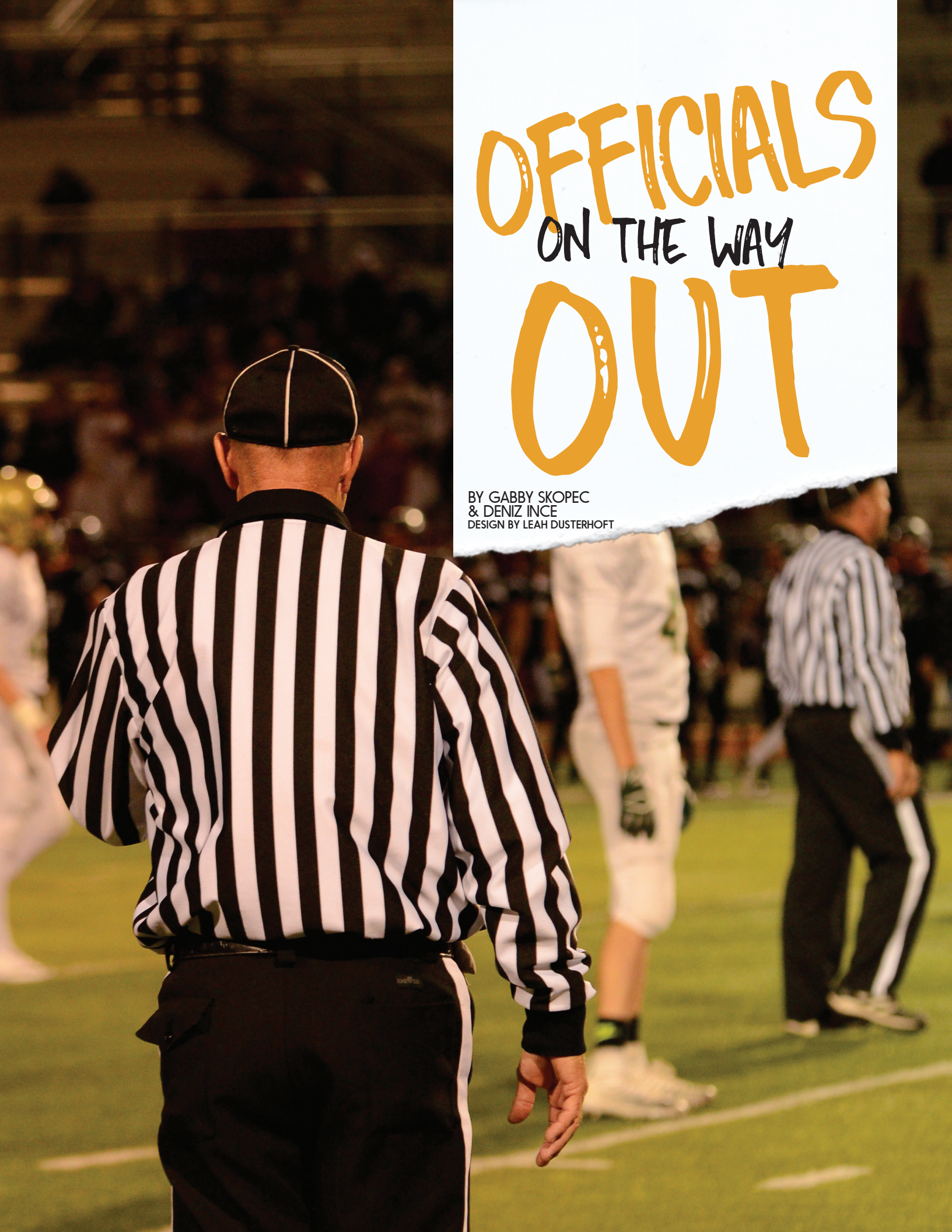




OFFICIALS ON THE WAY OUT

BY GABBY SKOPEC
& DENIZ INCE
DESIGN BY LEAH DUSTERHOFT

Picture standing on the field of a football stadium, specifically Kinnick Stadium. Hoards of angry fans yell; curses, boos and screams collide into a wall of sound that hits you. Something else nearly hits you too: a water bottle. This was the case for officials and others on the field on Oct. 1 at the Iowa vs. Northwestern football game. Fans, angry with calls the referees made, were fed up and began to throw trash onto the field at the officials. The public address announcer even reminded fans to be courteous.

And it's not just college athletics. At every sporting event, the same type of people appear: players, coaches, athletic trainers, spectators

and referees. However, the number of referees in high school sports has been declining over time. In some states the decline has been severe; in New Mexico, according to an article by Athletic Business, there has been a 20 percent decrease in football officials over the past seven years. This loss has caused them to move at least 15 games from Friday night to Saturday morning and cancel some junior varsity and junior high games so far this season. Iowa too has felt the effects; over the past 10 years, registered referees have declined overall by 6 percent, some sports losing up to 26 percent.

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9/10

high school sports
associations need
more referees.

6%
overall
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referees in
IOWA

DATA FROM NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SPORTS OFFICIALS

WHY THE LOSS?

Behind the loss lingers a multitude of reasons. Lewie Curtis, Iowa High School Athletic Association Director of Officials, credits age and lack of incoming officials as a possible reason for the shortage.

"I think we are not seeing a lot of young officials getting into officiating; we're not seeing the younger people taking it up and our population age is creeping upward," Curtis said.

He also cited bad sportsmanship by fans as a potential contributing factor.

"I think that's been going on forever; for as long as there's been officials and contests, yelling at the refs has been kind of a normal practice. But maybe [referees] just don't want to deal with that anymore," Curtis said.

Another contributing factor may be lack of pay combined with working hours.

"It's hard if you are 30 years old and have two children at home

with your wife and you're gone two or three nights a week. Sometimes people make the decision not to do that," Curtis said.

Referee and Assistant Executive Secretary and Treasurer at the Iowa City Athletic Officials Association Joshua Berka adds that refereeing cannot support a person.

"I would say probably [0.01 percent] of officials are where that is their full time vocation, but the rest of us it is an avocation, something that's done in addition to our full time jobs."

An additional cause for the decline may be the specialization of referees, which is now more common.

"You'll see officials tending to focus on one sport or maybe two whereas in the past it wouldn't be unusual to have someone officiate three or four different sports," said John Mathias, Executive Secretary of the Iowa City Athletic Officials Association.

Mathias is also a referee and has faced abuse multiple times throughout his career.

"I have certainly heard abuse and have taken verbal abuse from fans many times over the years. I am fortunate in that I have never been physically assaulted or have any altercations that led to the level of needing to involve the police," he

said.

Berka brings up a possible cause for the drop off in the past ten years: "There was a brief spike in the number of officials back in the late 2000s during the economic crisis. As people found that it was a way to get involved with the game and make some additional money, and then as the economy improved, I think a lot of those folks realized that they didn't want to continue with officiating," Berka said, then noted, "Again, because they didn't want to take the abuse ... they got out of it."

Football coach Garrett Hartwig summed the reasons up.

"It's a tough job, it's a thankless job and it doesn't pay very well, if at all. It can be stressful; there's a lot of things riding on good officiating. Ultimately, is the effort worth the reward in the end? I think that's what a lot of people are kind of going back to."

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—GARRETT HARTWIG



PHOTO BY SARAH LONGMIRE

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Although a popular saying in theatre may be 'the show must go on,' in athletics, the game cannot go on without officials; it simply cannot be played. From the surface, this doesn't seem like an issue that comes up often. Officials are always at the game, right? Yes, there are few games canceled due to lack of officials, but sometimes getting officials to work each game can be a difficult task for administrators.

"I can tell you that I had difficulty today," said West High Athletic Director Craig Huegel. "We had a ninth grade freshman volleyball match [set for this weekend] and up until about two hours ago I was going to cancel it because we could not find officials. So we made some panicked phone calls, basically twisted a few arms, persuaded folks. Either you can help us out, or else we're going to have to cancel

the match."

The need for officials can be seen in every sport.

"They control the game, they enforce the rules, they protect the players first and foremost. They are the ones who are in charge out there, and make sure things are going okay," Hartwig said.

For Aubrey Sowers '17, a volleyball player and student actively involved in the student section, the

game is important. As an athlete, Sowers and her team put in hours of practicing and preparing for each game, so the mere idea of a game being canceled due to lack of referees is concerning.

"I would be so mad [if we couldn't play due to a referee shortage] because the team has put so much effort in during practice ... Just to not be able to play in it would be upsetting and unfair," Sowers said.

DECREASE IN
IOWA SPORTS
(2007-2016)

FOOTBALL

-14%

BASKETBALL

-9%

BASEBALL

-25%

WRESTLING

-25%

TRACK
& FIELD

-26%

SWIMMING

-21%

SOCCER

+3%

DATA COURTESY OF JOSHUA BERKA

THE SPORTSMANSHIP ISSUE

In a study done by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), more than 76 percent of survey respondents listed poor sportsmanship by parents as the biggest reason that officials quit.

76%

OF REFEREES CITE
POOR SPORTSMANSHIP
AS REASON THEY LEAVE

Berka has noticed an uptick in abusive behavior in the past few years and contributes it to social media, television and a trickle-down effect.

"Everything is magnified from the professional ranks through the collegiate ranks. What's seen on television and social media in terms of behavior of coaches and players towards officials at the professional level is eventually to be mimicked at the collegiate level. If it's happening at the collegiate level, eventually it will be mimicked at the high school level, unfortunately," Berka said.

At West High, fans acting out may be less of an issue than at other schools.

"It has not been a problem so far in my experience here. I have had other situations at other schools where that has been a problem," Huegel said.

Sowers agrees, but does admit to noticing some hostility, although notes it is in the nature of the job.

"I think that sometimes the student section can get too intense and too into the refs' faces, but for the most part, I think we're all right," Sowers said. "I think that the refs need to know going into the job that they are going to get some comments at them, but they just need to do their job."

The student section, though, is not the only group who acts out toward officials. Parents and coaches are also seen as aggressive at times, although for coaches it is the nature of the job to want to win and fight to win the game.

"I think coaches sometimes [are] a little more hostile to the refs if they are trying to fight for a certain point or play because I think that their job is to obviously protect their players, obviously fight for every point they can," Sowers said.

Hartwig agrees.

"I get after officials—I like to think that I'm pretty fair and unbiased, but I also advocate for my team first, and sometimes that requires me to get in their ear."

As for players, Hartwig has the rules clearly laid out for his team.

"We have a pretty straightforward rule that we've established and that is you don't talk to the refs unless they talk to you. Even then they are usually one word answers like 'yes' or 'no'; other than that it is me that is in charge of communication with the team," Hartwig said.

Despite the efforts of players and coaches to behave hostilely to referees, abuse may not always affect the official's mindset.

"I think it's something that weighs on you, but for me personally, I would not consider quitting because of anything I hear from a fan.

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I understand fans are very emotional; especially parents can be very emotional when their son or daughter is involved in a contest. I try to separate that as much as possible and understand that they're just reacting emotionally," Mathias said.

Berka believes that fans and students should be educated on behavior so the game can be enjoyable and educational.

"[We need to] really work on educating coaches and educating fans. ...The way that coaches and fans behave towards officials is sometimes not okay. It's not part of respectful discourse, it's not part of what high school athletics should be, which is a part of the educational process."

Brooke Goodman '18, a student who officiated for a North Liberty youth baseball league this summer, did not directly experience much abuse, but it was something that worried her.

"It definitely made me nervous because I have experience just from playing sports [that] parents are really involved in kids athletics. So I was a little nervous making calls, especially since I hadn't done it before," Goodman said. "I know some of my friends have experienced it before, but I didn't really experience anything pointed at me."

PHOTO BY NICK PRYOR

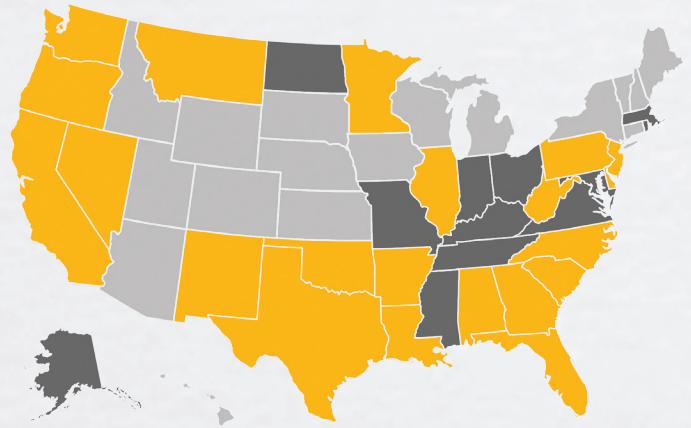


WHERE IS LEGISLATION PRESENT?

33 States have some legislation protecting officials

22 States consider assault on an official as a crime

■ No Legislation
■ Some Legislation
■ It is a crime to assault a referee, along with additional legislation.



DATA FROM NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SPORTS OFFICIALS

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

Thirty-three states currently have legislation in place to protect officials and in 22 states it is considered a crime to assault a referee. Iowa currently has no legislation in place; a bill aimed to add protection for officials recently stalled in the House.

However, according to student referees, at the local level, leagues informally try to protect their referees, despite the lack of legislation requiring it.

"Usually they try and keep an experienced older umpire behind the plate with you so if there's any question about a call that you made or if you have a question about something you can just call time-out and the umpire will come help you or kind of back you up," Goodman said. "If there's a problem with a parent or a coach, we can tell [the head empire] and he will handle it."

Ty Bopp '17, who referees as a part time job with RedZone football academy, has had a similar experience as Goodman.

"[If something happens,] they will bring it back to our guy in charge and he goes, 'Okay, we'll just email everyone just saying 'keep it down,'" Bopp said.

Possible legislation is confronted with mixed opinions.

"[Officials] are entitled to protec-

tion just because they are a person and it's illegal to assault somebody. But, I think it could go a little bit further in that sometimes you are put in those environments where people, for lack of a better term, kind of lose their minds, and I think that makes it a little bit scarier for the referee who has to make that tough call," Curtis said.

Mathias agrees with Curtis, explaining that "officials are in a unique position because the work we do does make us vulnerable to assault and abuse and I think we would also be deserving of special protection in that case."

On the other hand, Huegel does not think that adding a law will make much of a difference.

"I certainly wouldn't be opposed to legislation, but I don't know that legislation would solve the problem. I'm almost certain that [in] states that do have laws, they probably still have instances of issues regarding officials," he said.

Bopp agrees with Huegel.

"No, [I don't think legislation should be in place] because people will always find loopholes for it."

On a non-legislative level, steps have been taken to protect referees. For handling protection at West High, Huegel varies actions based on the anticipated intensity of the

event.

"For example, [for a] home football game, I actually have a teacher in our district - I call him our game day host - [meet the official]. He literally takes the officials from their car when they arrive into the locker room to the field and back ... every night we try to have someone specially greet the officials when they arrive," Huegel said. "I think it's always important to greet the official and have it start off in a positive atmosphere."

The IHSAA and Huegel also work together to promote good sportsmanship.

"[We try] to inundate the schools with ... positive sportsmanship and

how you should conduct yourself."

This is the Character Count's initiative, which focuses on displaying good sportsmanship and character in the community and is pushed by the IHSAA and Curtis.

In addition, the IHSAA holds clinics where officials learn the basics of officiating, as well as how to conduct oneself at an event.

"We want officials to know at the very start how they are going to exit if they need to exit quickly. We try to talk to athletic administrators to make sure that they do the best job that they can do with regard to being nearby the officials so they can help get them out of the facility," Curtis said.

"[OFFICIALS] ARE ENTITLED TO PROTECTION JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE A PERSON..."

—LEWIE CURTIS

For an official, the best way to react may be to not react at all.

"The best solution is always to avoid them. Unfortunately, there are situations where it's not possible to ignore a fan when they become overly abusive," Mathias said.

The IHSAA and other officiating associations have also tried to amp up recruiting of officials. Berka also noted the importance of keeping referees after they first start out.

"There is a lot of research that's been done that there's that tipping

point; if they stay in it past year two, then they stay in it for a long time," Berka said.

In the end, the responsibility rests in the hands of not one group, but multiple groups working together.

"It's a shared responsibility among

several groups to not only bring light to it but also reverse the trend [and] provide the necessary support for officials to get into and stay with it. And make it feel like they are part of the game, they have backing, they are supported," Berka said.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

PHOTO BY SARAH LONGMIRE

The IHSAA encourages high school students and other young college students to consider officiating. Curtis would encourage anyone with an interest in helping with athletics other than competing to consider it.

"There is certainly a need [for officials] and it is also a good way to stay involved in the sport," Curtis said.

The cost to register for one sport is \$20 and more information can be found at the IHSAA website.

"We need to keep building that pipeline of good young officials because a lot of times what will happen is our officials will either retire because they're old ... or as they're young officials they get families [and no longer have time to officiate]," Huegel added.

Though Goodman decided that officiating was not a good career choice for her, she is still supportive of youth sports and high school students refereeing.

"I still encourage it ... It just wasn't really fun for me," she said.

Mathias is an advocate of adolescents and college students officiating, despite the occasional controversy the referee may be presented with, saying, "More often than not you'll have a positive experience ... It's a great way to stay involved in the sport you love and meet a bunch of great people and stay active as well."

