



Op-Ed: Become an official – Stay connected to high school sports

**By Bob Gardner, Executive Director of the National Federation of State High School Associations
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They don't make the headlines. Their names are not in the box scores. They don't make the all-star teams. But some of the most important individuals in high school sports are the contest officials.

These individuals are so important that, in fact, there would be no organized competitive, school sports without the men and women who officiate these contests every day across the country. Subtract the dedicated men and women who officiate school sports and those sports would no longer be organized; they would be chaotic.

In some sports, officials are retiring faster than new licenses are being issued. The worst-case scenario is that junior varsity, freshmen and middle school games are being postponed – or even cancelled – because there are not enough men and women to officiate them.

Anyone looking for a unique way to contribute to their community should consider becoming a registered official. For individuals who played sports in high school, officiating is a great way to stay close to the sport after their playing days have ended. Officiating helps people stay in shape, expands their social and professional network and offers part-time work that is flexible, yet pays. In fact, officiating is a form of community service - with compensation.

“Officiating is a difficult avocation, but a big part of it is building life skills for yourselves and others,” said NFHS Hall of Fame official Gary Christiansen, a Mason City native who officiated state championships in four Iowa sports over the course of a nearly 50-year career.

“If you're going to be successful in any field, it's about developing and learning how to deal with the people around you. Whether they're athletes, coaches, fans, or other officials, you want them to grow as people and understand that what you learn from an event is more than the final score.”

Christiansen recently retired from officiating varsity level contests, but he still watches games and tournaments year-round with his experienced eye on the action and on the officials.

“When I started in the late 1960s, I thought I would be officiating in the NFL within six months,” Christiansen said. “Young people just have to be patient and give themselves a chance as officials. Then, coaches and parents have to help give them that chance. That's tough to do.”

Another benefit of officiating is that individuals become role models so teenagers in the community can learn the life lessons that school sports teach. Students learn to respect their opponents, the rules of the game and the importance of practicing good sportsmanship thanks, in part, to those men and women who officiate. And the objectivity and integrity that officials display is an example that every young person needs to observe firsthand. In short, communities in our state and around the country will be stronger because of the life lessons officials help teach the next generation.

Officiating is a great way to stay connected to sports and to give back to the local school and community. We need dedicated men and women to become involved so school sports programs can continue to prosper for years to come.

“My theory has always been that high school and middle school athletics are designed to be part of the educational process,” Christiansen said. “Very few people are going to go and play and participate in sports beyond high school. But you have to learn how to win and learn how to lose. It’s part of life.”

Individuals interested in learning more about becoming an interscholastic official, and even beginning the application process, can do so at <https://www.iahsaa.org/officials/>.