



The NFHS Voice



Let's Listen to Student-Athletes and Respect High School Contest Officials

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Chief Executive Officer

 @KarissaNFHS

With the 2022-23 high school basketball season in full swing, we have, unfortunately, continued to see reports of unacceptable behavior similar to events this fall – individuals yelling insults and obscenities at officials, and fans tracking down officials after games. A new year, but the same ongoing problems with fan behavior in high school sports.

As soon as one of our state associations signs up another person to officiate, obnoxious behavior by fans drives two or three others away. In fact, the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) reports that 7 of every 10 first-year officials quit by the end of three years.

Yesterday, the NFHS hosted a [national media session](#) in another effort to bring attention to this critical matter. In addition to Dana Pappas, NFHS director

of officiating services, I was joined by Barry Mano, NASO president who founded *Referee Magazine* nearly 50 years ago, and Erin Trujillo, an active basketball and volleyball official from New Mexico.

It is one thing to read about accounts of unacceptable behavior by fans at high school sporting events; it is another to listen to an official like Trujillo who has experienced mistreatment first-hand.

“People feel like their \$5 entry fee allows them to come in and behave however they would like – that’s cussing, leaning over pointing fingers in the face of officials,” Trujillo said. “People (fans) will say everything from talking about your mother, to your heritage, to your skin color. Whereas, in our perspective, we are trying to call the game equally on both sides the best we can do. We’ve been grilled to leave out everything else. So, that continues to develop into fear of being harmed physically, whether that be during the game or after the game, from coaches, fans and even kids themselves.”

In the webinar yesterday, we noted that we must continue to help everyone – parents, fans, media and others – understand that the institution of sport at the high school level is formative – not performative. Sports are still formative at our level, and if we can bring that focus back, especially for youth sports and scholastic sports, that it is about youth development and not performance development, perhaps that would help with perspective.

Barry Mano has seen about everything in his almost 50-year association with officiating; however, attacks on officials was not a common occurrence when he started in the 1970s.

“Today, we are getting reports in our office every single week of physical assaults against sports officials,” Mano said. “I believe it is important that administrators come to the realization that they are going to have to put some

lines in the sand, saying that certain types of behavior are not going to be tolerated.

“And that’s going to have a bad effect not only on those parents, but in some cases, when it gets egregious, it’s going to have an effect on the child that’s playing. You hate to make that link, but the things that have been tried don’t seem to be working. (Those) parents need to get a life.”

The NFHS, state associations, administrators, athletic directors and other leaders have been calling for a change in behavior by parents and other fans for a long time – admittedly with limited success. Maybe if more high school student-athletes like Noah Bjerke-Weiser would speak up, people would listen, and the sounds from the stands would turn from jeers to cheers more consistently.

As reported by John Millea of the Minnesota State High School League, Bjerke-Weiser, captain of the La Crescent-Hokah High School boys basketball team in Minnesota, had seen enough. He was tired of the mistreatment of officials and decided to do something about it. After a recent game, the senior posted the following message on his Facebook page:

“Hello Lancer community, I am Noah Bjerke-Wieser and I would like to talk about our team’s basketball game tonight. We all know that there were some controversial calls, but nothing is going to be perfect. As a captain of the varsity team I would like to come out and say we need to stop yelling at the refs, us as players, and as spectators in the stands. Nobody will ever call a perfect game, and everybody makes mistakes. We all get it is frustrating watching and playing in a game where the officiating is not great. But we need to stop. It is hard enough to get officials to ref a varsity game anyway; it doesn’t help when they specifically don’t want to ref for a La Crescent game because they know they will be getting yelled at.”

“I personally would appreciate it if we could change the ‘La Crescent way’ and when refs see La Crescent on the schedule, they WANT to ref for us because of how great our team and fan base are. As players and spectators, we need to let the players play, the officials officiate, and the fans cheer. I know I am not perfect in this too, but we need to change. I hope we can all come together as a community and change for the better. Thank you for coming and supporting us but let’s support our team in a positive way.”

Kudos to Noah – that’s really what it is all about. We simply need to respect others. If we keep encouraging others to join the officiating ranks, and if we begin to change the culture in high schools nationwide and respect each and every person, the high school sports experience would be better for everyone.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fifth year as chief executive officer 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. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.