

The Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association has a message for parents of high school student-athletes: Cool it.

WIAA director Dave Anderson, in conjunction with the National Federation of High School Associations, is circulating an op-ed titled "Dear Mom and Dad: Cool it" that focuses on parents' verbal criticisms of officials at sporting events.

In addition to wanting to promote better [sportsmanship overall](#), the WIAA wants to address a shortage of officials.

"As the column points out, the parents of high school student-athletes in our state are not only causing a stir, they also are causing a problem," WIAA director of communications Todd Clark said. "We have a shortage of licensed high school officials in Wisconsin. Not only are experienced officials retiring, but younger officials are quitting. Why? Because of parental abuse."

Clark said the net result is that athletic events around the state have been rescheduled, postponed or outright canceled because of a lack of officials.

Longtime coaches and athletic directors from area high schools say the majority of spectators cause no issues, but the boisterous ones stand out.

"Parents, not all, are a problem at almost every high school and youth athletic event that I attend," Nicolet High School athletic director Kirk Krychowiak said. "The parents who cheer the right way and have the proper etiquette at games far outweigh the ones that don't, but those that don't tend to be the loudest and most difficult to deal with. I struggle with this as an administrator."

Overzealous fans at prep sporting events are nothing new, but school administrators say they have seen the problem grow over recent years.

"I want to stay optimistic and say it's always been this way, but there seems to be more of a culture of parents being more vocal, even more so than the kids in our student sections," Greenfield athletic director Trent Lower said. "I've seen an increase in the level of how upset parents are and how they display it at an athletic event."

The request from schools and the WIAA alike for good sportsmanship is nothing new. Attend any varsity basketball game this season and you will hear the public address announcer read a statement about the games being educational events.

"I think we have to get back to the core mission of why we're there," Lower said. "We're there because high school sports are there to provide enriching experiences, to add to the overall high school experience. It's not to bring criticism and negativity toward people who officiate and support that event."

The shortage of officials has been notable across the state. Lower first had to cancel lower-level soccer and baseball games last year because he simply couldn't find WIAA-sanctioned referees to work them. Older, more experienced officials find themselves with few nights off throughout the season, even if they would rather cut down their workload.

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"The refs that we see are the ones I've been seeing for 20 years now," Cudahy girls basketball head coach Bob Maronde said. "Some of them, they want to sort of phase out into retirement, but they have coaches and ADs basically saying they need them to stick around."

As for new officials, the WIAA's letter asserts 80 percent of them quit within two years.

"Younger refs? We don't see them," Lower said. "Not many of them exist."

Abuse isn't the only reason for lower officiating participation from younger people, said one former referee. Many who would otherwise put on the striped jerseys are focused on beginning their careers, have young children or are unable to fit games into their schedules.

"I knew a lot of the guys from club and WIAA reffing, and it can be tough to stick with it," said Stephen Moon, who officiated at the high school level for four years before giving it up.

"The WIAA, as it relates to soccer, doesn't make it easy for somebody who wants to do it on the side. If you're not a long-standing official, you get JV and freshman games that start at 5. I work 9-to-5, and that got difficult. I would have loved to keep going but I just couldn't."

Some schools have already taken up the initiative to try to get more students onto the field as officials.

Grafton is in the midst of its first semester of offering a class specifically geared toward teaching students how to become referees. The 22 students enrolled focus on one specific sport and work toward becoming a licensed official by semester's end.

"They can all officiate youth and middle school games for now, and after they graduate high school, they can referee lower level or freshman games," Grafton physical education teacher Mike Weldon said.

Below is the op-ed in its entirety.

Dear Mom and Dad: Cool it

By Karissa Niehoff, Executive Director of the National Federation of State High School Associations, and David Anderson, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association.

If you are the mother or father of a high school athlete here in Wisconsin, this message is primarily for you. (Youth)

When you attend an athletic event that involves your son or daughter, cheer to your heart's content, enjoy the camaraderie that high school sports offer and have fun. But when it comes to verbally criticizing game officials or coaches, cool it.

Make no mistake about it. Your passion is admired, and your support of the hometown team is needed. But so is your self-control. Yelling, screaming and berating the officials humiliates your child, annoys those sitting around you, embarrasses your child's school and is the primary reason Wisconsin has an alarming shortage of high school officials.

It's true. According to a recent survey by the National Association of Sports Officials, more than 75 percent of all high school officials say "adult behavior" is the primary reason they quit. And 80 percent of all young officials hang up their stripes after just two years of whistle blowing. Why? They don't need your abuse.

Plus, there's a ripple effect. There are more officials over 60 than under 30 in many areas. And as older, experienced officials retire, there aren't enough younger ones to replace them. If there are no officials, there are no games. The shortage of licensed high school officials is severe enough in some areas that athletic events are being postponed or cancelled — especially at the freshman and junior varsity levels.

Research confirms that participation in high school sports and activities instills a sense of pride in school and community, teaches lifelong lessons like the value of teamwork and self-discipline and facilitates the physical and emotional development of those who participate. So, if the games go away because there aren't enough men and women to officiate them, the loss will be infinitely greater than just an "L" on the scoreboard. It will be putting a dent in your community's future.

(Youth)

If you would like to be a part of the solution to the shortage of high school officials, you can sign up to become a licensed official at HighSchoolOfficials.com. Otherwise, adult role models at high school athletic events here in Wisconsin are always welcome.