



Thursday, Aug. 23, 2007

Letting the Kids Play

Sports Officials Meet Challenges of High School Athletics

By Steven Sellers
Source Assistant Sports Editor

Hall of Fame umpire Bill Klem was a fixture behind major league home plates from 1905 to 1941. "The Old Arbitrator," as he was known, worked 18 World Series and is widely credited with bringing professionalism and dignity to sports officiating. Asked what made a good umpire, Klem replied, "The best umpired game is the game in which the fans cannot recall the umpires who worked it."

The notion that sports officials—umpires, referees, judges, and linesmen—should be at once invisible and omnipresent, emerging only at the right time and for the right reason, holds true today. And it is no less a challenge than it was in Klem's time.

The goal of "letting the kids play the game," as one area referee put it, is met by more than 3,500 officials in Connecticut high school sports. They oversee everything from baseball to wrestling and are bound by a common thread: a fair game is best assured by sharp eyes, a thorough knowledge of the game, and no interest in the outcome. That deceptively simple concept is unchanged, but the growth of scholastic sports has caused an evolution of nearly every other aspect of sports officiating.

The expectations placed on sports officials over the last 30 years have quietly grown as high school sports have grown. The popularity of new varsity sports—some of them unknown in most high schools a decade ago—has necessitated a steady supply of officials despite the fact that many officials have no experience playing the sport.

For example, the first CIAC state champion in lacrosse was crowned by just 12 years ago with a smattering of teams across the state. This year, including boys' and girls' teams, there are 145 varsity lacrosse teams. Then there is the huge growth of girls' high school sports since the passage of Title IX in 1972, requiring gender equity in publicly-funded educational institutions. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, almost three million girls participated in high school athletics in 2003-04. In the 1972, the number was barely more than more than 817,000.



High school officials must be at the right place at the right time.



The ripple effect in sports officiating in Connecticut is plain. According to the governing body for high school sports in the state—the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletics Conference (CIAC)—the 4,195 officiating spots in each year's athletic contests have outpaced the 3,500 officials available to fill them. That gap has been filled, in part, by officials who are certified in multiple sports. At last count, there were 440 of them. Some are certified in three and even four sports (see box, page 33).

At the same time, sports officials have worked to ensure that training, certification, and related issues have kept pace with high school athletics. Local, sport-specific associations have met officials' needs for decades, and still do, but in 2006 the CIAC suggested an umbrella organization—the CIAC Officials' Association—as a way to "serve the betterment of all member officials and their respective organizations, promote ethical standards, sportsmanship, professionalism, and high quality officiating."

"Prior to having a statewide offi-

task of recruiting new officials was the sole responsibility of the local boards." While that function is unchanged under the new plan, Tonelli said he sees the CIAC's strength in its ability to use its "statewide communication network and resources to help attract new members to the officiating ranks in all sports."

The idea gained momentum quickly and now it is catching up to the demand that created it. This "team effort" of officials, Tonelli said, started with old-fashioned word-of-mouth.

"The committee immediately did a few things to help spread the word," said Tonelli. "First, they requested that the [the association] develop a website to provide interested individuals with information and contact numbers. This was done immediately [www.ciacofficialsassociation.org]. Secondly, with the help of the CIAC, the committee developed a recruitment brochure entitled, 'Get in the Game!—Be a High School Sports

Official.' The brochure is a great resource, and is designed to encourage former athletes, coaches, and other interested individuals to consider becoming an official."

A draft of the brochure was circulated at last spring's state tournaments. A full-color version was released in early August and is now available online.

According to Tonelli, every officiating group can use more members, but the more critical needs are in field hockey, boys' and girls' lacrosse, and gymnastics.

"We definitely need more female officials across the board," said Tonelli. "Although the local boards will pursue anyone that shows some interest, we want to target high school and college students, siblings and relatives of current officials, and we also want to suggest that our current officials consider becoming an official in another sport. We believe that our current officials can be our best recruiters and we are asking them to play an important role in the recruiting efforts. We are taking the approach of 'each one, get one' as a goal to increase our numbers in all sports."

Ralph Zingarella has more than 30 years of experience as a high school and college official, working football,

basketball, boys' lacrosse, and softball. A teacher at Cheshire High School and a former coach, Zingarella has witnessed the evolution of Connecticut high school athletics—and the demands placed on officials—firsthand.

"We've become experts in our sports, to a degree, because we work very hard to continuously learn them," said Zingarella. "We have clinics for new and veteran officials, both preseason and in-season."

Zingarella acknowledges that it can be difficult to recruit new, younger officials, but he adds that in every sport, new officials are given a thorough, rigorous, and continuing education about the sports they referee, starting with classroom work, exhibition contests, and then freshman and JV games. He emphasized that new officials are always paired with a veteran official to guide them, even in freshman contests.

"I sometimes hear, 'I don't want to be yelled at,' but I tell them that doesn't occur the majority of the time," said Zingarella. "People have a right to cheer, or even boo, and officials learn not to react to it. Coaches are intense—they work very hard with their teams all season—but very, very few have been abusive. I'm more concerned about the fans. I think much of it is fed by pressure to go to college and its expense, so that high school sports sometimes become overblown as way to get a scholarship. That drives some people to go overboard."

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SPORTS PERSON OF THE WEEK



Gill McKay hopes to be playing D-I softball by this time next year32

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But the fact is there are thousands of games played every year and the number of problems really is few. It's just that when an incident does occur it gets immediate attention."

"Parents can be tough sometimes," agreed Dom D'Aurio, who schedules softball and soccer in southern Connecticut, trains soccer officials, and has 15 years of experience as a referee

for volleyball and girls' basketball. "I think, in some cases, kids are pushed in sports at a young age and sometimes they're pushed a little too hard."

Officials must, of course, be prepared for disagreement with their judgments, whether by coaches or fans, but there are limits on the level of discord, whether imposed by schools, the CIAC, or state law.

A recent survey by the National Sports Officials' Association revealed

16 states with laws protecting sports officials for harassment and assault, some by civil fines and others by criminal penalties. Connecticut has no law creating a specific crime or enhanced penalty for assaulting or threatening a sports official, although the state legislature has considered at least six bills on the subject since 1988. The most recent bill was considered by the General Assembly this year.

But any occasional unpleasant experiences that come with the job, said the officials, are more than outweighed by the rewards.

"Working with the kids is the best part," enthuses D'Aurio.

Zingarella concurred. "It is as rewarding a job as anyone can have because you're working with kids. I'm a teacher, and that's the best job in the world, but officiating is next."

Lev Torgerson, CIAC referee-in-chief and member of the Connecticut Chapter of the National Ice Hockey Officials Association, refers to the "psychological income" sports officials receive.

"If you have participated in sports and want to stay active, this is a great way to do it," said Torgerson. "Just like anything worth doing, it takes hard work and commitment to be successful. Remember, it's an avocation and we are compensated, but the real ben-

efits are the friendships and relationships developed over the years."

Bringing Bill Klem's philosophy into the present, Zingarella has his own way of meeting the challenge of sports officiating and he reminds himself of it game-in and game-out.

"I always start every game the same way," said Zingarella. "I tell the officiating crew this: 'No one has come here to watch us officiate. Let the kids play.'"

For more information about becoming a high school referee, visit www.ciacofficialsassociation.org or call the CIAC Officials' Association at 203-250-1111.

Let The Games Begin

The Connecticut Interscholastic Athletics Conference (CIAC), the governing body for the state's high school sports, relies on approximately 3,600 officials to fill 4,195 officiating spots throughout the year. Of that number, many officiate in multiple sports. Entering the 2007-08 season, about 440 referee two sports, 115 oversee three sports, and a dozen are assigned to four. *Information courtesy of the CIAC*

High School Officials by Sport

Baseball: 782	Boys' Ice Hockey: 107
Basketball: 1081	Soccer: 480
Boys' Lacrosse: 163	Softball: 400
Girls' Lacrosse: 111	Swimming: 116
Field Hockey: 96	Volleyball: 178
Football: 570	Wrestling: 86
Girls' Gymnastics: 25	

Youth Sports Seminar

Bob Bigelow will speak on the "Common Sense Approach to Youth Sports" on Monday, Sept. 10 from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at the North Branford Auditorium. The event is free, but donations are appreciated. Signed copies of his book, *Just Let the Kids Play*, will be available for \$15. For info, on Bob Bigelow, visit www.bobbigelow.com.

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