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Recruitment and Retention of Sports Officials

Peter J. Titlebaum, Nichole Haberlin, and Garrett Titlebaum

Sabaini (2001) states that “virtually everyone with an interest in improving the numbers and quality of officials must become involved in recruitment and retention” (12). Once standards are set for recruiting and retaining hardworking, positive, and honest officials, management must find ways to evaluate and reward those officials to uphold the accountability of each individual performance at any sporting event. Managers need to reevaluate who, what, when, and where they are recruiting. They must be able to create clear, measurable, and significant goals for current officials such as making expectations clear, holding mandatory study sessions, demanding national and/or regional clinic attendance, creating standards for physical conditioning, and developing rules preparation and game performance expectations (Sabaini, 2003). These changes can only be accomplished by staying consistent with the idea that a change needs to be made.

Keywords: psychic income, National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), marketing, sportsmanship

Sport officiating is usually a second job pursued by sports advocates, many of whom were formerly athletes and want to stay involved with sports and give something back to the athletic world (Prus, 1984; Furst, 1991). The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) consists of 19,000 officials across a variety of sports. NASO serves its members by providing benefits and services, such as educational classes and research, to improve members’ performance. These officials either seek out an officiating position on their own or are recruited by current members (Furst, 1991). A special 2001 report by NASO indicated there is likely to be a shortage of sport officials in the near future. This report also indicated that soccer and field hockey were already struggling to find officials as early as 2001. In its August/September 2008 issue, *Athletic Management* reported the lack of sports officials as the cause of the near extinction of Florida’s high school soccer teams (Scholand, 2008). It is clear that the impact of this trend is already being felt. (Sabaini, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to identify (1) researched recruitment and retention issues of sports officials, (2) ways to retain current officials, and (3) strategies to help recruit new officials.

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Current Recruitment and Retention Issues

In *Referee Enterprises* NASO has foreseen the impending scarcity of officials and has updated its mission to “advocate opportunities for officials and engage in programs to recruit and retain officials” (Referee Enterprises, 2007). A 2001 NASO research study suggested a shortage of sports officials at the high school level and also indicated that a third of all officials quit after their first year. Some of the top reasons that referees quit include (1) obligations of career or other job, (2) sportsmanship of the participants, (3) sportsmanship of the spectators, (4) time away from family, (5) low game fees, and (6) their relationship with the game assignor (Sabaini, 2001). This response is nearly identical to the reaction from the National Federation High School research results, which show that the primary reasons officials leave the industry are (1) career or other job, (2) poor sportsmanship by participants and spectators, (3) missing family, (4) low game fees, (5) relationship to the assignor, and (6) difficulty to advance (Sabaini, 2001).

Ways to Retain Current Officials

Creating a solution for retaining officials will not be easy. While the association cannot control many of the factors that lead to attrition, the sporting world can make strides to improve the stress factors related to the job of officiating.

In the *Journal of Sports Behavior* (Rainey, 1999), Taylor and Daniel (1987) identified five sources of stress: fear of failure, fear of physical harm, interpersonal conflicts, time pressure, and peer conflicts. Rainey investigated sources of stress, burnout, and intention to terminate among high school basketball referees, using a revised version of the Ontario Soccer Officials’ Survey (OSOS). Seven hundred and twenty-one respondents (664 male, 57 female) provided the data for the research. Five factors related to the sports officials’ sources of stress were identified: performance concerns, interpersonal conflict, time pressure, lack of recognition, and fear of physical harm. It was concluded that the first four factors did produce stress; however, the impact was mild. The fear of physical harm was essentially identified as a factor that “did not” contribute at all to the referees’ stress (Rainey).

Not surprisingly, these sources of stress closely resemble previously stated common reasons for an official to hang up the whistle. Fear of failure, fear of physical harm, and dealing with interpersonal and peer conflicts have an impact on officials at the game. The number one reason stated for departure was poor behavior on the part of spectators. Next was poor sportsmanship on the part of the participants (Sabaini, 2001).

Another study in New Mexico had similar findings. Hughes (2001) investigated New Mexico high school sports officials’ perceptions of sportsmanship in the competitive sport environment. Four hundred and sixty-two officials participated in the self-reported survey, which investigated four areas of officials’ perceptions: misconduct, legal aspects, modeling, and leadership. The area of misconduct was the most concerning for the majority of respondents, particularly basketball officials. Verbal and nonverbal misconduct by spectators was another major concern common between all officials.

Answers to the final question were particularly telling. In the survey officials were asked, "Should your perception of the sport climate during athletic competition progressively worsen in the next few years, would you consider terminating your officiating services?" (Hughes, 2001, p. 97); 85.7% of the officials indicated they would seriously consider terminating their officiating services should the environment worsen.

To combat these issues intramural programs have begun to force standards of moral conduct, deemed Good Sportsmanship, in their programs. This is done by conducting moral education that helps increase higher levels of moral reasoning among participants (Kohlberg, 1981; Rothwell & Theodore, 2006). Raths, Harmin, and Simons (1978) believe that when values are ambiguous, students' lives lack direction. Without clear direction students are more likely to make poor decisions about how to spend their time (Raths, Harmin, & Simons, 1978; Rothwell & Theodore, 2006). For a person to create values, s/he must be able to: (1) choose freely, (2) select from alternatives, (3) consider the consequences of all possible alternatives, (4) affirm publicly, (5) prize and cherish, (6) act upon choices, and (7) repeat the process (Raths, Harmin, and Simons 1978; Rothwell & Theodore, 2006, p. 48). Intramural programs on college campuses enforce standards of moral conduct by mandating that students abide by the rules of sportsmanship laid out by the university. Participants are held accountable to these rules (Rothwell & Theodore, 2006). In order for this to be effective, accountability and good sportsmanship need to be modeled, learned, and expected.

The U.S. National Youth Sports Safety Foundation research reported that parents feel participants should be "positive, encouraging, and non-critical" to fellow participants. These same participants believe their parents should not yell at the referees. Even more so, participants think that poor spectator behavior may put their team at a disadvantage during the game (Holt, Black & Tamminen, 2007). A common trend to remedy poor sportsmanship is to create a parent-participant sportsmanship contract to be signed by all involved parties. These contracts outline a code of conduct to encourage good behavior during a sporting event and hold participants and spectators accountable for their actions during a game.

Seidler, Scott, and Hughes (2004) investigated perceptions of "misconduct," or sportsmanship issues. It is possible that the difference in perceptions of sportsmanship could be attributed to racial or cultural disparities regarding the definition of sportsmanship.

Low game fees might seem like an issue of significant importance, but the idea of "psychic income" could offer greater impact on the retention of officials. Psychic income is defined as the intrinsic rewards people receive from an activity. This might mean giving back to something they care about, molding future participants, or gaining personal satisfaction from helping others. The more psychic income one expects to receive, the greater the likelihood that one would be willing to make a time commitment to the particular activity. NASO should address officials' stated concerns and develop ways to meet outlined needs to increase this psychic income level. Once this has taken place, retention problems will ease (Sabaini, 2001).

In addition, an official should receive training, development, and nurturing (Sabaini, 2001). One way to improve technical skill is to create mentoring programs in which a "senior" official would be shadowed by a "rookie" official. This

would increase positive development of relationships outside of one's career, develop friendships with other professionals, and create a fellowship devoted to the success of the field of officiating. These are stated reasons that individuals get started with officiating, and NASO should address them through a mentorship program (Furst, 1991).

A process for delivering feedback should be implemented to determine the success of a mentorship program. Feedback would be solicited from other officials and game participants. Good mentors should be rewarded (Sabaini, 2001). The University of Michigan is one school that has adopted a mentorship program for its officials. Marcy Weston, NCAA National Coordinator of Women's Basketball Officiating, challenges each of her officials at the collegiate level to help at least one individual improve their officiating experience through a mentoring process (Sabaini, p.29). Feedback can provide value that extends beyond a mentorship program.

The issues of advancement and strained relationship with assignors can be addressed through an annual evaluation system to assign officials based on objective data. This process should include officials evaluating each other, the assignor, the mentor or the mentee, and NASO as a whole. Using these evaluations, officials can hold each other accountable and also foster mutual respect. The evaluations can then be considered during advancement, placement, and pay rate for future games. This will also encourage the assignor to create a fair policy to assign officials and eliminate perceived biases between officials and the assignor.

Retention of officials is not the only problem. Sabaini learned that lack of new recruits was a bigger problem than "lack of retention" (Sabaini, 2001). The Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) reported in the early 1990s that for every 100 people who sign up to become officials, only 50 show up to test (Scholand, 2008). In the article "How to Get & Keep Officials," Sabaini identifies four obstacles when recruiting officials: (1) availability of prospects, (2) the likelihood that an individual is interested in being recruited, (3) decline in veterans and other sphere influences, and (4) economic benefits of officiating as an avocation.

To combat the challenge of finding new officials, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) has employed two novel methods of recruiting. The first was targeted toward juniors in high school. The recruiting tool used was a video that explained the Legacy Program. This is a program in which high school youth of at least age 16 are paired with approved officials to learn the ropes of officiating. The other recruitment method targeted females. This program was called "Two-DAE," (DAE meaning "dedicated, accomplished, and educated." Two-DAE is an informational clinic that encourages attendance by providing breakfast, lunch, officiating materials, a t-shirt, and a voucher for registration by offsetting the cost of their first session (Sabaini, 2001, p. 23). A few other examples of ways to market for new recruits include public service announcements on cable television, websites, introductory pamphlets, weekly training sessions, and mentoring programs with postgame sessions (Sabaini). Once again, to ensure that methods of recruiting are effective, evaluations should be conducted. Additional feedback could provide information dealing with how recruits learned of training sessions, how officials felt about the success of the recruiting programs, and whether recruits had ideas to encourage more people to officiate.

Issues in Collegiate Official Recruitment

Every university is different in its ability to recruit for its intramural program. Rowan University Intramural Sports and Facility Operation Assistant Director Kevin George is at a school with approximately 10,000 students that recruits officials by word-of-mouth within the intramural programs. During games, intramural staff members look for players who display integrity and commitment to the program. The staff member then encourages the intramural participant to apply for an officiating job. Once a student has applied, they are interviewed in the spring for the next fall season. The objective of this effort is to recruit officials who will be available to work longer than one semester (George, 2008).

Arizona State University Intramural and Sport Club Assistant Director Chad Ellsworth recruits by staffing display tables in high-traffic student areas with uniformed officials and providing information on how to get involved. While at the table, officials talk to the students passing by in an effort to get them interested in playing in the intramural program or officiating for the program. Arizona State University has also started recruiting at new-student orientation fairs to inform students about the recreation sports department and available employment opportunities. Parents who attend these orientation sessions often encourage students to get on-campus jobs, so it is logical that speaking with the parents is a good selling point for officiating jobs. (Ellsworth, 2008).

The subject of recruitment was also addressed at the Ohio Recreational Sports Association's (ORSA) annual conference at Ashland University in November of 2008. The idea that grabbed the most attention included searching out local officiating professionals to discuss the possibilities of advancement within the officiating world.

Retention Strategies for Officials

Retention in any work environment has been explained by Meyer and Allen's (1991) "Hypothesis of Turnover." This hypothesis asserts that job enjoyment relates to personal investment, involvement alternatives, opportunities for social constraints, and intent to quit. All impact the decision to stay or leave. Kevin George has tried to combat this model by creating "camaraderie" or an enjoyable work environment for his staff at Rowan University. The university creates a satisfying and rewarding work environment by having older staff members support new staff members with two meetings a year to discuss intramural and personal issues. These meetings help establish a mentoring relationship that is recognized through an Employee of the Week program. In addition, Rowan University Recreation Center sets up an all-staff meeting as a way for the entire team to get to know each other. This is accomplished through icebreakers and team-building exercises. An incentive program has been implemented for staff members that includes various challenges and prizes (George, 2008) to promote positive healthy competition in a fun environment.

Rowan University's student employment structure encourages a student starting in an entry level role such as score keeper to advance to a manager level in which he/she gets to participate in scheduling, marketing, and other

administrative duties. Each year a student returns to his or her position, he/she assumes increased job duties and appropriate compensation. The university has in place a policy that forces an assignor to understand many elements to be considered before creating the schedule. This list includes availability, commitment, willingness to help cover open shifts, and flexibility to work any level of the job duties (George, 2008).

Arizona State University fosters an optimal working environment for officials by providing continual training and evaluation of the program and staff. This creates a structure for student employees to advance and encourages involvement in regional/national events. This program is a good example of promoting a greater loyalty to the officiating world. To earn assignor duty at Arizona State University, students must meet certain criteria. They must have first-hand experience as an official and a solid understanding of the factors that affect a student's ability to do the assigned job. Officials will respect students who demonstrate these skills. Even so, students are not left without oversight. While Graduate Assistants or other staff-members supervise, students do have a voice and are involved with the assigning process as long as all the games have been covered (Ellsworth, 2008).

The students and professionals in attendance at the ORSA Conference in 2008 represented a variety of universities. They shared many tools and ideas used to retain their officiating staff. Perhaps the most unique was the concept of using sportsmanship points to hold intramural teams accountable for their behavior. Other ideas suggested evaluating officials at the end of their shift and hosting preseason mentoring nights with new officials to practice skills learned.

Conclusion

To reverse the downward trend in recruitment and retention of sports officials at both the high school and college levels, many approaches have been suggested in this article. All seek to create a positive and rewarding experience for the officials, thus providing incentive to new participants and motivation for existing referees to continue in their positions.

To summarize these points and suggest a framework for a successful program, these steps should be followed: (1) market the job, (2) set standards for officials under consideration to be hired, (3) continually evaluate officials and the program, (4) set up mentoring programs, (5) create incentives for staff members, (6) create a job structure where students can advance within the program, (7) set policies of how games will be assigned, and (8) hold fans, participants, and officials accountable for their behavior during an event.

While many of these strategies have been employed at different levels of officiating with various degrees of success, more research needs to be given to this topic at the college recreation level. Colleges and university have a shorter window of time to manage these issues. In a given year, staff can lose as much as 25% of the officiating staff due solely to graduation. Compounded by staff lost due to waning interest, demands on a student's time, and the pressure of being a college student, there is a clearer picture of why this issue must be addressed if the industry is to continually recruit and retain officials at the recreational level.

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