




The NFHS Voice



Poor Sportsmanship, Pandemic Contributing to Shortage of Officials

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Executive Director

 @KarissaNFHS

As high schools begin a third school year of sports and other activities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, a familiar issue continues to challenge administrators nationwide: finding enough individuals to officiate all scheduled contests.

In some states, Friday Night Lights have become Thursday or Saturday Night Lights as teams consider playing on alternate dates to accommodate the lack of individuals to officiate games.

The shortage of officials in high school – and middle school – sports has been a growing concern for several years – in large part due to unsportsmanlike behavior by parents and other adult fans. Now, additional sports officials are

electing to stay on the sidelines because of health concerns related to COVID-19, or they are uncomfortable wearing a mask during games.

The challenge for schools and state associations remains two-fold: how to recruit more individuals to become officials and how to retain those people currently serving as officials. Short of unexpected events like the coronavirus, if a new official remains active after the first three to five years, the outlook for a long-term career is pretty good.

Hoping to make an impact nationally on the officiating shortage and the sportsmanship issues at hand is Dana Pappas, who joined the NFHS staff last month as the new Director of Officiating Services. Pappas joins the NFHS staff after 24 years with the New Mexico Activities Association, including the past 17 years as commissioner of officials.

Although there was a hope that the post-pandemic behavior of parents and other fans would be improved, Pappas said the jury is definitely still out as sportsmanship issues have continued to exist.

“From some of the early reports, there are still acts of bad sportsmanship occurring,” Pappas said. “There are still people who are going after sports officials after games, during games, and it continues to be an adult problem. I don’t think too many of the issues we see are really the kids. It’s generally the spectators, although it can be coaches at times when their behavior incites the crowd.

“I think the sportsmanship issue is something that continues to keep individuals from officiating, or we lose them because of poor sportsmanship.”

Pappas noted that in addition to losing officials due to the COVID-19 concerns and poor sportsmanship, others may have changed jobs during the

pandemic, and with some games being moved earlier in the day, they are unable to get free from their jobs to handle officiating assignments.

While the loss of officials because of the pandemic is understandable and uncontrollable, losing individuals from the officiating ranks due to the boorish behavior of parents and other adults is unacceptable.

The Kansas State High School Activities Association has implemented a new ejection policy. Any participant (player, coach, spectator) who is ejected for making contact with an official or who is ejected for unsporting behavior directed toward an official shall be subject to a non-appealable suspension from the next contest at that level and for all contests at any level until the suspension has been served.

Pappas said there are states, like Kansas, that have made this statement: “If you act in an inappropriate manner, you will have to pay.” While these programs are necessary, she also believes proactive plans should be in place as well.

“Doing preseason meetings with coaches and parents is important, but I think having officials go and address parents and talk to them about rules changes is important. It would be great for officials to go and talk to parents and kids so that they understand that they are not just the bad guys in the striped shirts, that they are someone who wants to be a part of the educational process, who’s giving back and there really to help and educate.

“There needs to be shift in those expectations and remind parents of what it was like when their kids didn’t have an opportunity to play. Everyone agrees that was not good for anyone last year. And if you continue to abuse officials, we are going to be exactly where we were because there won’t be any way to adjudicate these games.”

The NFHS has been actively recruiting officials for four years through its #BecomeAnOfficial campaign. More than 50,000 individuals have expressed an interest in officiating through this national effort at www.highschoolofficials.com.

Most recently, the NFHS has been targeting high school coaches to consider officiating another sport in their off-season after previous campaigns directed to other groups. Assisting state associations and schools in recruiting more officials is also on Pappas' To-Do list.

“Kids coming out of high school think they have two options – to play sports or to coach sports. They forget about the people who are officiating their games! So, how do we make officiating something that is at the forefront of their minds? When they are leaving high school or leaving college, they need to understand that there is an entire career path they could follow in the world of high school officiating.”

As fall high school sports swing into full action this month, let's respect the men and women who are giving of their free time so that once-in-a-lifetime opportunities of high school activities can continue for our nation's youth.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is beginning her fourth 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.