Sports officials needed for all seasons

The number of available sports officials is so low this year that some games are being rescheduled for different days or times.

Pete Caldwell, football commissioner for the Northeast Oregon area, had 33 officials last year. This season he has 23, and four of those are currently fighting fires. Football games need four officials at 1A, 2A and 3A level and five for 4A games.

An issue came up right away when Caldwell saw 12 games scheduled for September 7. He said schools have already agreed to move games to either Thursday or Saturday.

“We're truly having a hard time covering games,” Caldwell said.

In some cases, he can have officials work two games in one day – one in the afternoon and another in the evening. His area covers football games in Baker, La Grande, Joseph, Enterprise, Elgin, Union, Cove, Imbler, North Powder, Pine-Eagle, Burnt River, John Day and Dayville-Monument.

New officials receive training – including on the job – and are paired with a veteran official. Pay per game varies from $40 to $60, depending on the level.

“You've got to do it for the love of the game,” Caldwell said. “You want to help the kids out, and still be involved in the game.”

This is Caldwell's fifth year as football commissioner.

“To be honest, this is the most trying year,” he said.

Dave Comfort is also facing a shortage of officials for basketball, softball and baseball. Last year, he
had seven available for baseball, and seven for softball. Each game, which is typically a double-header, requires two officials.

“If La Grande and Baker were both home on the same day, I couldn't cover anything else,” he said. “At some point, this will affect the ability of schools to even schedule games.”

Basketball season has more games to cover than any other sport, and right now Comfort has 37 officials to cover more than 900 games. His area includes 13 high schools, plus several junior highs. The challenge, he said, is that every school has a full set of games – JV and varsity for both girls and boys. Two officials can cover two games, which means he needs a total of four for each event. La Grande now requests three officials per game, which is the standard at state championships. Prior to having both his knees replaced, Comfort was officiating five to seven basketball games a week.

“And there were guys doing more than me,” he said.

Both Caldwell and Comfort say one of the toughest parts of officiating is conflicts with the coaches or parents. Official meetings help with this, Comfort said, because they talk about crowd responses and go over game situations.

As for games, Comfort pairs new officials with veterans.

“The best way is to send them with a senior partner who will totally have their back,” Comfort said.

He said junior high games are a good place to start officiating.

“You can get your sea legs doing junior high games,” he said.

Aside from recruiting new officials, retention can also be an issue.

“It's difficult to keep them for more than two years,” he said. “It's disappointing when you get that second-year guy, he's excited about it – then he moves.”

Jack Folliard, executive director of the Oregon Athletic Officials Association, said the shortage of officials is a wide-spread problem.

“It's a huge issue across the state in all sports, and an issue across the nation,” he said.

Folliard has tracked a decline of officials over the last nine years.

“We've lost 18 percent of our officials. And the number of contests hasn't gone down,” he said.

Plus, the current officials are aging – he said the average age is 48.

“There are some sports with a lot of physical requirements,” he said.

He's also noticed that fewer teachers are officiating now as compared to in the past.
“Teachers make great officials,” he said.

Folliard said he sees several factors that may keep people from becoming officials. First, there are inevitable conflicts with fans and coaches.

“You do have to have a thick skin,” he said.

Another factor is employment – officiating afternoon games requires a flexible job. Folliard said there were more officials during the recession because employment was down and people needed extra money.

Although at this point games are being rescheduled, he said the lack of officials could result in the cancellation of games at lower levels.

“If we continue to lose at the same rate, some games will not be able to be played,” he said.

Folliard officiated Pac-12 football for more than 30 years. He still officiates high school basketball games.

“Its a great way to give back, a great way to stay in shape, and you make a little money,” he said.

Volleyball officials are also needed. The Northeast Oregon Association currently has 15 officials, which Heidi Justus, commissioner, says is fairly consistent with past years. However, “more officials are always welcome,” she said.

“On days when there are multiple matches and/or tournaments scheduled, scheduling enough officials can become very creative to cover all the matches,” she said.

Each volleyball match requires two officials. She said the association covers many junior high matches in addition to high school.

To become an official or for more information, go to www.osaa.org and click on “Become an official.” Candidates must be older than 18, register with OSAA, and pass a background check. Another resource for information is www.osaa.org/new-officials/index.html.

The commissioners for each sport are listed online at www.osaa.org/officials along with their contact information. Contacts for the Northeast Oregon area are:

Pete Caldwell: 541-910-7020
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About Baker School District 5J

Nationally recognized Baker School District 5J (BSD) in Baker City, OR, is the largest of three
rural school districts in Baker County, serving 1,700 students and employing over 235 educators and staff. District elementary schools include Brooklyn Primary School, Haines Elementary, Keating Elementary School, and South Baker Intermediate. Baker Middle School and two high schools, Baker High School and Eagle Cap Innovative High School, are also part of BSD. Additionally, BSD sponsors two charter schools, Baker Web Academy and Baker Early College, each offering teacher-supported online education. BSD provides next generation education for the future of Eastern Oregonians and launched Baker Technical Institute (BTI), a career and technical program that partners with regional employers and industry experts to provide an innovative education in hands-on fields. BSD believes strong schools are the foundation of strong and vibrant communities and is committed to prepare students to become successful life-long learner.

The Baker 5J schools exist to be the center of community vitality eliminating the barriers for gratifying individual educational experiences in order to have capable contributing citizens with character.