

Blurred Lines

By Tammie Newman

If you are a sports fan on any level, you are aware of the shortage of game officials across all sports, across the nation, and that includes South Carolina. Couple that with being a social media user and reading the public thrashing game officials take during and after sporting events. Monday mornings are always a treat to open work accounts and see “unofficial” officials name calling, skill critiquing and outright bashing the individuals who worked the games they watched from the bleachers. I appreciate the private emails and messages sent to the league office regarding officials, specific games, or calls. I’d rather personally sift through the *ashes of scorched earth* than have the dedicated men and women who worked the games read it. Criticism is to be expected in any competition, yet it is up to the critic how they wish to relay and what result they hope to gain.

Keyboard warriors are aplenty, unfortunately, while officials are a rare breed and dwindling in numbers. *Smack talking* those who give the extra effort and commitment during pandemic times no less, are a special type of critic. See, whipping out a cell phone and going ham on the keypad to followers while boldly tagging organizations such as SCHSL... well, that *skill* is free with no training or certification involved. Our officials dedicate an admirable chunk of their lives away from their family, friends, hobbies, and full-time careers to maintain the training and certification requirements every year to help school athletic programs operate. Learning entire rule books for each sport is no easy task, yet we have officials who work more than one sport. Sometimes the rules are different for male vs female competitions of the same sport. Officials take on the challenge and sign up, take the classes, take the tests, and show up when called upon. We still need more of these men and women.

Adding to the pool of officials will not only benefit the game, but it benefits the school and community as well. Involved adults who support children in all aspects of their academic career are to be applauded, not ridiculed. Support for our adult partners is just as motivating as support for our athletes. Expanding our official roster will improve everyone's performance from the officials' crew to student-athletes on to the coaching staff. Competition is an incentive to improve and succeed, thereby supplying more efficient calls and 'gate-keeping.' Supply and demand come into play when assigning officials across the state for multiple sports. Each team wants to win just as all officials want a safe, well-managed competition. Current officials are mentors to new officials and a major part of the learning process as with any other job. They are consistently training as well as recruiting for others to join the team. Notice I have not mentioned compensation. Although officials are compensated for their efforts, the vast majority officiate for the love of the sport and service to the community. An increased population of more informed officials mean a higher percentage of correct calls while on the job training helps the rookies as well as the veterans. Experience is key. The talent pool is decreasing for many reasons to include retiring individuals or those who no longer enjoy the activity due to bashing. This decline in certified officials means contorted scheduling with overexerted personnel.

Imagine going to school / job only to hear jeers/see negative posts every day. If your goal is to better their performance, ask yourself how are your uncensored social media comments helping. "*The refs working the Jane Doe High game were awful and handed the game to John Doe High...*" "*The refs are cheaters!*" "*Who paid off the crooked officials?*" Of course, this is TAME compared to what is really being screamed or floating around online. Posting negative comments about those who serve our athletic programs is easy. It's happening in person and online. Signing up to change the narrative takes work and commitment.

Sporting events are meant to be positive, family-friendly entertainment for student-athletes and their fans. Black and white stripes are not targets to launch a verbal barrage of hate. It's abuse. At no point in any workspace is abuse tolerated. I will refrain from discussing the actual physical abuse toward officials that has happened across the United States during the last several years. *Google it.*

My hope is those watching the raunchy behavior or reading it online understand it is a game at the high school (and/or below) level. We all have opinions and it's up to us to share them in a responsible manner. What you see as a problem call, others may see as a fair call. Officiating will never be perfect from all points of view. Again, you can be part of the solution by joining the team or by helping to share the need for officials. If you have no interest in officiating, maybe your friends or family members do. SCHSL will continue to recruit and train the adults who are doing whatever it takes to keep sanctioned athletics in our schools. Bullying of any kind is wrong. In person and/or cyber bullying- it's abuse. Adult bullies are the worst kind. I implore you to follow the advice we give to children- *take a stand against bullying.* Use your voice to state the obvious- berating officials at events or online is senseless, hurtful and accomplishes nothing productive. Use your energy to help grow the game's positive aspects such as our talent pool of officials. Thank your officiating crew after the next game, even if you lose. Thank them, encourage them. It's an important job and they improve every chance they get to work. They are the winning team no matter the score.

If you want to know more about becoming a high school official, please visit www.highschoolofficials.com or contact Charlie Wentzky at charlie@schsl.org. We, along with the rest of the nation, need men and women with a desire to work with student-athletes and coaches to ensure athletic operations remain organized and fair. *Imagine a game without an official?*