



# “I LOVE TO OFFICIATE – BUT”

► **Despite its many inherent benefits, there sometimes are aspects of the officiating avocation that an individual might want to change.**

*By Jerry Sulecki*

*Pssst! Got a minute?  
This is just between us officials.*

**P**lease bear with me as I vent a little about some circumstances associated with officiating that bother me and, judging from what I hear and read, most other officials as well.

Don't get me wrong, because officiating means a lot to me. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't officiate. As someone said recently, "Officiating is not something I do — officiating is what I am." That's certainly true in my case. I love officiating — for many reasons.

One of those reasons is that officiating keeps me in reasonably good physical shape. Without officiating to force me to stay in condition, I probably would be a couch potato and require medical care. When I'm feeling good physically, I think and function so much better.

Moreover, officiating certainly contributes to my mental health. I find that when I'm officiating, I'm forced to concentrate solely on the contest at hand. All of life's other problems slip into the background until the game is over. I feel good about my effort after most games. Sometimes, I can even be in that euphoric "zone" when I know I worked to the best of my ability. Officiating is definitely therapeutic for me.

Additionally, officiating provides me with a little extra spending money. It's well-known that anyone who decides to officiate strictly for the money soon will become sorely disappointed — but that extra money can provide another evening out or even contribute to a better vacation.

I also like the feeling of being in charge of something in my life — if only for very brief periods of time. Outside of

officiating, it seems like being in control of anything is becoming harder and harder to do. More and more, external forces or governing agencies are continually forcing so much of what we do upon us. When I'm officiating, I feel like I'm in control.

However, there are certain things about this avocation that bug me just a little bit. Not enough to make me want to quit. Still — enough for me to think about them — and put them down on paper.

In no particular order, here are some things I wish I could change to make for a better officiating experience:

## **WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?**

Doesn't it seem like forever to get to really know the assignors and commissioners and finally work your way up to a decent schedule? Seasoned officials will tell you it's not wise to become too comfortable. Leagues and associations have been known to occasionally change assignors. New assignors tend to schedule the people and the crews with whom they are comfortable — regardless of how long someone has worked in that league or conference. It doesn't happen to everyone, but it happens enough to make most crews feel just a little uncomfortable when league changes are announced.

## **ALL OFFICIALS ARE BAD OFFICIALS**

Doesn't it seem like there's a certain segment of society that just automatically hates all officials? Are they born with this "kill the umpire/official" attitude, or is it learned from others as they are growing up? Most of us, when new, will try to please or appease such individuals — but after officiating a while — learn to distrust most people's motives.

## **OFFICIALS ARE FAIR GAME**

It also seems that no one who plays or coaches nowadays ever loses the game. It's often the officials who lost it for them. Coaches can call bad plays, players can make errors, but officials have to be perfect — all the way down to the pee-wee level. It particularly galls me to hear after a contest, "Don't worry, Joey, you didn't lose that game — the officials did." And most times, this is said in front of the official so that

the intent is not lost. What kind of message is this sending to the young student-athlete? Does anyone take responsibility for their actions rather than blaming the officials?

### **TOO SOON OLD – TOO LATE SMART**

Don't we all eventually reach that stage in our officiating career when, to borrow a current popular sports phrase, "the game slows down and everything seems to happen in slow motion?" We begin to know our mechanics so well that we can actually get to that spot to see the call we should make. We begin to learn how to handle coaches and participants. We've established ourselves and have made the necessary contacts through networking to become truly successful officials. Our schedule becomes the envy of most of our officiating brethren. We've reached a pinnacle in our officiating world. However, sometimes it seems to me we're probably too darn old to really capitalize on all this success.

### **I THINK THE OFFICIALS BLEW THAT ONE!**

Though not really part of the officiating experience, as an official, it becomes more and more difficult to listen to or watch televised sporting events without screaming aloud at the radio or television. It upsets me to no end that these people who have never read a rules book, had a whistle in their mouth, or had a flag in their belt can say whatever they please without recrimination. Why don't these announcers

learn some part of the rules of the sport they're getting paid to announce?

Or, could they at least wait a few seconds and see the replay before saying, "The official(s) really blew that one!" I know many times they eventually say the official got the call correct, but the damage has already been done. Most people only hear the first part and I'm convinced this contributes to some of our everyday problems.

I'd like to tell you more, but I've got a game to officiate in two hours.

Thanks for letting me get all these things off my chest. Whew!!! I feel better already. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Jerry Sulecki, who has been an NFHS football official in Ohio since 1973, is a member of both the Northeastern Ohio Football Officials Association and the Cleveland Football Officials Association, of which he is past president. He is also a co-founder of the Football Officials Hospitality Committee. Sulecki is a member of the NFHS Officials' Quarterly Publications Committee, which oversees the editorial content of the NFHS Officials' Quarterly.*

