



The NFHS Voice



More Officials, Better Fan Behavior Needed in High School Sports

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After months of working with state government, education and health leaders, schools in all 50 states have been given the go-ahead to resume high school sports at some level of competition. Schools in the District of Columbia were the last to receive the green light on April 1. This is great news and signals that a return to normalcy may be on the horizon by the time schools begin sports and activities this fall.

Unfortunately, there is an ever-increasing issue that could put a kink in the return-to-play plans across the country – a shortage of officials, as in referees and umpires, that borders on catastrophic in some sports and in some parts of the nation.

The shortage of officials in high school – and middle school – sports has been a growing concern for several years; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has moved the issue to heightened levels.

In some cases, schools that have waited months and months to “play ball” have had to cancel games or reschedule games. There are so many contests occurring, with some states currently playing football and other sports they were unable to offer last fall, coupled with regular spring sports now underway, there simply are not enough people to officiate all scheduled games.

According to the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), registration of officials across the country is down about 30 percent this year. In Oregon, the number of football referees has dropped 34 percent compared to last year, and volleyball is down 45 percent. In a football officials association in California, nearly two-thirds of its members opted out of officiating this year.

Tennessee and Georgia have reported declines in baseball umpires. In one county in Georgia, one middle school had to cancel its baseball season due to a lack of umpires.

In some cases, the number of available officials has declined due to health-related reasons – people opting out this year because of the pandemic. As vaccinations increase and the optics improve, many of these individuals hopefully will return.

For other officials, however, the pandemic was a secondary concern compared to the verbal abuse they receive from fans – mostly parents. It is particularly hard for rookie officials to overcome the verbal shots they hear from parents. In an article in the Salt Lake City *Deseret News*, Jeff Cluff, assistant

director in charge of officials for the UHSAA, had the following to say about unruly fans in his state:

“Parents are out of control . . . Because of the club and super-league culture, they think these games mean everything; we don’t look at it that way in high school. Kids are learning, the officials are learning, the coaches are learning. We have lots of people who are interested in officiating. If we could keep these officials, we’d be fine.”

Schools across the country need two things: 1) more individuals to consider officiating high school sports and 2) an improvement in fan behavior so that officials don’t have to deal with verbal abuse and can feel good about continuing to officiate. Despite the fun and rewards that come with officiating high school sports, no one wants to continue if they are continually berated by fans.

The NFHS has been actively recruiting officials for four years through its *#BecomeAnOfficial* campaign. More than 50,000 individuals have expressed interest in officiating during this time. However, more individuals are desperately needed to keep the games going for the millions of students in middle school and high school sports. Anyone can sign up today at www.highschoolofficials.com.

Equally important, let’s do all we can to keep the men and women who are currently giving of their time to officiate middle school and high school sports. The next time you think about yelling at the referee during a high school contest, DON’T!

There is hope on the horizon that the pandemic will not keep kids off the playing fields and courts much longer. Let’s make sure boorish behavior doesn’t keep officials off the same fields and courts.

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