

An Open Letter to Coaches

By *John Milstead*

(Editor's Note: This open letter to coaches was printed in the October issue of "The Leaguer," the official publication of the Texas University Interscholastic League. I had been discussing the need for such an article with Dr. Charles Breithaupt, the UIL's Athletic Director for several months in the hope that someone would write it from a coach's perspective. Dr. Breithaupt asked me to write it, and I did in the hope that coaches and administrators would come to realize their obligations in helping fill our membership rosters. In every state, we have a critical shortage of officials in almost every chapter and sport.)

MY FRIENDS, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Since 1964, I've been chasing your kids up and down football fields and basketball courts. I was fortunate to start officiating as a freshman in college, and have enjoyed almost every minute. If the World War II generation was the greatest generation of Americans, the Baby Boomers have been the most fortunate generation insofar as the proliferation of sports is concerned. I've been lucky to have had "the best seat in the house" for over 3,000 basketball games and over 1,400 football games. And I'm grateful.

In your coaching careers, you've enjoyed that same opportunity to see athletics develop to the point where high school kids now routinely do things that even professionals couldn't do in the mid-60's. You've developed your skills, your programs and your kids to accomplish amazing things. Many of you are coaching sons or daughters of your former players. I hope you've enjoyed it, because unless you take immediate and aggressive action, it's going to start falling down around your ears - and it's your fault.

Over the past few years, the on-field and on-court relationship between coaches and officials has become increasingly adversarial. As the pressure on you to win has become a higher reality, it has replaced or at least reduced the pressure to demonstrate the higher ideals of sportsmanship and fair play. Sportsmanship has been nudged to the side in favor of gamesmanship.

In this environment your tolerance levels have been reduced to near zero for any perceived error on our part in your games. In the 38 years I've been officiating, the level of conflict between officials and coaches during games has accelerated at an alarming rate. Many of you think that part of the game is to try to intimidate officials, and some make it an art form.

On the other hand, you work long hours to get those kids ready to play well and hard, and you may work for several series to set up one play only to have it ruined by a penalty or a violation. And admittedly, sometimes some of us really

are bad. It must be overwhelming to have to handle your administration, your kids, their parents, your booster clubs, and your state association, and get it all about where you think it ought to be; and then have five insurance salesmen drive up in a brand new Suburban and screw it all up for you. You should be able to vent your frustration, shouldn't you?

From our perspective, and within the rules, we certainly have it in our power to penalize any unacceptable behavior on your part. Occasionally, and inconsistently, we do. When I first started officiating, a coach who made any derogatory remark was penalized immediately - no questions asked. State high school organizations encourage and support us to be intolerant of anything that "isn't education." Every rulebook has sportsmanship and ethics as points of emphasis. Codes of ethics for both officials and coaches stress the critical importance of sportsmanlike behavior.

However, over time what we actually enforce and require of you has changed. Now we are encouraged by our chapters to be more tolerant. We are taught at camps and clinics that you are under great pressure, and we should try our best not to affect the game or hurt the kids by penalizing your bad behavior.

We learn that if we penalize you, we are disciplining a teacher in front of his or her students. And, the point that should influence us the least: we know that if we penalize you, we may very well not work at your school again, regardless of our skill level, because you're generally an unforgiving bunch.

It would be bad enough if this situation only involved coaches and officials, but the real problem is that it most impacts your kids. You demonstrate to them that strong adults don't hesitate to abuse and insult other adults - and those in authority at that. You're their heroes, and if you do it, it must be right. This is a lesson they learn well from you.

And we're enablers. The kids see us tolerate that behavior. If we accept or don't respond to constant questioning of our calls, our ability and our integrity, that must mean Coach is right, right? It doesn't matter that they don't realize that if we were ever to treat you the way you treat us, our officiating career would be over that night.

This leads me to my real point. Our numbers are diminishing as yours are growing. The people we need so that our numbers will grow are in your programs. After being coached to play the game, they can be more easily taught to officiate it. The problem is that after your kids spend their time in your programs watching how you, their heroes, treat officials, they don't want to have anything to do with officiating.

Currently, there are too many games and not enough qualified officials. At the sub-varsity level, we have numerous games covered by half a crew, or officiated

by coaches. We try to recruit through the various means available to us, however we're fighting a difficult battle, primarily because you don't help.

You want numbers? Last year we recruited 215 new basketball officials for the Houston Chapter. I'm not aware of a single one who was referred to us by a former coach. We put them through as complete a training program as there is in the country. We tried (and for the most part, succeeded) to assign our new officials with experienced officials at every game. We had special in-season training meetings for first- and second-year officials, in addition to our regular chapter training meetings. At the end of the season, 23 re-joined the chapter. Most of the ones who opted not to come back cited the abuse from coaches as their primary reason for quitting. Before we can get them trained to move up, you've run them off. And every time you throw out an insult at an official on the floor or field, your kids become that much more convinced they will not become officials.

A recent article published by the National Federation contained research about why officials quit. The largest group, 43 percent, cited poor sportsmanship on the part of players, coaches and fans, with 36 percent citing job/career demands. Most of these are in their first few years of officiating.

At that stage, we have coaches learning to coach, players learning to play and referees learning to referee - the worst possible combination. We also have parents just getting started on unreasonable expectations for their children's athletic careers.

Those new coaches invariably gain experience and grow into their jobs. The parents generally continue to have unreasonable expectations. However many of the officials decide that it's just not worth leaving work early to get to a 4:30 game to have people abuse and insult them for two hours.

Before we can teach them how to avoid, or at least mitigate the unpleasanties and actually have fun, we've lost them. Our chapters get blamed for sending you unqualified officials, when in truth, it's just not possible for us to send you new people who will start out perfect and then gradually improve.

Why should you care? This is our problem, right? Well, the truth is that this will eventually result in occupational suicide on your part. Right now, we have real problems covering your sub-varsity games. In another 15 years, we'll be having the same problems covering your varsity games. You'll be upset with our chapters for failing to grow and train.

The truth is that training for officials has never been better. In every sport we're doing more and doing better to teach all our members rules, mechanics, philosophy and common sense officiating. The growing part is where we need your help.

The solution to our numbers problem is in your hands. If you don't make two changes immediately, you are headed for a crisis-situation caused by a severe shortage of qualified officials. Those changes are:

1. Start sending us your ex-players to become new officials.

If you want a really lasting influence and legacy, help us keep your kids in the game throughout their adult lives. We'll provide them an opportunity to stay in the game they love and to earn some pocket change while they're doing it.

We need about two ex-players annually from every football, basketball, volleyball, soccer, swimming, softball and baseball team in the state. If we get those numbers from you (we certainly have room for more), we could staff your games at every level, and keep the pipeline full of well-trained, qualified officials for your varsity games.

If you want to help us, don't make some half-hearted announcement about "anyone interested in officiating should call..." Respect your ex-players enough to encourage them individually and tell them how important it is to your sport that people like them become interested and involved in officiating.

Follow up with both your local officiating chapter and your ex-players to check their commitment and progress. You have to be an aggressive part of this solution or you will remain a major part of the problem.

Invite us to speak to your kids and your booster clubs about what we do. Many of our members have advanced presentation skills, and we'd welcome the opportunity to do some PR work. There are several schools at which I do annual rules and rules change presentations to the players, coaches and booster clubs. Each year we get ex-players from those schools who become officials. Having us in front of your players and parents clearly demonstrates to them that you and we are on the same team and working toward the same goals of developing competitive athletes into productive adults.

2. Reduce the level of conflict you create with officials.

The contentiousness, animosity, sarcasm, insults, intimidation and abusive language has to stop. It dishonors sport and teaches the wrong lessons. It also costs us our newest members and our best source of new officials - your former players.

The result in many chapters is that we have a significant number of very senior and very new officials. The mid-range is empty. While officiating is tremendously enjoyable, many of our members decide every year there is not enough enjoyment to offset the conflict - it takes the joy right out of the activity.

If you have a complaint, certainly you should address it, but we'll hear you whether you're polite or abusive. However, there's a big difference in our acceptance of your comments. An abusive coach loses his credibility with the officiating crew almost immediately. They hear only the abuse, not the content. If you'll work with us, we'll work with you. If you voice your complaints constructively, we'll listen and respond.

I hope you will receive this message in the spirit it is intended. I've been watching you for a long time. I understand the frustration of you and your staff working hard to prepare your players to play a game, only to have to turn a good portion of it over to the officiating crew. The message we need you to receive is that we're working hard to train officials in every sport. Are we going to be perfect? Nope. Are we going to try to be? Absolutely. No one hates a bad call more than the official who makes it.

The quality of your games depends in large part on the quality of our officials, and we're absolutely getting better. However, ours is an impossible task without your aggressive and proactive support.

You've trusted us with your games, now trust us with your kids as they grow into mature men and women. This is a shared need to keep your profession and our avocation growing and viable. You send'em to us. We'll teach'em to officiate, and keep'em in the game. And we'll all win.

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