. He is currently on the WSSAAA Executive Board, North Central Washington Executive Board and is the secretary/treasurer of the Columbia Basin Big 9 Athletic Conference. He has served on the WIAA Executive Board and been named the District 6 AD of Year.