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Addressing the Shortage of Sports Officials

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“Come on ref, you are a terrible official!
You need glasses!”

How many times have you been at a sports venue and witnessed similar verbal abuse directed at a sports official? The reality is that officials are often targeted with negative publicity. Coaches, players, and fans generally have a negative attitude toward sports officiating. In recent years, officiating sports has even become dangerous with the rise of physical attacks on officials. Regardless of these challenges, can games and sports as we know them be played without (our dearly beloved) officials? This article is about the nationwide shortage of sports officials and how SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators can help address the shortage and educate our youths on the value of sportsmanship.

Background

I began officiating at the age of 14 at a youth baseball game when no baseball umpires showed up. I did not want the game to be canceled, so I umpired the game. Fifty years later, I am still officiating two high school sports. My participation in officiating as a hobby has paid dividends. Without a doubt, officiating made me a better, more understanding elementary physical education teacher. Officiating also helped me to become a successful health and physical education coordinator. As an unintended consequence, my sports official career led directly to my induction into the Rio Grande Valley Sports Hall of Fame.

The shortage of sports officials in the United States is well documented. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS, n.d.) is the national leader and advocate for high school athletics. It is the national authority promoting and protecting the defining values of education-based high school athletics and activities in collaboration with its member state associations. Table 1 shows data on the shortage of sports officiating provided by Dana Marie Pappas, director of officiating services for the NFHS.

Reasons for the Shortage

According to Pappas, “[T]he reasons for the shortage are varied, but poor sportsmanship is the #1 reason stated by officials as to why they quit officiating, and this truly is more about the behavior of spectators and less about the behavior of players.”

The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO)’s mission is to serve as the leading source of sports officiating information, programs, and services. As per the NASO National Officiating Survey (2023), “51% of officials that left officiating indicated fear for their safety due to the behavior of

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an administrator, coach, player or spectators.” Additional concerning data from the survey include:

- the average age of sports officials is increasing,
- sportsmanship has gotten worse,
- recruitment and retention have become more challenging,
- more than 50% of all respondents have feared for their safety,
- sports officials believe they are underpaid for the services they provide, and
- 59% of survey respondents indicated they believe the officiating adage, “Most new officials quit within the first 1–3 years.”

Data from both the 2023 and 2017 National Officiating Surveys are available free of charge at www.naso.org/survey.

Solutions and Best Practices

As the awareness of the shortage of officials continues to rise, varied solutions are beginning to evolve. For example, there are many best practices for improving the negative stigma toward officials. Because I have only officiated in one state, here are some impressive best practices I have observed in Texas.

The University Interscholastic League

In Texas, the mission of the University Interscholastic League (UIL) is to organize and properly supervise contests (extracurricular and academic competition in grades 7 to 12) that assist in preparing students for citizenship. The UIL provides organized, healthy, character-building educational activities promoting and ensuring fair play for all participants. Dr. Charles Breithaupt, UIL

Table 1. Key Sports Officiating Statistics

Difference between 2018–19 and 2020–21: Known loss of 31,532 officials nationwide
Difference between 2018–19 and 2021–22: Loss of 19,499 officials nationwide
Difference between 2018–19 and 2022–23: Loss of 8,013 officials nationwide
<i>Source:</i> D.M. Pappas, director of officiating services for the NFHS, personal communication.

executive director, stated, “At the UIL, we value sports officials and understand we cannot play games without officials. Our expectations from our schools are very high in respecting officials and avoiding conflict” (C. Breithaupt, personal communication, December 11, 2023).

As an official at a UIL game, I feel highly supported when a proactive announcement on sportsmanship is delivered prior to my game. Here is a sample announcement:

This game is being conducted according to the rules and regulations of the University Interscholastic League. The UIL rules of sportsmanship require all fans to refrain from shouting negative comments at the referees, coaches and players. Only positive comments should be directed toward all participants. Fans who choose not to follow these guidelines will be asked to leave the facility. Thank you for your understanding of these guidelines and enjoy the game.

Legislative support

With the rise of fan attacks on officials nationwide, more states must enact legislation supportive of sports officials. In Texas, House Bill 2484 (Capitol.Texas.gov, 2023) is now in effect. Unruly fans at games will be held accountable for their outlandish attacks. The new rule bans anyone who causes bodily harm to an official from ever attending a future UIL-sanctioned game. In addition, school districts are required to provide a peace officer security force and a school game administrator at all UIL contests to ensure the safety of the official(s).

Appreciation of officials

This past year, prior to officiating a high school volleyball game, the public address announcer called the officials to midcourt, where coaches and players from both teams gathered. I was thinking, “Am I going to get attacked?” No, the teams were celebrating Texas Officials Appreciation Week, an initiative on behalf of the Texas High School Coaches Association (www.thsca.com). Each official was given a gift goody bag while the announcer made very supportive, appreciative, pro-officiating remarks. We then took group pictures. The game began and the love quickly dissolved after I made my first call. Nevertheless, the gesture for improving relationships with officials was greatly appreciated.

Supportive entities

Each state has many entities that provide support for officials. The Texas Association of Sports Officials (TASO; see <https://taso>).

org/) is an organization providing support, resources, and training for Texas high school sports officials. Playing a vital role in combating the shortage of officials is the special emphasis placed on education and training (communication with coaches and players), on recruiting new officials, and on the retention of experienced officials. TASO also has the START Program, targeting the recruitment of high school and college students as sports officials.

Officials, and especially coaches, have a tremendous influence on players. Understanding that there is a shortage of officials, youth leagues such as the McAllen (TX) Boys and Girls Club are now initiating stricter hiring processes. For example, umpires/referees must complete and pass a criminal background screening. To ensure a positive experience for all participants, coaches and officials are expected to promote a fun, team-focused environment in which players are encouraged and supported. They also prioritize sportsmanship and character development over winning.

State standards

Educating students in schools on sportsmanship at an early age can pay dividends later when students participate in sports. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are the state standards for what students should know and be able to do. Physical Education TEKS places an emphasis on sportsmanship at all grade levels daily. I am confident that standards on sportsmanship can be found in physical education standards throughout the country. Here are two physical education TEKS examples:

- 4th Grade Standard: (13) Social and emotional health—resolving conflict and social interaction. The physically literate student demonstrates competency in resolving conflict and social interaction. The student is expected to: (A) discuss ways to resolve conflict in socially acceptable ways and respond to winning and losing with dignity and understanding; (B) identify effective communication to enhance healthy interactions while settling disagreements; and (C) demonstrate respect for the feelings of others. (Texas Administrative Code, n.d., Physical Education, Grade 4)
- 8th Grade Standard: (13) Social and emotional health—resolving conflict and social interaction. The physically literate student demonstrates competency in resolving conflict and social interaction. The student is expected to: (A) discuss the importance of and resolve conflict, without cue, in socially acceptable ways, and respond to winning and losing with dignity and understanding; (B) communicate effectively to enhance healthy interactions while settling disagreements; and (C) demonstrate empathy and mutual respect for the feelings of others. (Texas Administrative Code, n.d., Physical Education, Grade 8)

Early officiating opportunities

To help with the shortage of officials, high schools are now offering sports officiating classes for credit. At the higher



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education level, sports officiating classes for credit are also being offered and students can get experience in sports officiating by officiating intramurals.

Solutions: How SHAPE America Can Help

The SHAPE America membership is in a perfect position to recruit and/or prepare more sports officials to assist with the shortage. A high percentage of SHAPE America members were former athletes themselves and still enjoy sports. Our members, especially physical education teachers, can also instill good sportsmanship and positive behaviors in their students at an early age. In addition, SHAPE America members have unique resources at their disposal to help address the problem. The SHAPE America National Standards for Sports Coaches



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(SHAPE America, n.d.) is a great resource that sports coaches at all levels can utilize to instill sportsmanship in athletes, spectators, and parents. For the most part, the trend is to educate only the athletes, and golden opportunities are missed in educating spectators and parents about sportsmanship expectations. Another way in which physical education teachers can teach youths about sportsmanship is with daily implementation of the National Physical Education Standards. Related to sportsmanship, Standard 4 states, “The physically literate individual exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others” (SHAPE America, 2014).

Conclusion

As previously stated, my sports officiating experiences accelerated my growth as a health and physical education teacher and later as an administrator. I learned how to become a stronger leader and how to resolve conflict better on the job and in life in general. I can support the “12 great reasons to start officiating” listed on the SayYes to Officiating (n.d.) web site (Figure 1). The SayYes program is sponsored by NASO and provides information on how to become a sports official. So, if you are currently a sports official, keep up the good work! If you are not an official, give it a try! Aspiring to become a sports official? The first steps are easy. In addition to the information you can find on the SayYes website, please visit the NFHS (n.d.) web page for officials.

Rest assured, the benefits will help you to overcome the negativity that is part and parcel of officiating.

Calling New Officials!

In addition to encouraging SHAPE America members to get more involved, I would like to articulate a greater goal: to bring the SHAPE America sports advocates together through the creation of a SHAPE America Sports Officiating Community. I have met members who are current or former officials and are willing to support my goal. We will help to recruit and retain officials, provide mentorship to new members, and promote the very best practices in sports officiating. If you are interested in joining our community as a new sports official or to share your knowledge on sports officiating, please complete

LOVE OF SPORTS	STAY ACTIVE	GET IN THE GAME	GIVE BACK
EXTRA MONEY	CHALLENGE	ESCAPE	CAMARADERIE & COMMUNITY
LIFE SKILLS	FORTITUDE	OPPORTUNITY	EXCITEMENT

Figure 1. Twelve reasons to start officiating.
Source: SayYes to Officiating (n.d.).



Figure 2. SHAPE America sports officials' community form.

URL: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdQNb3EQXBv4AZdvAsNl4sqbIxQgOcEsx_yoygA5ad8cZWlQ/viewform

the SHAPE America Sports Officials Community form (see Figure 2 for a quick response code).

Disclosure Statement

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