

## Verbal abuse from parents, coaches is causing a referee shortage in youth sports

By Nick Eilerson June 16

Warren Graver raised the whistle to his lips midway through the second half, bracing to shift his focus from the sideline hysterics to the girls' soccer game at hand three years ago.

And that's when the veteran youth soccer referee saw two men walking onto the field.

It was a Sunday afternoon at an under-16 tournament in Vienna, and Graver had just ejected an invective-spewing coach. Without warning or permission, two angry parents marched across the field to take the coach's place on the bench.

Uncertainty gripped Graver. Emotions were running high. There was no field marshal or senior official in the vicinity. It was the only time Graver can remember feeling fear as a referee.

"It could have easily escalated into something physical," Graver said.

Following a decade as a referee, Graver returned for one more season. But he said that incident in Vienna crystallized a creeping realization: His days in the job were numbered.

"I said, 'I would rather spend my time on the weekends with my kids and with my wife than stand out here and be abused by these parents,' " said Graver, who kept good to his word and hasn't been a referee in the past two years. "It doesn't make sense."

Graver's experience — or something similar — plays out every weekend across the country.

Administrators contend that escalating verbal abuse is partially to blame for a dwindling referee pool in youth and high school sports. The fallout is crippling officiating bodies mired in a deeply cutthroat sports culture, one that often holds amateur referees to a professional standard.

Perhaps no sport suffers from the shortage more than soccer. Player participation numbers rise every year in the D.C. area while referee organizations grapple with stagnation or decline, leaving youth leagues in a constant scramble to fill officiating slots.

Soccer is not alone in its troubles. Mid-Atlantic Officials, one of the D.C. area's largest referee assigning groups for baseball, is enduring its worst shortage of umpires and referees in more than 25 years, according to Commissioner John Porter.

Only about half of the umpires who complete one year are back for a second year, and the five-to-seven year attrition rate hovers around 80 percent.

In football, the Fairfax County Football Officials Association said it has experienced a 40 percent drop over the past three years, according to an estimate by referee assignor Andre Jones.

Both Porter and Jones pointed to referee abuse as a significant driving force behind the declines.

It was certainly a factor in Kevin Griffin's decision to quit officiating youth football games two years ago. Griffin recalled seeing five or six irate parents approach him in the parking lot after a spring flag football game in

Gainesville, Va. The 15-year officiating veteran instinctively reached for his granddaughters' two aluminum softball bats in the trunk of his car, stepped forward and asked, "Who's going to be first?"

"When it gets to that point right there, I came home and I talked to my wife, and she was like, 'Nope, that's it. Give it up. Let it go,'" Griffin said. "And that's what I did."

It's a decline transpiring wherever games are played. On average, only two of every 10 officials return for their third year of officiating, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

And Barry Mano, founder and president of the 22,000-member National Association of Sports Officials, does not expect the situation to improve anytime soon. More referee shortages will mean more game cancellations, leaving youth and high school sports with a growing problem.

"Without us going out there and working these games, we've got Armageddon," Mano said.

### **Close calls, angry reactions**

Last month, a few minutes into sudden-death overtime of an opening-round game of the Virginia 6A North region boys' soccer tournament between Patriot High and W.T. Woodson, a Patriot player sent a long ball upfield, with three teammates standing in offside positions.

A fourth teammate, however, tore through a gap in the Woodson defense from an onside position, rounded the goalkeeper and scored the winning goal. Assistant referee Scott Hartman stood directly across from the play on the sideline and maintains total conviction in the decision not to call offside.

With the game over, a pair of incensed Woodson players beelined for Hartman. Their coach, Andrew Peck, who has since stepped down from his position, stormed in seconds later to unload another diatribe.

As Hartman and his two fellow referees packed up their gear, parents and fans lobbed insults at them on their way toward the stadium exit. Some stood menacingly at the end of the fence line, apparently waiting for the refs to come their way.

W.T. Woodson's director of student activities, Dan Checkosky, approached the refs and insisted on escorting them to their cars. But he did little to quiet the fans, according to Hartman, and even chastised the referees for missing several possible fouls by Patriot.

"I told him, 'You're the exact reason that we're losing referees, and you're the reason that parents and coaches are out of control,'" Hartman said.

The abuse often takes on a different form for female referees, many of whom say they encounter sexism nearly every time they step onto the field.

"I've had no compunction about tossing a player who's spat at me or called me a whore," said veteran soccer referee Thea Bruhn, who said adult recreational games are most prone to egregious behavior. "I've been called that and worse in at least a dozen languages."

Lauren Hartman, Scott's older sister, quit refereeing high school games last year after becoming fed up with snippy players and the coaches who enable them.

"It's terrifying that we're going to live in a society where if you scream and holler and curse and make yourself a fool that you're going to get your way," said Hartman, 29. "That's absolutely crazy."

## Not worth the sacrifice

In response to rising reports of controversy, the Commonwealth Soccer Officials Association (CSOA) began conducting match inspections at Northern Virginia high schools in mid-April. Of the 42 matches inspected, 85 percent featured loud vocal dissent from fans, of which 20 percent included spectator profanity.

And while the incidence of red cards this season has not changed much from last year, the number of cards for foul and abusive language has doubled.

Hartman points the finger at school administrators. While some schools are vigilant about maintaining decorum, he said, others neglect holding their coaches accountable for poor behavior.

"It's a joke," said Scott Hartman, 27. "They're more worried about wins and losses."

There are numerous other explanations. Officiating organizations emphasize tolerance and allow coaches to dictate which referees work certain games. An explosion of travel leagues coincides with overzealous parents who want to see their kids strive for college scholarships. Professional players on television, meanwhile, show kids that feigning injury and berating referees are normal behaviors.

In Virginia, some coaches cite a feedback system that they say lacks transparency and doesn't allow them to adequately provide evaluations of referee performance.

And then there's the existential view.

"There's no moral fiber left in our society," said Northern Virginia Football Officials Association Commissioner Dennis Hall, who dealt with 32 player and coach ejections across all levels of youth football in 2016. "People think because they paid to get into the game they can say and do anything they want, and they think they know the rules better than the officials because they watch television."

Referees often leave their day jobs early to travel to far-flung games and get home around 10:30 p.m. Center referees earn about \$66 per varsity game, while linesmen take in \$47.

A former referee, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity, thought back to what prompted him to quit. It was a freezing night in Northern Virginia two years ago, and parents were eviscerating him for calling a penalty kick in a 1-0 high school game.

At some point, it dawned on him. He was cold; he was wet; his family was waiting for him at home. Why was he on this frigid turf field, enduring this relentless torrent of callous barbs?

"There's zero regard for the fact that I'm making a sacrifice to be here," he thought, "and I'm being sacrificed."