

DOWN

COVID-19 MADE AN EXISTING SHORTAGE OF OFFICIALS WORSE. STATES NOW MUST FIGURE OUT HOW TO GET THEM BACK.

By Steven L. Tietz

That we're facing a shortage of sports officials isn't a new situation.

We've been writing about it on the pages of *Referee* magazine for years, including an in-depth exploration as far back as the 10/01 issue, which featured "Not Enough Refs" splashed on the cover in towering letters.

But the pandemic made a bad situation worse.

Amid the usual annual attrition often attributed to poor sportsmanship, fan abuse and low pay, many officials opted out because of COVID-19. From coast to coast, state and local associations experienced massive declines in registered officials of 30 percent on average.

In some places, the exacerbated shortage pushed things over the edge. Prep

football needed to add "Thursday Night Lights" to the schedule to have enough officials to work games. But even flexibility in scheduling hasn't always been enough. Mount Clemens High School in suburban Detroit, for example, couldn't find referees for its early October homecoming game, even with a willingness to shift the Friday match-up to Thursday or Saturday.

With the shortage's impact on the sports world status quo growing, a 2021 NASO Sports Officiating Summit@Home session entitled, "Down 30 Percent! Now What?" explored how to reverse the trend, bring officials back and bolster the ranks with new recruits. State association leaders in North Dakota, Louisiana, Alabama, Kansas and Utah — each with their own recruitment and retention issues — shared their insights.

As noted by Louisiana

High School Officials Association President Paul LaRosa, who moderated the panel, it's not going to be an easy task.

"Especially at the high school level, the confluence of COVID, bad sportsmanship and poor pay has made luring (officials) back with the old hook that 'they enjoy it and love the game' that much harder to sell," LaRosa said.

Add to that continuing uncertainty about when the pandemic will end and it leads to a challenging dynamic for assigners, who find themselves with fewer active officials to work games. Summit panelists said the situation ranges from manageable to dire, and it also varies sport to sport.

Alabama is stable but not optimal, said Ken Washington, Alabama High School Athletic Association director of officials. Many top officials who were older opted out during the height of the first wave of COVID-19 during the summer of 2020, he said. It was thought they might return in 2021 now that vaccines are available, but that is not yet fully the case.

"We understood their

30%

position," Washington said. "We hope to get them back this year, but even with the vaccinations, I've read all individuals are still not safe. If you still have underlying health issues or you're up in age, you're still at risk (for a breakthrough case) even after getting a shot. So those officials are still faced with the same decisions they were last year."

But it hasn't been all bad news for Alabama's officiating numbers.

"We've been seeing (new) officials sign up," he said. "I don't have the exact number, but we have been seeing (more) officials starting for the first time. But as you all know, it's a difference between a first-year official rather than somebody who's been officiating for 15-20 years."

Meanwhile, Kansas State High School Activities Association Assistant Executive Director Fran Martin sees the reverse happening in the Sunflower State.

"We did see a reduction (in 2020-21)," Martin said, "(but) I think the biggest surprise last year was we thought that we'd be losing our veteran officials because of COVID. ... The average



DOWN 30% NOW WHAT?



age of our officials over the past 10 years has been about 45.

"Last year (though) the average age of our officials was 51. So, we actually had more veteran people stay, and it was younger people that stepped away. So we're interested to see what it will look like this year."

Martin said the pandemic wasn't solely to blame for current shortages.

"This isn't just a COVID problem," Martin said. "This challenge has been going on for years."

Jeff Cluff, assistant director of the Utah High School Activities Association, agreed. In Utah, the ranks of high school officials dropped 20 to

The pandemic made the officiating shortage worse. States will need to be aggressive with their recruitment efforts. Liam Leonard, Sammamish, Wash.

30 percent in 2020.

Amid the decline, collegiate football officials in the state volunteered to lend a hand on prep games. It was a stopgap measure and not a solution to the underlying issues. So in 2021, Utah tried a more personal approach with high school officials, Cluff said.

"One of the things that our (local) associations have talked about is (having) personal conversations with officials to return them to the field," Cluff said. "Make them feel like they're welcome, that we need them back. That we understand their place, we understand their decision."

"We (know) that their health is paramount, but we

need them. Some people may not feel needed, and so if we can create that need and awareness with each of them, then we'll (get) some of them back," Cluff said.

North Dakota High School Activities Association Executive Director Matthew Fetsch said his state saw decreases of about 8 percent in the fall and winter of 2020-21. The decline was fueled by fears of COVID and uncertainty about whether seasons were going to be completed normally.

But by the spring of 2021, the trend had completely changed.

"Our spring was essentially normal as far as no crowd restrictions, and in spring, (the number of) officials rose 13 percent from previous years, from our previous high actually," Fetsch said.

He added that North Dakota was already very proactive in official retention prior to the pandemic.

"Something we started about nine years ago is our local officials' program where we created an opportunity for individuals in your hometown, where you can pull them out of the crowd and have them work a sub-varsity game because they previously were an official," Fetsch said.

"(It) allows someone to do that on the day of a game, get registered online, get insurance. They don't have all the requirements a regular official would, but it allows them to work any games below varsity level."

"They're now in our system (and) we can blast out information to them. We've had some success there where they've come back years after and become registered officials. That's something that's worked well."

MENTORS CAN BE VITALLY IMPORTANT IN HELPING AN OFFICIAL GAIN THE SKILLS NEEDED TO OFFICIATE AND TO ADVANCE IN OFFICIATING.

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SUMMIT SESSION OFFERS SOLUTIONS

At the 2018 NASO Sports Officiating Summit, officiating leaders gathered to discuss recruitment and retention efforts under the theme: "Say Yes to Officiating." One session involved extensive brainstorming of ideas to bring more people into officiating and keep them. Those ideas remain relevant today as leaders try to bring back officials in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE THOUGHTS AND IDEAS THAT WERE SHARED:

> **PUBLIC RELATIONS** – Officiating associations need to be professional in how they present themselves, including using social media as a tool.

> **TREATMENT OF OFFICIALS** – There needs to be proactive campaigns to promote respect for sports officials.

> **MANAGING EXPECTATIONS** – A brand new official doesn't belong on a varsity-level assignment right out of the gate. But officials need to know the path to advance, how it works and how long it will reasonably take. Otherwise, it can lead to frustration.

> **MENTORING** – Officiating leaders need to support mentoring programs as those can be quite helpful in retaining officials. But it can't be something other officials are forced to participate in.

> **INCLUSIVENESS** – Officiating needs to reflect society's diversity and be inviting to anyone who wants to give this avocation a try.

> **INCENTIVIZING OFFICIALS** – Fellow officials are among the best recruiters for new officials, but incentives help them act.

> **LOCAL ASSOCIATION CULTURE**

– Associations need to avoid good old boy networks that block out newer officials from assignments.

Associations also need to improve their training for new officials.

FOR MORE IDEAS ON RECRUITING AND RETENTION, VISIT SAYYESTOOFFICIATING.COM.



LaRosa said Louisiana's current issue is whether the sport is inside or outside. As of fall 2021, he said, officials in outside sports like football were feeling comfortable, though a percentage were still voluntarily masking up even though players and fans were not.

"Our numbers (of officials) were a little up (for football in fall 2021) over where we were last year," he said.

But indoor sports such as volleyball had problems getting officials back in fall 2021, LaRosa said.

"We're way down and it is largely COVID," he said, noting officials were still uncomfortable with indoor crowds.

LaRosa said Louisiana, like many state associations, defers to the advice of local health officials. He said urban areas like New Orleans were still strict concerning masks and crowd size, but rural areas tended to be more relaxed.

"One large high school notified a local assigner that his people would have to provide either proof of vaccination or have a negative COVID test within 72 hours of a game," he said.

While such requirements might be aimed at keeping people safe, they don't make it easier to recruit people into officiating.

All Summit participants agreed there needs to be a pragmatic way of recruiting in a COVID-scarred landscape.

One suggestion was to find ways to get in front of high school seniors to talk about opportunities in officiating.

"On the surface, it sounds like a natural, very fertile ground, but we have a hard time getting in front of them," LaRosa said. "Be it career day or assemblies, the general response (from schools) is 'No time and no space.' But if we

move a game to another day, they all go crazy."

Martin agreed the help of schools is needed in the recruitment process. At the same time, officials are the best recruiters of officials, she said, so they've been challenging officials to bring someone new on board. "If they bring them on board, then there's a good chance they'll be a mentor to them," Martin said.

Mentors can be vitally important in helping an official gain the skills needed to officiate and to advance in officiating.

Additionally, Kansas has been using a scholarship program for the past several years. Assigners can recommend people to the state association for a complimentary registration. Because the officials must be recommended, it typically leads to a mentoring situation.

"The good part about that is our retention rate for ... scholarship officials is about 50 percent will come back the next year and register on their own," Martin said.

Cluff said every official, no matter the level, can make a difference in addressing the shortage.

"We can find somebody to develop and become part of the culture of officiating, which has singlehandedly changed my life," Cluff said. "I didn't realize 20 years ago I'd be doing what I'm doing. It would kind of govern where I'm at in life. My very best friends are officials. And it's changed my life. And I think if we understand that we can make a valuable, valuable addition to those young peoples' lives — we can change them. ... Let's get out there and get after it and take that charge and find some more people to join in."

Steven L. Tietz is an award-winning journalist from Milwaukee. □