



The NFHS Voice



## **Pandemic Intensifies Need to Retain, Recruit Officials for High School Sports**

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In addition to the many new challenges for high school sports leaders this year, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified concerns regarding a longstanding issue – the shortage of high school sports officials.

At this time last year, we suggested that numerous veteran officials were retiring early, in large part, because of unruly behavior by parents. In some cases, officials were quitting before they even reached two years on the job – unwilling to take abuse from parents and other adult fans.

The [2017 survey](#) of 17,000-plus officials by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) supported our views about the effects of parents' behavior. While 42 percent of respondents said they started officiating for the

love of the game, only nine percent responded that way when asked why they continue to officiate.

Although our messages were beginning to be heard across the country, we believe the pandemic will be an additional wake-up call for parents and other fans. Surely, after the events of the past seven months, these individuals will be grateful for any opportunity to attend contests this year and positively support student participants.

While the NASO survey indicated that the level of poor sportsmanship was worse in competitive youth sports (36%) and adult recreational sports (21%) than high school sports (14%), now – more than ever before – we urge parents to let players play and officials officiate.

On the flip side, however, while the pandemic may help with gaining stronger support for officials from parents and other fans, it has created other challenges – from the uncertain status of high school sports in some states to individuals opting not to return to officiating because of health concerns.

With the average age of officials nationally at about 53 years and many officials in their 60s, some individuals have not returned this fall due to COVID-19 concerns. In South Carolina, for instance, [more than 80 football officials opted out this year](#), causing some games to be moved to Thursday nights.

Although registration of officials is down in many other states, the numbers are expected to rise some when all sports are reinstated. State associations have encouraged numerous safety measures to protect officials, such as wearing of face masks and gloves, social distancing, suspension of handshakes and attending online preseason meetings.

In addition to retaining these incredible men and women currently serving as high school contest officials, recruiting new individuals to serve in this capacity is more urgent than ever.

Since 2017, the NFHS has been involved in a national campaign – [#BecomeAnOfficial](#) – to recruit and retain officials, and the program has achieved remarkable success. Now in its fourth year, more than 44,000 individuals have expressed interest in becoming an official and have contacted their state association to start the process.

In another silver lining to COVID-19, the interest in officiating is skyrocketing this year. In the first six weeks of the 2020-21 school year, almost 6,000 people have expressed interest in officiating high school sports and have signed up through the [#BecomeAnOfficial](#) website at [highschoolofficials.com](https://highschoolofficials.com). At this rate, almost 30,000 potential new officials would be identified by the end of the year – almost double the number from two years ago.

In the past, we have targeted specific groups of individuals that might be interested in officiating, such as college intramural sports directors, police, firefighters, EMTs, high school teachers and currently high school coaches.

Another possibility for the future comes from Tennessee – call it “All in the Family.” After Teresa Edmondson’s two sons finished their high school football careers at Mt. Juliet High School in 2017, she decided to keep high school sports alive in the family in a surprising way – she became a high school football official. Two years later, her son, Noah, joined her as a Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association referee. They have worked a couple of games together and are the only mother-and-son duo in the state.

Along with the incredible education-based teacher-coaches in our nation's schools who have connected virtually and in-person with students during the pandemic, [the Edmondsons](#) are among the hundreds of thousands of men and women who sacrifice evenings throughout the year to serve as contest officials. They are the unsung heroes of high school sports.

Next week provides a great opportunity to recognize the individuals who serve in these roles as **National High School Activities Month** continues. Join the NFHS October 18-24 in celebrating **National Coaches, Advisors, Officials and Sponsors Week**.

More information on **National High School Activities Month** is available on the NFHS website at [NFHS.org/hsactivitiesmonth](https://NFHS.org/hsactivitiesmonth).

*Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is starting her third year as executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS, which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> year of service during the 2018-19 school year. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.*