

The IndependentSPORTS

Hey Ref, **YOU SUCK!**

After an official was assaulted at a youth football playoff game, NCAFA takes aim at improving the culture at parks throughout Eastern Ontario

BY JEFF MORRIS

Greg Vail of Barrhaven has been a football official for nearly 30 years.

This year, he made a decision. He will no longer offer his services to be a referee for NCAFA football games.

"I do this because I enjoy it," he said. "But the way it is now – with the abuse we take at games – I don't enjoy it anymore."

Vail is not alone with his feelings. The difficulty with the way parents, coaches and players are treating officials has become one of the most difficult and unexpected problems the National Capital Amateur Football Association is facing.

A long and difficult season came to a boiling point during the semi-final weekend earlier this month. After a game in Cumberland, an official was assaulted in the parking lot. Though it was the worst situation of that weekend, it wasn't the only one. Dur-

ing a tyke game in Kanata played by eight- and nine-year-olds, a parent celebrated a touchdown by running onto the playing field, jumping up and down, and waving his middle fingers at the opposition coach while shouting obscenities. After another game, an official was berated with obscenities by an angry parent who followed him to his car after his 11-year-old's team lost a game.

"I've never seen it like this," Vail said. "This year, it has been crazy. I know you will always have people arguing or disagreeing with calls, but this year was completely out of control. If it keeps up, a lot of officials won't put up with it."

"It's not the kids and for the most part, it's not the coaches. Some spectators cannot contain themselves, or behave in a manner that shows leadership, or restraint. Threatening violence as a result of a call, or non-call, verbally assaulting offi-

cial during, and then again after the games, and at worst, following officials into the parking lot to continue the threats and abuse is not acceptable."

Barrhaven resident and NCAFA President Steve Dean meets with the Eastern Ontario Tackle Football Officials Association on a regular basis, and he said that eliminating the abuse that officials are subjected to will be met head on. The EOTFOA officials work games from Cornwall to Brockville, and from Hawkesbury to Deep River, as well as all games in Ottawa and Gatineau. Officials receive a stipend for games, which with the time commitments involved, often works out to less than minimum wage. Officials are also responsible for their own uniforms, supplies, and training sessions and clinics. For those who require physiotherapy during a season, many spend money officiating instead of making money on the field.

"Without officials, there is no game," Dean said. "The way our officials were treated this year was not acceptable, and it will be a priority in the offseason to change the culture at the parks next season."

Dean said that solving the problem will begin with the head coaches. He said that during the offseason, a clinic for head coaches will address the issue of abuse toward officials by coaches, players and spectators.

"It's a chain reaction," said Dean. "If the kids playing here the coaches being abusive toward officials, then they will think it's acceptable behaviour. It may be verbal abuse, or it may be something as simple as a coach throwing his arms up in the air and rolling his eyes. Either way, he is sending a message of disrespect to his coaches and players, and even the parents. That's where the problem behaviour begins, and as it goes along, it gets worse. But ultimately, the head coaches have to be account-



Barrhaven Independent editor and publisher Jeff Morris is one of the dozens of people who "give back to the game" by being a football official. After an official was assaulted in the parking lot following an NCAFA youth playoff game last month, abuse and treatment of officials will be at the forefront as club executives plan for next season.

MIKE CARROCCETTO PHOTO

able."

Dean has two fingers in the proverbial pie, as on top of being the NCAFA President, he is also President of the local club in NCAFA, the Nepean Eagles. The behaviour of players, coaches and spectators toward officials has been a problem in a number of local sports. Minor hockey's problems have been highly publicized across the country, and Dean said he is looking at how the different sports are coping with the issue. The Nepean Minor Hockey Association has a code of conduct that is strictly enforced.

"During the course of all NMHA activities and events, members of the NMHA shall conduct themselves at all times in a fair and responsible manner," the policy reads. "They shall refrain from comments or actions that are disrespectful, offensive, abusive, racist, or sexist. Behaviour that constitutes harassment or abuse (as defined by Canadian hockey governing bodies) will not be tolerated by the NMHA."

Dean said that while there has always been an expectation level

for the behaviour of people at youth football games, a more aggressive and proactive policy is needed. He praised Kanata Knights President Dan Lachance for promptly removing the parent that came onto the field shouting obscenities during the tyke game from the park.

"Football is different than the other sports," Dean said. "There is a culture of respect, teamwork and discipline. The behaviour we have seen this year does not belong at a football game. Some will say that a 'hockey mentality' has crept into our sport, but we can't point fingers at hockey or at soccer or at any other sport. We just have to establish parameters of what is acceptable at the park during football fields. If spectators can't abide by those rules, they will be sent home, and they will have to watch a live stream of it online or find another way to watch it. But either way, the honour system we have is not enough."

Dean recalled a situation he saw when his daughter played soccer in the Ottawa South United program,

and how that situation was handled by the official.

"The girls playing were about 12 and there was a 16-year-old referee," he said. "There was a parent who was out of control and chirping relentlessly. Finally, the referee stopped the game, and calmly told the parent that if he continued to behave in that manner, the game would be stopped and it would not start again until he left the park. Not only did the parent behave the rest of the game, but he was extremely embarrassed. The situation was handled perfectly."

Jim Lianos, General Manager of Ottawa South United, said that education is the key in preventing situations like the ones NCAFA has been facing this year. With 10,000 players, OSU is one of the largest soccer clubs in the country.

OSU has a code of conduct for players, coaches and parents. In all three, respecting officials and their decisions on the field, right or wrong, is mandatory.

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Snow Bowl

Nepean Midget Eagles' running back Noah Gauthier (7) dances into the end zone for a touchdown during the "Inter-provincial Bowl" championship football game at Carleton University's MNP Park Sunday, November 19. The Eagles, who won the NCAFA championship in early November by beating Bel-Air 7-6, lost 18-10 to the Montreal champions, the North Shore Mustangs. In position to make the call is veteran official Andre Papineau, who officiates many NCAFA youth, high school, OPFL and university games from May through November. Papineau is also a CFL off-field official.

MIKE CARROCCETTO PHOTO

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"If a parent is out of control and crosses the line of what is acceptable behaviour, we will have a disciplinary hearing," Lianos said. "Usually, a parent understands when they have acted inappropriately. What really brings the point home for them is when the referees are young people. How would those parents like it if an irate parent was pointing that kind of behaviour at their child? When a parent has to be held accountable for their behaviour at a game, they are usually embarrassed."

Lianos said that treatment of officials and coaches is addressed in meetings at the beginning of each season, and an expectation level is put into place.

"Our referees are a big part of our club," Lianos said. "We are developing players, but we also develop referees and coaches. If our young referees are not treated with respect, why would they continue to be referees? And if we don't have referees, we don't have games."

Lianos added that the most important message

sent to parents is that the game is just that – a game.

"At the end of the day, it's just a game," he said. "It's a game meant to be enjoyed by everyone involved. We want to create a positive atmosphere for everyone."

Part of the training that soccer officials receive is in dealing with situations involving unruly spectators.

"That's one thing that we will look to work on in football," Dean said. "We have to arm our officials with the proper tools to deal with these situations properly."

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