

# Unacceptable Behavior at High School Sporting Events – It's Still Happening

By Dr. Karissa Niehoff on May 08, 2024

*nfhs news*

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Unacceptable behavior at high school sporting events – it's still happening. And much of this deplorable behavior continues to be directed at the thousands of individuals who VOLUNTEER to serve as contest officials.

While many states have reported an increase in the number of individuals signing up to officiate high school sports – particularly in the past few years of recovery from the pandemic – surviving the constant questioning of calls, name-calling, profane language and even violent attacks remains a challenge for new officials.

This is supposed to be EDUCATION-BASED SPORTS. Yet, the NFHS has heard reports of coaches – and even student-athletes themselves – disrespecting officials on the court and field.

We have to do better. We must do better. As the slogan for our Bench Bad Behavior campaign says, Enough is Enough.

One of our sport directors attended a state basketball tournament a few weeks ago. The games were action-packed, the skill level was superb, the stands were packed. Two outstanding teams advanced to the championship game. The tournament was a great success – except for the behavior. In high school sports, however, that is an unacceptable exception. Coaches and players in the final game were constantly on the officials, questioning calls. Does winning, in and of itself, define success in high school sports? The answer should be a resounding NO!

Since the NFHS started its Become an Official campaign about seven years ago, more than 125,000 people have applied to become a high school official. These are individuals who had a desire to give up time on weeknights and weekends – for not much money – so that millions of high school students could be involved in sports.

These individuals officiate to give back to high school athletics. Do they get every call right every night? Absolutely not, just like coaches and student-athletes make mistakes at times.

High school sports need to be different than the college and professional levels, where players and coaches tend to complain about almost every call. High school sports are also different than non-school youth travel teams, where the emphasis is on individual accomplishments and winning. While we wish the behavior of coaches and athletes at other levels presented a better role model, behavior in education-based high school sports must be different.

In a 2023 survey by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), 35,000-plus officials who completed the survey indicated that while 40 percent of sportsmanship problems are caused by parents, 25 percent of the behavior issues were attributed to coaches. Not surprisingly, 50 percent of the survey respondents said coaches were the group most responsible for improving sportsmanship.

Bingo! In high school sports, coaches set the stage for the proper displays of sportsmanship and positive support for officials. If coaches are haranguing officials throughout the game, the message to players and fans is that type of behavior is acceptable. If coaches take the lead and show support for officials, others will follow.

In that same survey, 68 percent of the respondents said sportsmanship is getting worse – six years earlier in a similar survey 57 percent indicated behavior was getting worse. And 72 percent of the officials indicated they are treated unfairly by coaches. We are definitely going in the wrong direction!

This is extremely disappointing. We must do better. In high school sports, coaches must support those individuals who are serving as officials – those people who make it possible for the games to continue. The goal is for everyone to work together for the betterment of the eight million participants in high school sports.

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