

Fan Behavior and the Shortage of Officials

BY BOB PARKER

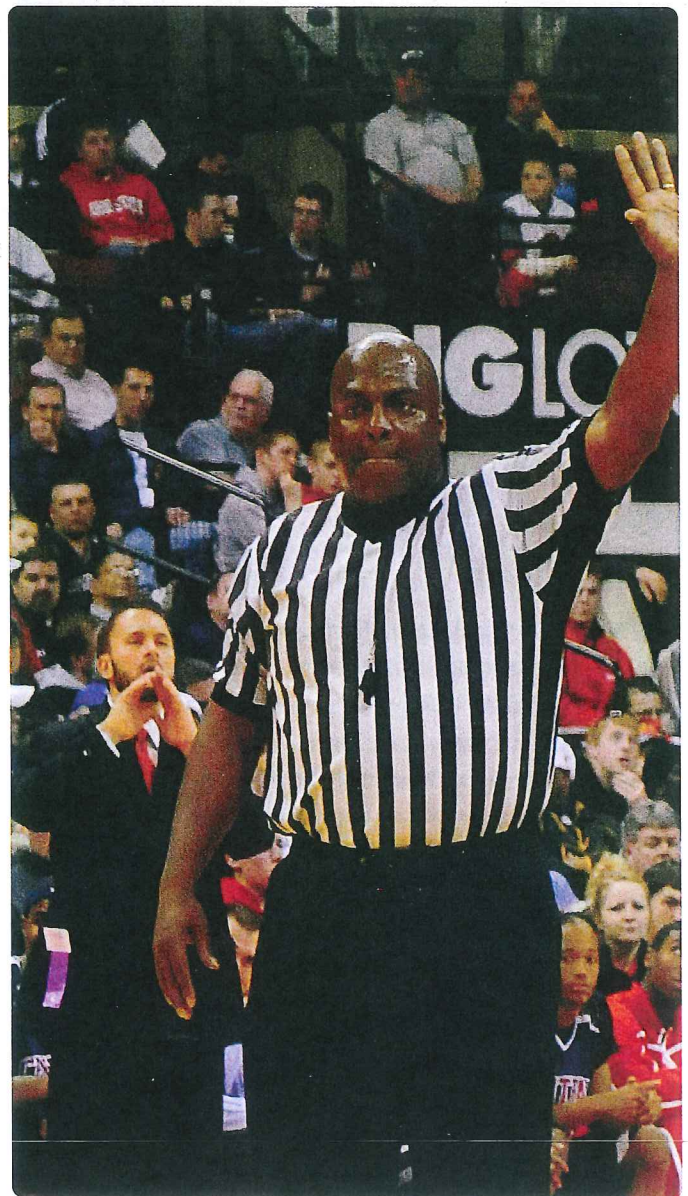
Ancedotal evidence of officials leaving their avocation as a result of displays of unsportsmanlike behavior by fans abounds. However, there is also an abundance of hard statistical evidence to support the conclusion that fan behavior has a significant effect on recruitment and retention rates among officials.

First, that the shortage of officials has reached a crisis stage in some areas cannot be doubted. Nine out of ten high school sports associations need more referees, according to a survey by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO). Ninety-five percent of the survey respondents – the 60 governing bodies in charge of administering high school sports in the United States – reported that canceling or rescheduling of games due to a lack of officials was a problem that they dealt with at least occasionally, and many on a more frequent basis.

Second, the linkage between the shortage of officials and unsportsmanlike behavior endured by officials at contests is also readily apparent. More than three-fourths (76%) of the NASO survey respondents listed poor sportsmanship by parents as the single biggest reason officials quit. A similar survey of officials who did not renew their officiating licenses showed that, although the most frequent reason was a change in job or career status, 68 percent cited poor sportsmanship by coaches and players as a factor. Alarming, national statistics show that one in three new officials do not renew their licenses after their first year of officiating.

A few years ago, the Ohio High School Athletic Association asked officials to name the worst part of their jobs. Poor fan behavior was the No. 1 answer. According to the National Alliance for Youth Sports, 15 percent of youth games involve some sort of verbal or physical abuse from coaches and parents, up from five percent just five years earlier.

In response to what the New York Times called “the rising tide of misbehavior at high school and youth sports, especially among adults,” many leagues and even state legislatures are making efforts to curb misconduct. New Mexico, for example, has enacted a law increasing penalties for attacks on referees, and the Illinois



Legislature passed a bill mandating a minimum fine of \$1,000 for battery against sports officials. More than 20 states have enacted statutes making it a crime to assault a sports official.

Third, the “abuse” doesn’t end when the game does. In the past, officials could shrug off unsportsmanlike behavior once the game ended and they were on the way home. Now, however, disputed calls that inflame parents and other adult spectators now live forever in cyberspace. Type “controversial call” and “high school” into YouTube’s search engine, and it returns dozens of videos. The Internet has provided a new forum for abusive fans to continue their bad behavior long after the lights on the field or court have been turned off and the crowd has gone home.

Simply put, officials are asking in increasing numbers why they should put in the necessary work to become proficient, accept the relatively low pay, and take the time away from their careers and families, when the reward seems to be a lack of appreciation at best, and outright vilification on far too many occasions.



Photos provided by Ed Wolff, Seven Hills, Ohio.

With the connection between the growing scarcity of officials and poor fan behavior firmly established, the inquiry must now turn to possible solutions. What can administrators do to help stem the flood tide of officials leaving their chosen avocation due to stress-inducing fan behavior? Here’s a five-point plan for dealing with the issues:

1. Control what you can control.

It is very difficult for administrators to influence fan behavior proactively, as opposed to simply reacting to incidents. But administrators can control the behavior of coaches and players, and it is clear that the fans often take their cues from what they see on the sideline. If your coach is out at the numbers on the football field screaming at the officials, or throwing his clipboard on the floor when he disagrees with what’s being called on the court, the fans pick up on that. That is their clue to join in the unsportsmanlike

behavior. As an administrator, you have it in your power to make it clear that such behavior reflects poorly on the institution and will not be tolerated. Use that power!

2. Set the tone at the event.

Some schools have begun displaying banners promoting good sportsmanship at their athletic venues. Many are now making public-address announcements prior the start of a contest at which the expectations of good sportsmanship are stated clearly and forcefully. Express support for the officials and pay homage to the ideal of good sportsmanship. If you make good sportsmanship the norm, it becomes much easier to deal with aberrant behavior.

3. Get to the kids.

Today’s players and students are tomorrow’s fans. Instilling the values of good sportsmanship and fair play at a young age will pay great dividends in the future. Make good sportsmanship a point of pride in your school or league. Emphasize the role of the officials in athletic contests and make sure they are included in all discussions of sportsmanship.

4. Have a plan to deal with unsportsmanlike behavior.

Make sure there is a security presence at all contests, whether it be police at a Friday night football game or an assistant principal at a Monday afternoon freshman contest. Empower those people to deal swiftly and decisively with instances of unsportsmanlike behavior. Have a policy that addresses incidents of such behavior, and enforce it. Where necessary, expel troublemakers from the facility and develop a procedure for monitoring, or even precluding, their attendance at future events.

5. Make your officials feel that they are valued.

Give them a secure dressing facility that is adequate in size and simple amenities – like a clean towel, something to drink, and hot water for a shower. Assign a representative to be a liaison with the officials – someone who can get them to and from their secure dressing facility quickly and who can “run interference” to prevent unruly fans from making them feel threatened.

Adopting these five suggestions will go a long way toward making your facility more hospitable towards officials and, in turn, take a step in reversing the trend that has made it increasingly difficult to recruit new officials and retain veterans. ☉

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