

15 quick, must-read takeaways from the ArbiterSports National Webinar on sportsmanship and its impact on the shortage of officials.



Executive Overview

On August 10th, 2022, Arbiter Sports, in alliance with *Athletic Business Magazine*, hosted a National Webinar titled: **HOW SPORTSMANSHIP IS IMPACTING THE SHORTAGE OF OFFICIALS AND WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS?** In a reflection of the significance of this subject to high school and college sports, nearly 375 athletic directors, associates and administrators registered for the event making it one of the largest webinars in the history of *Athletic Business Magazine*, in spite of the webinar being held during summer break.

Joining the publication's Managing Editor, Andy Berg, and Arbiter's host, Spencer Evans, were two highly esteemed webinar panelists, Darryl Nance and Kevin Dustin. Darryl is a renowned Master Athletic Administrator, South Carolina Basketball Coach of the Year, and NIAAA Recipient of the Award of Merit who was joined by Kevin who is the Salt Lake City College Director of Athletics, State Championship High School Basketball Coach, and NJCAA Athletic Director for Championship teams in Soccer and Basketball.

About ArbiterSports

ArbiterSports impacts more than 65 million Americans each year, one in every five of us, through their network of products and strategic integrations including Arbiter Registration, Arbiter Scheduling and Arbiter Pay which are the leading high school and college software solutions for sports, events and scholastic management. Recently, Arbiter surpassed the \$1 billion threshold in payment processing, through Arbiter Pay, making the company the leader in K12 payment solutions to 1099 workers.



Darryl Nance



Kevin Dustin



1 TAKEAWAY ONE

Arbiter's entire business model has been significantly affected by sportsmanship and the shortage of officials.

As Spencer Evans indicated, ArbiterSports is more impacted by the shortage of officials than any other company in the U.S. That's because with hundreds of thousands of officials, managed by more than 5,000 assigners in the Arbiter pool, the official shortage becomes a systematic challenge, certainly for schools and school districts, but also for Arbiter's Scheduling software that must manage the fluctuations that occur in referee shortages on a nearly daily basis.

Staff at Arbiter began to notice a dwindling pool of referees quite a few years ago and that became the foundation for much of Arbiter's research into this issue. Arbiter did not set forth to research sportsmanship, the research plans and protocols were developed to research the shortages. In the end, the findings were abundantly clear that the shortage of officials was caused by bad behavior and a lack of sportsmanship of fans first, followed by coaches second.

2 TAKEAWAY TWO

Kevin recently met with the Director of Officials at the Utah High School Activities Association (UHSAA) who indicated that the trend is alarming in both Utah and the western United States.

Many officials are simply aging-out of the industry; unfortunately, those are the very best officials we have in terms of game management, crowd control, and control of the coaches. The pipeline to replace those officials has dried-up compounded by the fact that sports is expanding both in participation and added types of athletics. When the UHSAA reviewed their research surveys, by far and away, the results showed that sportsmanship was the main catalyst for driving-away officials who because of low pay and the time commitment just don't want to put up with bad behavior anymore.



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3 TAKEAWAY THREE

According to Darryl, where many think that Covid played a role in the shortage, and it did, the trend in the reduction of referees has been seven years in the making.

For Darryl, the shortage has been impacting their district for up to seven years, but for some sports like soccer and high school basketball, the shortages can be more extreme. And then when COVID hit, like any workforce, referees just didn't want to referee. The training and the pipeline to recruit officials is simply hit or miss. The real problem is that officials are becoming 50, 60 and even older, but the athletes will always be 15, 16 and 17. Although we can't keep recycling the older officials year after year, they are the ones with the experience and the expertise and we need to find a way for them to be the mentors to new officials.

Pay is definitely a factor, too. In South Carolina they have increased the pay significantly, but still, the shortage persists. In fact, Darryl has 20 middle schools in his district and can't possibly schedule more than 10 games in an afternoon or evening. And then those games need to be balanced with the varsity games and it becomes a chess match for assigners.

4 TAKEAWAY FOUR

The pipeline used to be robust, but there were so many options to become involved, as well as a tremendous amount of collegiality in officiating, that we need to find a way to return to that success.

Not that long ago, there were robust officiating classes that PE majors attended. Students would officiate games in conjunction with experienced referees and gradually work up to varsity games. That's how the pipeline continued to grow. Now, PE majors are less, colleges are no longer offering classes, and there aren't many places to turn for the education and training of referees.

What we need to do is look at students in junior, community and the college level, who will not play on the field or the court, but who love sports, to help fill the pipeline. And, in the past, where we always pushed those individuals into coaching, perhaps we should be pushing them into officiating because it can be a profession, and the good officials will always move to advanced levels in this business.

[Read Kevin Dustin's interview here:](#)



5 TAKEAWAY FIVE

We can talk about poor sportsmanship from fans and bad behavior of parents, but we need to shed greater light on the behavior of coaches because the way a coach behaves WILL BE THE WAY a student-athlete behaves and the way a fan will behave.

Our esteemed panelists don't think the behavior of coaches is addressed as frequently as it should be. Although it's important to note that ArbiterSports' research clearly indicates that the behavior of coaches is a contributing factor to the shortage of officials. Kevin believes that there was a time when coaches coached for the love of the game, but today, many coaches are performing at a level that is egocentric at its core; that they are coaching to satisfy their own goals and accomplishments. The focus is now on the coach when it should always be on the athlete.

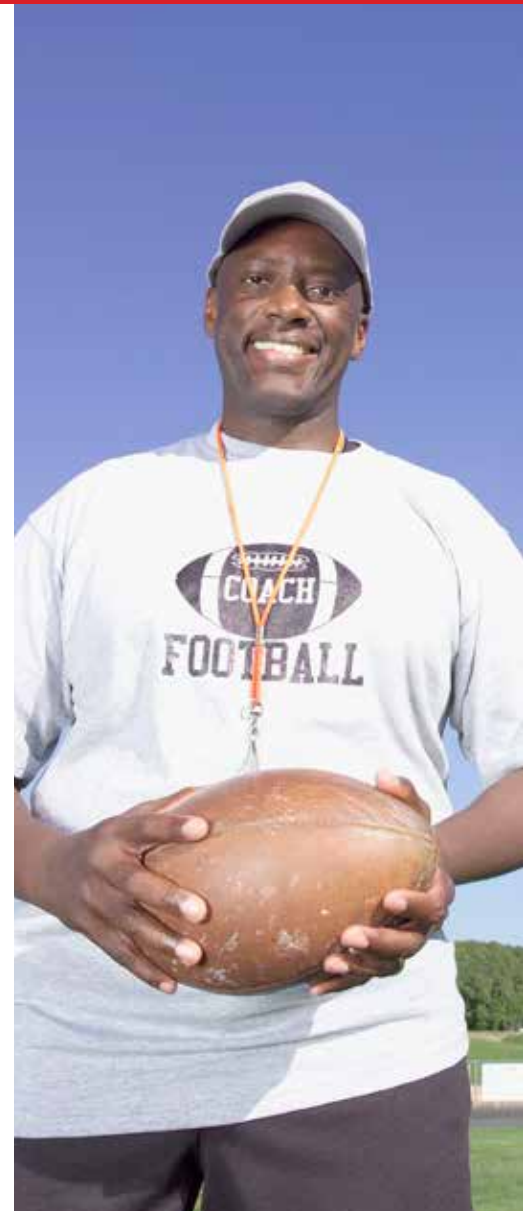
To that end, if a coach is always on the officials, it won't be long before the fans are, too. That's why Kevin would much rather see a video of a coach on the sidelines than receiving a resume.

6 TAKEAWAY SIX

It doesn't matter if you're in a match with a crosstown rival or an out-of-town opponent, officials are your guests and should be treated that way.

We need to be thinking that our opponents are also our guests. And how do you treat a guest in your home? You make certain things nice, you tidy-up your home when you have a visitor. Sure, there's a game to play, but you need to treat the team as if you're a gracious host. And the second visiting team are the officials. You need to treat them as guests, too.

Meet and greet the officials. Give them a secure place to stow their gear. Welcome them into your home. If it's a 5:00 game, where will they have eaten if they're just coming from work? You can do better than a candy bar and a water bottle. And most of all, be a leader, be the school that leads in the positive treatment of both teams. Don't just try to manage behavior and say kids will be kids; be the leader in positive behavior.



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7 TAKEAWAY SEVEN

Never underestimate the power of a bad example.

Kevin told a really important story and we need to heed his advice. It was a long time ago, and he was on the basketball court, waving his arms and shaking his head and not acting in an appropriate manner. An official looked at him as if to say, “You need to help here, you can’t be that guy who everyone is looking at rolling your eyes and behaving that way.” Kevin removed himself from the game, sat in the stands and reflected on what his path going forward would be.

Now he’s the first to escort the officials to their secure area at half time, making sure they relax and get some rest. He’s being the good host he needs to be. With the pipeline drying-up, we need to retain the referees we have, not scare them away.

8 TAKEAWAY EIGHT

In this webinar, there were many references to the act of sportsmanship that occurred in the Little League World Series [highlighted in this video](#).



As Darryl said of the Little League act of sportsmanship, “That’s kids teaching adults how to behave.” We need to focus more on the positive acts of kindness and publicize those actions more. Yes, the negative occurrences receive the attention, but as administrators, it’s our job to make certain the good stories are told, too.

9 TAKEAWAY NINE

It's important to know your gym, your facility, your audience, and your fans. You just have to be able to feel the room.

As an athletic director, you ultimately know what the good sounds are in your building and what the bad sounds are. You also know what good silence is and what bad silence is. Just as there are good, positive cheers, there are also bad, negative cheers, and as administrators, we need to be able to shut down the negative with a snap of the fingers. In fact, according to Kevin and Darryl, athletic directors should be able to look at their fans and their cheering sections and immediately calm them down.

10 TAKEAWAY TEN

How do we teach the type of sportsmanship and behavior we want to see, how do we model it so it sticks, so it becomes less of a problem?

The way Darryl sees it, parents are going to be as vocal as anyone, that's just the way it is. When he was coaching, Darryl implemented an innovative parent's practice. There, he would teach the parents what the athletes were working on, why they were doing it, and what the objectives were. Ultimately, Darryl would put the parents in the scrimmage to teach them the pressure their kids are under, the quick decisions they need to make, and why their kid might not play if they're not prepared to implement dozens of different plays at a moment's notice.

Then Darryl would dismiss the team and tell the parents, "All I want you to do is love your son. Stand behind the bench and cheer for him when he enters the game and leaves the court. Cheer for his teammates, too. I'll coach them, you love them. I'll talk to the officials; you love your kid. When I finally figured-out how to create that family bond between all of our families, it changed our demeanor and people noticed. When my replacement took over, I only gave him these words of advice, 'don't ever lose the parents, we've worked so hard to keep them'".

[Read Darryl's story here](#)



11 TAKEAWAY ELEVEN

If you ask 15 people to define sportsmanship, you might get 15 different answers. But the only definition that really matters is the definition that we need to teach over and over again.

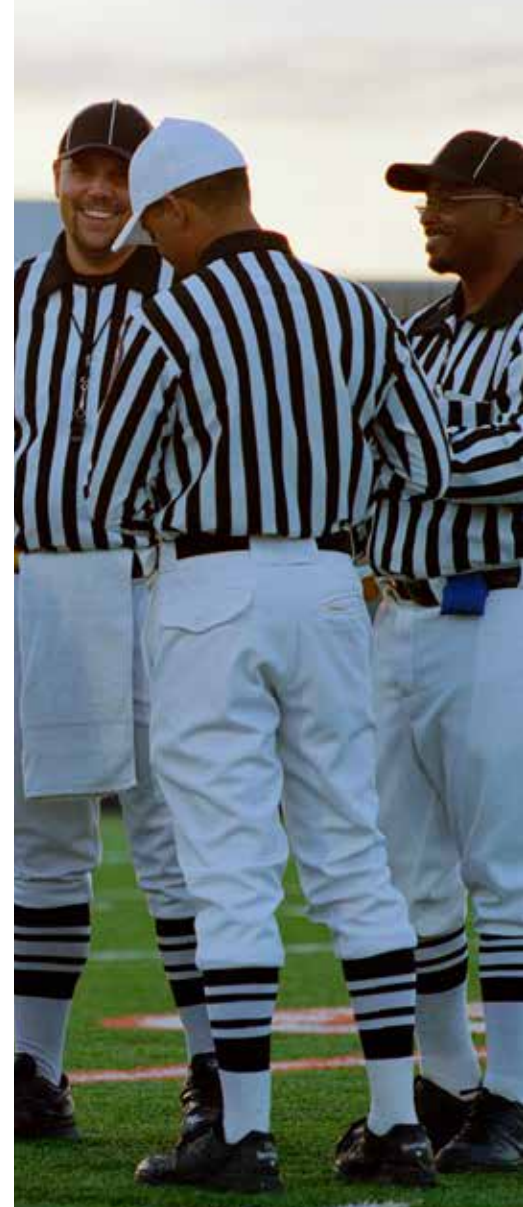
Sportsmanship's meaning, at least in high school sports, is fairness and fair play; integrity; respect; and the willingness to win, ethically. We need to be teaching that to our kids, and we are, and many times the kids become better role models than their parents. But every year, there are new teams, new players, new fans, so we need to start over in some cases, but we can't ever stop teaching those fundamentals. And we must be so very proactive.

12 TAKEAWAY TWELVE

As athletic directors, we need to become more cognizant of some of the little things we can do to ensure a positive experience for the officials.

We're starting to see this more and more, but when it comes to your home venue, there are little things you can do to increase the safety and the hospitality you should show your officials. They should never feel threatened or uncomfortable in any way. Fans should never have physical access to referees; officials should always have their own entry and exit doors, fans should not be near the officials break area, or be anywhere near them when going off or on a field or court.

Unfortunately, some people say that's what hired security is for, but in reality, it depends on the type of security you hire. If you're using police officers, they're not addressing general misbehavior. As administrators, we need to sit down with people and talk to them and tell them their behavior is not okay. Darryl has a friend in Oklahoma who people called "The Blow-Pop AD" because he hands unruly fans a blow-pop and tells them to settle down.



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13 TAKEAWAY THIRTEEN

As an administrator, your eyes need to be everywhere on the stands and your head needs to constantly pivot. You must watch for bad behavior in the bleachers. But in the end, you need to have a calming effect on just about every aspect of the game.

Different districts might have varying policies on signs in the stands, but you must keep watch for signs that are derogatory or racist. And you must get help within your circle for proximity control, which is huge. An experienced AD should be able to walk-up an aisle and the fans should get quieter. They know who you are and they know why you're taking that stroll.

Additionally, administrators need to be prepared for virtually anything that might happen. Kevin talked about pep rallies when he was a high school coach and it was incumbent upon him to discuss expected behavior at those rallies. Further, Kevin mentioned that some of the bad behavior by student-athletes actually is rooted in some club sports that are less structured and more about winning. But really we need to calm things down, and if we don't, people won't want to participate, and if you think that's not possible, that's foolish thinking because it's already happening in other countries.

[Read more about Arbiter's research on the ref shortage here:](#)

14 TAKEAWAY FOURTEEN

Today, we're seeing officials far more times in a year than in the past. And because we're seeing them more frequently, there's even more reason to treat them with respect.

A while ago, we might see an official two or three times a year. Because of club sports, year around play, and travel ball, no matter what ball it is, we are seeing officials maybe 10 or more times a year. And they know each kid and each kid knows them, and it's not just in one sport; many of these officials referee many different contests at many different levels.

If you're a parent, and you pay all of this extra money for travel ball expenses during weekend after weekend because you love the sport and you love watching your kid love the sport, don't you think those officials love the sport as much, if not more, than you do? Of course they do, and they are giving-up their weekend for you, so that your kid can play ball; please treat them with respect.



15 TAKEAWAY FIFTEEN

A Final Message From Darryl and Kevin:

The best answer for many of these issues and concerns is people need to be nicer and know their role. Parents need to love their kids and enjoy watching them grow and play. Coaches need to coach and love their kids and stop acting like a guy they saw on TV. Students need to cheer for their friends. Officials need to call it and move on with the game. They need to be decisive and keep the game going... and everybody be nicer to each other.



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