



Arbiter Sports Research

# The Shortage Of Officials Has Plagued High School Sports For Many Years And The Problems Have Intensified

## Insights From High School Athletic Directors, Assigners And Coaches



**ArbiterSports**

*The Only One That's All In One*

# Overview

For more than 37 years, Arbiter has been at the forefront of high school and collegiate sports through products that manage and coordinate sporting and scholastic events, their tracking, record-keeping, and payment processing that leads the industry. In the last year, for instance, Arbiter has impacted over 65 million Americans, one in every five of us, through SaaS solutions for online Registration, Scheduling and digital Payment systems.

With over \$500 million in payments processed, 35 million events coordinated each year, impacting 15 million high school students in more than 25,000 high schools, and 60 million official assignments each year, Arbiter possesses data and develops insights that can shed further light on the shortages of officials. This concern is not limited to high schools; the shortage of refs also affects middle schools and colleges and universities that typically draw their referees from experienced and talented high school officials.

In this report, Arbiter highlights some of the findings, attitudes and perceptions from research and discussions with Athletic Directors, Assigners and Coaches.



# Findings From Assigners

In a survey conducted by Arbiter in January of 2022 among 400 top Assigners who have operated in the business for over two years and have more than 25 officials and referees on their roster that they assign with frequency, the respondents provided the following answers to an online survey:

## 1. How long have you been an assigner?

- Less than 3 years: **6.23%**
- 3-5 years: **9.73%**
- 5-7 years: **10.72%**
- More than **7 years: 73.32%**

## 2. How many officials do you currently assign?

- Less than 50: **6.48%**
- Between 50 – 100: **18.20%**
- 101 – 150: **24.94%**
- More than 150: **50.37%**

## 3. Are you currently experiencing a shortage of officials?

- Yes: **97.26%**
- No: **2.74%**

## 4. If you are experiencing a shortage of officials, please select the primary reason for this (choose one).

- Issues of Sportsmanship From Parents: **23.94%**
- Pay/Compensation: **16.71%**
- Retirement: **16.46%**
- COVID-19: **14.71%**
- Issues of Sportsmanship From Coaches: **7.98%**
- Other: **20.20%**



## Findings From Assigners (Continued)

### 5. If you are experiencing a shortage of officials, please select the secondary reason for this (choose one more).

- Issues of Sportsmanship From Parents: **21.20%**
- Retirement: **18.45%**
- Pay/Compensation: **17.71%**
- Issues of Sportsmanship From Coaches: **17.46%**
- COVID-19: **10.22%**
- Other: **14.96%**

### 6. If you are experiencing an official shortage, what percentage of officials would you say you are down in the last 12 months?

- Less than 10%: **14.46%**
- 10 – 20%: **51.87%**
- 21 – 30%: **23.69%**
- 31 – 40%: **6.48%**
- Over 40%: **3.49%**

### 7. What would be the primary solution to solving the shortage of officials?

#### Weighted Averages:

- Resolve issues of sportsmanship: **3.45**
- Get younger people involved: **3.41**
- Better pay: **3.14**
- Better training that promotes the benefits of long term benefits of officiating: **3.04**
- Have a formal recruitment process I can use: **2.93**

### 8. What is the primary reason your officials get into the business?

- For the money: **38.90%**
- To get closer to sports: **29.93%**
- Referrals from others: **15.71%**
- Your recruiting efforts: **5.74%**
- To referee your kids: **2.49%**
- Other: **7.23%**

# Survey Insights

As we can see from this survey, the verification among Assigners, who are customarily not surveyed on a regular basis, validates the concern among Athletic Directors and Administrators that the shortage of officials has not subsided over the last 12 months. The concern is real and requires decisive actions.

These actions and solutions appear to be the resolution of issues of sportsmanship that is driving officials away from participation, and the need to recruit younger referees to begin replacing a high degree of retiring officials who are leaving the industry due to sportsmanship and other negative drivers.

Arbiter will continue to work in these two categories to address the shortages by developing and publishing recommendations by experts on how to best alleviate the concerns of sportsmanship in schools today as well as offer insights into programs and services that can assist in the recruitment of younger officials.

To the right is a recently published article by Kyle Ford, President and Chief Executive Officer of Arbiter that speaks to our efforts. [Click to view the article.](#)



## High School Sportsmanship is Impacting the Availability of Qualified Officials.

In South Carolina, the name of the game is practice, drills, and more practice. And that's for the players, too.

It's 6:50 on an overcast Tuesday morning and the Coach is already at his desk thinking about last night's game. He'll always be Coach, no matter where he goes, or what life throws at him, even though he hasn't been on the sidelines, or on the court for years. It's a designation that travels with you like Doc, Skipper or Chef.

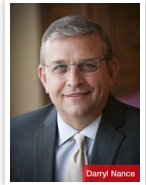
His hands are full and so is his mind. As the Athletic Director of Greenville County Schools, the largest school district in South Carolina, he's worried, not about sports, but about sportsmanship.

As is every Athletic Director in the country.

Greenville is a rabid sports town. The Greenville Triumph are a pro soccer crew; the Swamp Rabbits are a Double A hockey team; and the Greenville Drive are part of the Boston Red Sox farm system complete with their own Green Monster left field wall that's 7'6" short of being an exact replica of Fenway. And then there's Greenville's most famous baseball player, a legend who brought sportsmanship to the highest level, only to bring it down to the cellar.

"Shoeless" Joe Jackson turned the White Sox into the Black Sox with a single \$50,000 bribe. After the fix, Joe returned home to Greenville to operate a liquor store where he later died of a heart attack. Or was it a tattered heart?

With 77,000 students, a \$590 million budget, and over 4,900 teachers — more than 60% of the teachers have Master's Degrees — there are a lot of smart people in the Greenville County School District, and Coach Darryl Nance is one of them.



"Here's why I tell parents to never yell at an official. If you behave badly, officials won't officiate; there won't be any games played; you'll never watch your kid participate; those kids will never experience the thrill, excitement and education-based value that athletics can teach them; and then, because of your belligerence, you didn't just run it for your kid, you ruined it for everyone," says Nance, teacher, Coach, parent, mentor, leader, and interestingly enough, amalgamator of more basketball technical fouls than you can shake a Swamp Rabbits' hockey stick at.

Nationwide, the shortage of high school refs is problematic; Arbiter's exhaustive research is conclusive. We've conducted surveys among assigners, athletic directors, administrators, as well as one-on-one interviews with officials, state high school associations, and coaches. It's not so much that the results are conclusive as much as they are alarming. In fact, studies indicate the year-over-year shrinkage of qualified officials is averaging 30%.

A good reason for that is sportsmanship, but it doesn't need to be. "We should never forget that refs and officials are doing that job for you. They've taken tests, they've given up their one free night each week to do this, and sometimes several nights a week. Believe me, they're not doing it for the money. You would no more expect to be harassed, and take it, in your job, so why do you think it's okay to harass someone in their job? It's not, period," says Nance.

Yet, sportsmanship remains an issue in nearly every school district in the country. So how, in the case of Greenville County Schools, has the Coach managed to exert some sway over bad behavior? Not surprisingly, he has some answers, and a few, very strong recommendations. "



"The first thing I do," says Nance excitedly, "is have parent practices where I sit in the bleachers with the parents and explain the full-court drills we're working on for the first 20 to 30 minutes. I explain to them that we have 12 offensive man-to-man plays and 12 offensive zone sets depending on if the ball goes to the left or the right. Add to that another eight defensive options and it becomes a lot to think about with only a split-second to make a decision. Then I have them watch a series of full court defensive slide drills, fast-break drills, boxing-out so the parents can see what a practice is all about. But, as we say in basketball, that's just the tip-off!"

Always the Coach, you can tell Nance is building to a crescendo, preparing for a final second, game-winning play that earned him numerous distinctions including South Carolina Coach of the Year and NFHS State Basketball Coach of the Year.

"For me, here's the game-changer; it's how we've reduced bad sportsmanship which has made the shortage of officials less stressful for us. During our scrimmages, I put the parents in the game. I'll make them shoot a free-throw, inbound the ball, or ask them to call a play. I want them to feel what their kids are going through, constantly reminding the parents that this is just practice and hardly the pressure of a real game."

You can just imagine what the Coach would be saying to the parents in a half-time, locker room confab, but that's not what Nance does. When practice is over, he sends his players to the showers and has a frank discussion with his other team, the parents.

"I understand that these folks are entrusting me with their greatest asset. And for me, I need to add value to that asset and improve their son or daughter's performance; on and off the court. I create a family unit and make all parents sit together behind our bench during games. They don't just cheer for their kid; they stand and cheer for every kid. This creates a greater sense of sportsmanship, and believe me, other teams and their families notice how we behave."

- Coach Darryl Nance

And what about sportsmanship as it relates to parents, coaches and playing time? "Now that," says Nance, "is a discussion for another day."

The day, in fact, is done, but not the mission. As the Coach packs-up his belongings and heads home, he knows that after 30 years in the business, he must still innovate, conquer new challenges that seemed abstract only a few years ago, and most of all, teach life-lessons to his student athletes.

And, of course, to their parents.

Kyle Ford is the President and CEO of Salt Lake City-based ArbiterSports, the leading provider of high school sports and event management Registration, Scheduling and Payment technology.

## Arbiter

The Only One That's All-In-One

[arbitersports.com](http://arbitersports.com) | [sales@arbitersports.com](mailto:sales@arbitersports.com) | 1-800-576-2799

©2022 ArbiterSports. All Rights Reserved.

# Voice-of-Customer Research From High School Athletic Directors and Administrators

In October of 2021, Arbiter asked high school Athletic Directors and School Administrators their thoughts on referee shortages and aligned issues within high school athletics. The questions and their responses are as follows:

***When we asked interviewees if they could only change one thing in high school sports, what would they change; their top responses ranked in mentions were as follows:***

1. Sportsmanship and parental behavior
2. Getting all of us on the same software platform
3. Finding officials and the problem is getting worse
4. Entitlement, everyone believes they should receive a scholarship
5. Sports specialization
6. Club sports are a problem

***When we asked the same audience what subject matter should Arbiter research and write about, their top answers were:***

1. The shortage of officials
2. Sportsmanship and bad parental behavior
3. Athletic Director trends particularly the differences between transformational and transactional coaches
4. The need for software and technology consolidation

***And when we asked them the concerns they had relating to ref shortages their top responses were:***

1. If we don't have referees, we won't have sports, without sports, there won't be athletics, and without athletics, student athletes would miss out on scholarships and the life lessons we learn for teamwork, friendships and leadership.
2. Because we're constantly addressing the shortage of referees, that's time away from other important work attributes we should be addressing like spending more time with student athletes, working on professional development with our coaches, and trying to work with parents regarding issues of sportsmanship and behavior.

## Voice-of-Customer Insights

This serves as continued validation of not just the official shortages in the high school and middle school environment, but also how extensive the distraction can be to Athletic Directors and Administrators whose time is spent addressing shortages of officials when they feel better served addressing issues more important to them including spending time with students.

As we mentioned previously, Arbiter will continue to research and publish articles that can benefit all stakeholders who are impacted by the shortage of refs, and as time goes on, we will develop programs and services that will help alleviate the shortage.



# State Association Research Project

In one final research project, Arbiter staff reviewed state association statistics as they related to shortages of officials in an effort to determine if the combined software solutions of Arbiter Pay and Arbiter Scheduling might help alleviate the referee shortage. Those states where the two platforms are used heavily included Colorado, North Carolina, Vermont, Oklahoma, Indiana, Florida and New Hampshire.

Based on research conducted by the New Mexico Activities Association which saw a shortfall of officials of 29% according to Zac Stevenson, the NMAA Commissioner of Officials, who defined the national average at a 30% shortfall, Arbiter reviewed the shortages in the states listed above and found the following results:

- Colorado: **down 6%**
- North Carolina: **down 1.5%**
- Vermont: **up 8%**
- Oklahoma: **down 7.5%**
- Indiana: **down 1%**
- Florida: **down 5.3%**
- New Hampshire: **up 9%**

Now, we are not suggesting that Arbiter's products can alleviate referee shortages, however, there is evidence that the Pay and Scheduling products, when utilized together, have had a positive impact in some states, where the products are used heavily, in either diminishing the shortage of officials or increasing the roster of officials to positive levels.

This research is real-time and we will continue to monitor findings in these states and others throughout 2022. During the next year, we will continue to publish our findings and notify you of any results that are foretelling.





# Key Takeaways From Our Efforts

To a great extent, the shortage of officials and the undercurrent of reasons that drive that shortage, have an impact on nearly every school, school district, student, parent, Athletic Director, Administrator and Assigner across the country. With no evidence of relief from the situation, and a lingering persistence that has lasted for years, actions are required that, at the very least, address the situational causes of the shortage: solutions to sportsmanship and retiring referees who no longer desire to be part of the industry.

Arbiter will continue to address these concerns with additional research, strategic partnerships, syndication of meaningful and solution-based content, and actions on our own part to assist with reconciling the problem. Today, we know that:

- The problem is real, ongoing and threatening to the livelihood of high school and middle school athletics
- The issue is driven by poor sportsmanship and retiring referees who no longer want to be part of the business
- Efforts to reverse the trend need to be focused on the recruitment of younger officials and the correction to the problems of sportsmanship
- Athletic Directors want to be part of the solution, but probably need more time in their day to adequately address the problems
- By limiting the number of technology providers and trying to reduce the management time required to interact with various technology platforms, ADs believe they could save time and use that resource to better address these issues
- It's obvious that ADs and Administrators are looking for solutions to these issues and that these problems are top-of-mind with them as they have requested Arbiter to conduct research and produce content regarding these problems
- To address these concerns and satisfy the request for more research and articles, Arbiter will move forward with efforts to offer solutions and assistance whenever possible