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High school officiating a tough calling anymore Series: PREP FOCUS;
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Florida is losing officials, mostly because of mistreatment, and is searching for answers. Ron Allen looks at the future of high school football officiating in Florida, sees referees retiring their whistles and wonders who will take their place. "We're desperate, quite frankly," said Allen, the Florida High School Activities Association's deputy commissioner. "We're growing at such a rate statewide, and we're trying to find more young officials to keep up with that growth." All over the state, new schools are opening every year, with 10 percent more students in Florida public schools in 1998 than in 1994. Finding officials to keep up with the athletic interests of those students has been difficult, however, and since 1995, there actually has been a 3 percent drop in the number of football officials registered with the state. The shortage of young officials is not limited to football, or to Florida by any means, but the state is looking for answers. Why aren't more people interested in officiating and how can that be changed? Pete Rodriguez, a 45-year-old referee from Spring Hill who began officiating as a 19-year-old in New York, has some ideas. He has seen some changes in the sport over the years, but more alarming for him is the change in the way officials are treated. "If I was a rookie official starting out, I would probably have a difficult time trying to stick with it," Rodriguez said. "They are expected to start perfect and get better. They don't have the respect that was there when I started. They don't have enough time to mature while officiating. That's why a lot of them decide this is not for them, even though they might be good officials. They don't want to put up with it." Officials swap stories about parents waiting for them after games, about threats, about the fear of physical assault. Sandy Semegen, the booking coordinator for the West Central Officials Association in Brooksville, said the atmosphere surrounding an official is much more intense than it was when he started out. "Kids are more in your face," he said. "Years ago, if a kid ever gave an official a hard time, the first person that got into him was the coach. Right away, the coach was taking him out of the play. The second person was probably the parents. Now parents are coming to you after the game, running you down to tell you 'That was a horrendous call,' where they never did that before." What's more, younger officials start out working with younger players, where they say coaches are less experienced and knowledgeable and parents are the most unruly. "A young official isn't going to his high school game in his first two years unless there's an emergency," Rodriguez said. "At the lower levels, that's where you get your worst coaches. The higher the level, the easier it gets. A lot of people don't want to go into the profession. Why should they take the abuse?" Allen said the lack of respect shown to officials continues to serve as an obstacle in recruiting efforts, and if the poor treatment given to officials doesn't change, players and fans may



really have something to complain about. "If we don't ease up on our officials, we won't have any," he said. "We don't want to run off the ones we have. If we do, we'll have chaos." Because so many of those who give officiating a shot wind up throwing in the towel rather than continue tossing flags, there are larger efforts from organizations such as the National Association of Sports Officials to improve the conditions for officials. "We've noticed something of a three-year cycle," said Bob Still, public relations manager for the NASO, which has more than 19,000 members. "For every 100 that join up, 33 will quit after one year, and another 33 will quit after two years, so we're losing two officials for every one good one we find. There are not enough young people coming into officiating, and when you attend the clinics and conventions, you see a lot of gray hairs." The average age of the 1,613 football officials registered in Florida is 44.6 years, and the average experience is 9.4 years, meaning the average official starts out when he's 35. While the state is desperate for more officials, it isn't lowering its standards. In most areas, there is at least a two-year wait from when officials start to when they see varsity action, and before they do that, they must score a 75 or higher on the state's annual rules examination. Officials rarely are allowed to be wrong 25 percent of the time, but this 100-question, true-false exam has even the most experienced referees pulling out the rules book for a refresher course. "If you don't study, you don't pass it," Semegen said. "Some officials can do a whole game and never get themselves in trouble. Get them to take the test, and they're in trouble." The state also gives its football officials ratings, from 1 to 3, based on experience, attendance at clinics and performance on the exam. Only 22 percent of the state's registered football officials have "1" ratings, and all of them posted scores of 90 percent or higher on their tests. It has been a rough end of the millennium for officiating. A year ago, Sports Illustrated ran "Kill the Umps" on its cover, and this year's labor relations problems for baseball officials pushed officials deeper into enemy territory for most fans. With the return of instant replay in the NFL, there's never been a better time to second-guess any call. So why does anybody do it? Some officials can work on the same crew for years, and the trust and friendships that build within a crew are a big reason many will work a Friday night whenever they can. "You find a camaraderie among the guys," Semegen said. "They meet together, dress together, and the majority of them stop and get a bite to eat afterwards and talk." One thing most officials will say with pride is that they're not in it for the money. Officiating a varsity high school game pays \$50 for about four hours' work, not counting the commute. The clock operator gets only \$23, and local associations typically offer a small reimbursement for travel, around \$3 to \$5. "You have to have the incentive to want to stay," Rodriguez said. "The money doesn't really matter. For me, it has always been that I was out there doing something I enjoy. At one of my first clinics when I was 19, they said, 'If you're looking to get rich at this profession, you better do something else.'" Nonetheless, the state is hoping to strike it rich by finding more young officials. The association is offering a \$17 discount on registration for high school seniors age 17 and older, with the hope that they'll stick with officiating. The veteran officials are a crucial part of this, mentoring the rookies, reminding them why they're out there and telling them they've made the right call. "You have to have a lot of common sense. Once you know the rules, common sense takes over," Rodriguez said. "What keeps them in depends on who they get to work with. If you



don't have the right support, it can be very difficult to adjust. I've been blessed in that I worked with some of the best officials in the city of New York when I started. One thing I've learned is that I don't know everything, and by the time I retire, there will still be a lot of things to learn." During the football playoffs this month, the officials on the field will represent the best available, through recommendations from local associations and a tough selection process. "We've got the best teams out there, so why not give them the best officials as well?" said Allen, who would like to see high school coaches taking the annual exam. With 17 percent of the officials older than 55 this year, there are heavy losses simply due to retirement each winter. What state officials hope is that a new class can walk onto the field, not only to replenish what's left, but to give the industry a new set of downs. "Every year you find one guy that will stand out," Semegen said. "The veteran guys come to me and say, 'Hey, this guy is really good. Why don't we try him on another level?' We need more guys like that, someone that's good, that's come along, that's really into it. Not everybody has the makeup for it, but the ones who do, we say, 'Don't prove it at home watching TV. Try going out on the field

for a year.' "BY THE NUMBERSSPORT TOTAL AVG. AVG.
AGE EXP.

Baseball 382 47.6 8.5Basketball 1,782 42.8
8.2Football 1,613 44.6 9.4Soccer 927 44.4
5.4Volleyball 684 44.4 5.3

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In years.FOOTBALL OFFICIALS: 1,613UNDER 40 - 609 (38 percent)AGE 40-55 - 725 (45 percent)OVER 55 - 279 (17 percent)RANK 1 - 354 (22 percent)RANK 2 - 472 (29 percent)RANK 3 - 787 (49 percent)SAMPLE QUESTIONS Who wants to be a football official? To officiate a varsity football game, officials must score a 75 or higher on the state's annual exam, which has 100 true-false questions. About 15 percent of the officials don't pass, but before you laugh, see how you fare on these 10 questions we selected from the test. 1. It is illegal use of hands if an offensive player grasps or encircles any teammate to form interlocked blocking. 2. During a free kick, the clock starts on the first touching by the kickers. 3. If a forward pass accidentally hits an ineligible receiver while he is in or behind the neutral zone, that touching is ignored. 4. The passer must release the ball on a legal forward pass with an overhead motion from above his waist. 5. After a field goal, the opponent of the scoring team shall designate which team will kick off. 6. To complete a catch, an airborne player must have possession of the ball and come down with both feet inbounds unless an opponent's contact causes him to first touch out of bounds. 7. It is illegal for a defensive player to trip a runner on the offensive team. 8. Giving an invalid fair-catch signal carries a 15-yard penalty. 9. An eye shield which prevents visual examination of a player's eyes is illegal. 10. The penalty for an illegal forward pass is 10 yards and loss of down.1. T; 2. F; 3. T; 4. F; 5. T; 6. F; 7. F; 8. F; 9. T; 10. F.The cost of being a refereeHAT: \$10JACKET: \$58 (optional)SHIRT: \$25BELT: \$6 (must be black)PANTS: \$35SOCKS: \$6 (apparently there are official socks, honest)SHOES:



\$30BEANBAG: \$4DOWN INDICATOR: \$2PENALTY FLAG: \$3-5WHISTLE: \$4-
6WHISTLE LANYARD: \$2OFFICIAL'S CARD: \$6REGISTRATION WITH STATE:
\$27REGISTRATION WITH LOCAL ASSOCIATION: \$15-25TOTAL: \$175-\$247