

Ken Neaderhiser, Umpire Lenexa, KS Proponent Written Only
Kansas House Education Committee,

Thank you for considering legislation for specific assault against sport officials. There is an officiating crisis. As a sixth year official, I have felt it. The workload continues to increase in soccer and basketball. I have dropped a sport and limit the summer work to recover, leaving those organizations short on officials.

The average age of high school officials is 55, average starting age is 45. Only 50% of new officials see year 2 and 80% get to year 3. NASO stated 50,000 sport officials stopped officiating after the pandemic. (National Association of Sports Officials). It is not because those officials don't have "thick skin". They have plenty thick enough skin. They might be applying at work or a home health situation or something else in life and decide this is not worth it. The crisis is real. Atchison soccer was on the news having to move games and scrambling to get their players full seasons. Canceled games are coming. Behavior of parents, players and coaches is the leading cause of the crisis in every survey. I have sent the committee stories from NASO. ADs in this state have made the news pleading with parents in open letters. Last year Wichita showed up on the Facebook feed Offside. It is run by a sports official and is dedicated to posting videos of bad to violent fan behavior.

In addition to KSHSAA registration and Kansas Sports Officials Association dues, I also pay to be an NASO member. I do so specifically for the legal services members received in case I am assaulted or sued for a call I make. Yes, parents have taken officials to court for ejecting their children for misconduct.

I know not every situation can be accounted for, but I only work for leagues where I feel the leadership is making a tangible effort to stress and enforce sportsmanship. I have made decisions to not work certain facilities and leagues. I truly enjoy officiating. We all do it to help other kids play. We like serving. I like coaching too and now do some working mentoring teenage officials at youth leagues. It is sad when I have to tell someone to stop yelling at someone else's kid. Unfortunately most parents don't see those teenage referees as someone else's kid. It is also sad when a competitive high school game ends, we can't build trust and relationships. We have to tuck our whistles in our shirts and get out of the gym as fast as possible to end our game jurisdiction in case something happens post game.

It is really sad when the team captain approaches you at the first dead ball and asks you to please ignore their parents because he doesn't want them making me mad at his team. That one took me by surprise. A high school kid was so embarrassed by the team parents he needed to consult with me. It is a mostly positive experience. The minority situations are now very loud and becoming more dangerous. The legislation should not only be important to the education committee but also all tax and finance committees.

Millions in tax incentives and public funds are being committed to the construction of youth sport complexes in the hopes of attracting tournaments and the resulting tourism dollars to Kansas. We are a central location with easy highway access in all directions. Kansas should be a travel tournament destination. The flaw in the plan is having more courts and fields than officials to work them.

Are teams going to come for soccer tournaments when high level teenage games have a one person crew? That is happening and is a recipe for disaster. Two person JV soccer crews are becoming more common. It isn't fun to do. Those kids are competitive, they know what you can't see, take advantage and games get heated. Why specific legislation when there is assault legislation on the books? To show a level of seriousness. To send a message. To take specifically detail actions that qualify as assault. To let district attorneys know the legislature considers this important and the referee crisis is a threat to our children's all important extracurricular activities. And to give school administrators an easy attention grabbing message to deliver to their parents. It is not me, the sports official, that needs specific assault legislation. It is the kids. I will have more than full seasons and then some. It is the kids who won't.