



The Need for Greater Officiating Oversight by National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) January 18, 2018

There is a growing crisis in amateur athletics in the United States of America – a shortage of game officials. The average age of officials across all levels of sport is at an all-time high and there is an alarming lack of interest among younger generations. While NCAA Division II and Division III conferences are just beginning to experience the negative impacts, this shortage will become a bleak inevitability for the college game. Additionally, coordinators and other officials' contractors that work on behalf of the NCAA operate independently of each other with oversight from committees instead of a professional administrator/official. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) must establish a Director of Officiating to provide support to the membership and amateur athletics by way of recruitment, retention, education and professional development of officials and coordinators.

The “graying” of officials coupled with the increase in demand for these officials, due to proliferation of youth sports contests, have become the biggest threats to the future of amateur athletics. Without officials we are unable to conduct contests. This already occurs at the youth and interscholastic levels. Acute shortages have been reported across the entire country – Washington, D.C., Texas, New Jersey, Colorado, Illinois, etc. While there is no single solution to this problem, many areas of concern have been identified. Historically, the NCAA has relied on third-parties and related outside organizations to develop grass root level programs for the recruitment of officials. While reliance on this approach has been adequate for many decades this crisis now calls for an organization to unify all interested parties to address the culture and climate of officiating. As the most prominent amateur athletic organization in the world, the NCAA must become a leader in the support and development of officiating, particularly as it relates to the needs of its membership in addition to its own championship events.

According to the largest survey of sports officials ever conducted (National Association of Sports Officials National Officiating Survey, October 2017), the current average age of all officials is 53.29 years. Far fewer recent high school and college athletes are joining the ranks of officiating. The average age of a starting official in the 1970's was 19 years old. Today the starting age of an official is 47 years old (NASO, 2017). This alarming trend is already affecting youth leagues and interscholastic competition and is at the doorstep of collegiate athletics.

This problem is not geographic or sport-specific. It is the negative impression of officiating - the abuse that occurs at the gateway of the avocation, the lack of funding at the lower levels, the growth of club and high school participants and contests, and the absence of an advocating coalition between all amateur sports organizations. The NCAA has relied upon outside organizations, particularly state high school and officials' associations, to attract and develop new officials. While the NCAA has provided administrative, financial and educational support to members in nearly all areas affecting our 460,000-plus student-athletes, no ownership or substantial investment has been made in officiating.

Another barrier to entry for officials includes the “good old boys' network” of officiating organizations within state associations that still, reportedly, exist for the protection of their own assignments and promotions instead of the growth and vitality of the industry. When asked how did you get into officiating, 55% of respondents indicated that they first became an official because of interaction with a current official, coach or organization (NASO, 2017). Consequently, the NCAA must play an active role in supporting and encouraging these interactions.

While the club sports environment is an entry point for many new officials, club sports reportedly have the worst sportsmanship within sport at any level - 36% of officials surveyed indicate club programs have the biggest conduct problems - with parents (40%) listed as the cause of most problems (NASO, 2017). Often with little administrative support to hold participants, coaches and fans accountable for their behavior, club sports create a toxic entry point that provides little incentive for prospective officials to enter or current officials to remain in the industry. Though it has no involvement or jurisdiction over this segment of sport, the NCAA needs to assume a key and supportive role in the

identification and implementation of initiatives that will unify all levels of sports (e.g., youth, club, interscholastic, intercollegiate, professional) in establishing a positive image and environment for officials that will aid in the recruitment and retention of officials for generations to come.

At the same time, the precipitous growth of club sport contests places stress on the thinning pool of officials and becomes an increasing threat to the availability of officials for scholastic and collegiate contests. The ability to stay in a single location at a club tournament and work multiple games, reportedly to be paid in cash in some cases, versus traveling a considerable distance for one contest and a single game check creates an inequitable dilemma for even those dedicated officials. Furthermore, among officials completing the NASO survey, 17% indicated they have cut back on officiating multiple sports because they can increasingly get more games in their primary sport. Sport specialization is clearly not just an issue with the athletes.

The most recent Aspen Institute State of Play Report (2017) indicated that “while the percentage of core participants who play team sports on a regular basis declined again, total participation slightly increased.” According to the report, girls’ team sport participation increased to 52.8% and boys’ team sport participation held steady at 61.1%. The fact of the matter is, more and more games are added annually at the club level creating an ever-increasing demand for officials that cannot be met. The inverse relationship of program/participation growth to decline in the officiating pool is extremely problematic.

Based on the 2017 NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participate Rate Report, a total of 3,251 sports teams have been added across all three divisions of the NCAA over the past ten years. While individual-team sports like Track and Field have been the fastest growing and require fewer officials per team / per contest, the demand for officials shall unavoidably continue to increase with collegiate sponsorship growth. Though the tendency is to focus on higher profile sports like football and basketball, the “graying” of officials in track and field, swimming and tennis is greatest according to the NASO survey.

Future shortages at the collegiate level will most certainly affect the scheduling of games as it has already at junior high and high school levels. At its most extreme, this issue alone has the potential to increase missed class time - particularly at the Division II and III levels – as scheduling considerations become more and more dependent on the availability of officials. In addition, the dwindling supply and increasing demand for officials will invariably lead to escalating costs associated with game fees and the provision of mileage, per diems, etc. Ultimately, the shrinking pool of officials will affect the quality of officiating at the Division I level and even the professional ranks.

A second, corresponding officiating issue that requires the attention of the NCAA is the lack of consistency of expectations and oversight for NCAA Coordinators of Officials. Particularly at the Division II and Division III levels, coordinator positions are initiated at the committee level – committees generally consisting of a majority of coaches who have little to no experience with oversight of officiating programs. Not all team sports have coordinators at the Division II or Division III levels as it’s left to the committee to determine the need, duties and scope of such a position. The job of filling and overseeing these positions should be entrusted to an individual with the experience and expertise to fully comprehend and address all matters pertaining to officiating.

The NCAA, together with its membership, must develop a significant threshold among coordinators and between divisions through professional support and development. While not all sports have the same needs, there are fundamental components to all officiating programs that could improve national tournament assignments, evaluation systems, recruitment and retention efforts as well as gender and ethnic diversification. The establishment of a Director of Officiating position at the national office can become the public face of a campaign to make officiating a desirable avocation through cooperative efforts with the other groups and, separated from but working in conjunction with the Director of Playing Rules, will provide the needed professional oversight of the coordinators of officials thus eliminating the need for collective committee and staff involvement.

Recommendation:

We, the Division II Conference Commissioners Association, Division II Athletic Directors Association, Division III Commissioners Association and National Association of Division III Athletic Administrators respectfully request the NCAA Board of Governors add the position of Director of Officiating to the National Office staff with the following

responsibilities:

- The oversight of all national officiating coordinators.
- Formalizing the education and evaluation of coordinators and NCAA championship officials.
- Collaborating with key external organizations (e.g., NFHS, NASO) to develop recruitment and retention strategies.
- Working with U.S. Olympic National Governing Bodies to support recruitment and growth of Olympic sports threatened by higher than average age of current officials.
- Developing advertising campaign and initiatives supporting officials and promoting the benefits of officiating.
- Creating educational programs that target coaching committees, organizations and associations so they recognize the long-term challenges and ramifications associated with the crises in officiating and the role they must play to support a positive impression for their student-athletes to consider becoming officials once their playing careers are over.
- Providing funding to conference offices for the active ground-level recruitment and retention of officials – particularly officials of color and women.

In closing, the NCAA has seen significant benefits and received major credit by placing student-athlete safety and well-being at the forefront with the hiring of a Chief Medical Officer. The same model of responsibility for amateur athletics must be initiated in the vital area of officiating. Without question, the NCAA can be highly effective in this area should it elect to commit the necessary resources. As conferences and member institutions have recognized with the funding and staff support around inclusion, student-athlete well-being and coach/administrator professional development, the dedication of staffing and financial resources can have a substantial, long-term impact on other areas such as officiating.

Sampling of Article References on Officiating Crisis:

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