



Your Best Friend



By Al Goldberger

High school officials need to manage risk to avoid legal liability. In this space in the last issue of the NFHS Officials' Quarterly, various "liability factors" were discussed from the standpoint of preventing high school referees and umpires from becoming lawsuit targets. When enforcing "the rules" of avoiding liability factors by enforcing the rules of the game related to contact, unsportsmanlike conduct, uniforms and equipment, oftentimes officials on the high school level and elsewhere find themselves wondering why coaches, athletic directors and administrators battle the officials' efforts to prevent the "final buzzer" from sounding in the courtroom – rather than on the court or field.

As an official, I often puzzle at why grown men and women would not applaud the enforcement of safety-related playing rules by my crew members and me. Maybe it's because they are pre-occupied with putting points on the scoreboard and other pleasures of life as a high school coach, athletic director or administrator. Or, maybe it's because nobody told them that the game official is ...

"Your Best Friend"

Delusional or not, here's what I would tell the folks who coach high school sports – and their bosses – if I could:

Coach: Every time you send your team out onto the field or court to compete, I'm there. I know you practice hard all week. I know you want to win – sometimes more than anything. I know you are first and foremost a teacher and always want the best for your student-athletes.

I know you always look for innovative plays and strategies. I know it's frustrating sometimes to watch the kids not put in practice what you teach them all week. I know the athletes – and even I – disappoint you sometimes.

I also know exactly what it takes to make your sports event safe, fair and fun for the student-athletes under your charge. I know the requirements of the rules book that are designed to give each team and each student-athlete an equal opportunity to win the game or match. I also know the types of equipment and clothing that are safe and the types of clothing and equipment that are unsafe. I know how your field or court must be laid out; and I know that I need to have corrections made when your games are played in a facility that has safety hazards about.

I know the types of contact that are permitted by the rules; and I know the types of contact that are dangerous and therefore illegal under the rules. I know the ways that student-athletes sometimes choose to express themselves and

how those expressions can be misinterpreted by opponents and others. I know when you need to take a student-athlete out of the game due to an injury or illness and I know the restrictions on when he or she can come back in.

I know that you have a million things to worry about before, during and after the game. So do I. I know that the success of your program and the safety of athletes, coaches and spectators alike depend a large measure upon me doing my job. I know the rules, and, as importantly, the reason behind the rules.

"My only motivation is to get it right"

I will always answer a question if you approach me as a lady or a gentleman. I will never gratuitously embarrass you or do anything to interfere with your concentration knowing you are devoted to the task at hand. All I ask is that you afford me the same courtesy and realize that I am doing my best to call a fair game and keep your student-athletes safe.

Like you, I do not work in high school sports just for the money. I work to give something back and make a difference. I help you manage risk – whether you want to or not. Like

you, my first responsibility is the safety of the student-athletes in today's game. I don't care what happened before, I don't care which team wins, or which player scores a touchdown, hits a home run or fouls out. I only care that both teams have a chance to win the game and that nobody gets hurt. If I make a mistake, it does not make me happy. I may not see a play from the same angle or perspective that you do. Sometimes my positioning gives me a different angle and the call may not be what you think it should be.

Rest assured, my only motivation is to get it right. If I don't, it is unintentional. I never forget – not even for a moment – that my success depends on getting the plays right rather than getting the plays wrong. And finally, knowing that people are usually treated the way they treat others, I will respect you and your athletes at all times. **OQ**

Officials photo provided by Ed Wolff, Seven Hills, Ohio.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alan Goldberger, who is a former member of the NFHS Officials' Quarterly Publications Committee, is an attorney licensed in New Jersey, New York and Maryland and practices in the areas of sports law, business law, association law, and sports and commercial litigation. Goldberger has been a certified baseball, basketball and football official for more than 30 years. He is the author of *SPORTS OFFICIATING: A LEGAL GUIDE*, the recognized legal authority for game officials, and co-author of *SPORT, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE LAW*. He has written numerous articles that have appeared in legal and athletic publications nationwide. He serves as Parliamentarian and counsel to the International Association of Approved Basketball Officials, Inc. and is a Past-President of IAABO Board 33. He has been a featured speaker at many national conferences.



Wanted: Articles on High School Officiating



READERS: The NFHS Officials' Quarterly is seeking articles of interest to high school officials. The OQ always seeks articles regarding all sports, but at this time is particularly interested in articles regarding basketball, soccer, track, softball and football. If you're interested in writing an article, please contact:

John Gillis, Editor
NFHS Officials' Quarterly
PO Box 690 • Indianapolis, Indiana 46206
e-mail: jgillis@nfhs.org