

# ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY

By Todd Korth, Referee associate editor

The job of assigning officials comes with a lot of responsibility. Assigners decide which crews will be on a court or field working a contest. As a result, assigners are responsible for doing their jobs properly. What does that mean? Find out more from a code of ethics which assigners, themselves, put together.

**W**hat makes a good assigner and what are some rules assigners should follow? There are certainly some qualities that individuals need to have that stand out more than others. Some assigners grasp on to those qualities and perform well. Others struggle.

Dale Kelley, one of the more prominent assigners in collegiate athletics, says that the single best attribute of any assigner is his or her attitude or enthusiasm for the job. It can make the difference when communicating with officials and school and conference administrators.

"If we don't project that professionalism and enthusiasm for those to whom we are assigning games, we are not likely to get the end result that we are looking for as it relates to the level of play that we are responsible for assigning officials," says Kelley, who also serves on NASO's Board of Directors.

Kelley works with five NCAA Division I conferences — assigning men's basketball games to 241 officials and 61 schools — and juggles 4,200 individual assignments each season. He says that he is always trying to appease coaches, administrators and others to "make sure those assignments are going to be compatible."

What else makes a good assigner? A couple dozen high school and college assigners gathered to discuss various topics during NASO's 2008 Summit in Cleveland to share information about assigning and discuss what works and what doesn't work. Most agreed that a positive attitude and enthusiasm head a list of attributes that include:

- Be firm, not nice, with officials.
- Know your roster and geography of schools.
- Be approachable.
- Be a good communicator.
- Return phone calls.
- Answer e-mails.
- Keep up with technology.

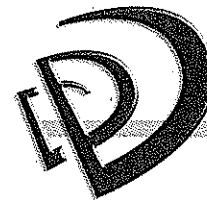
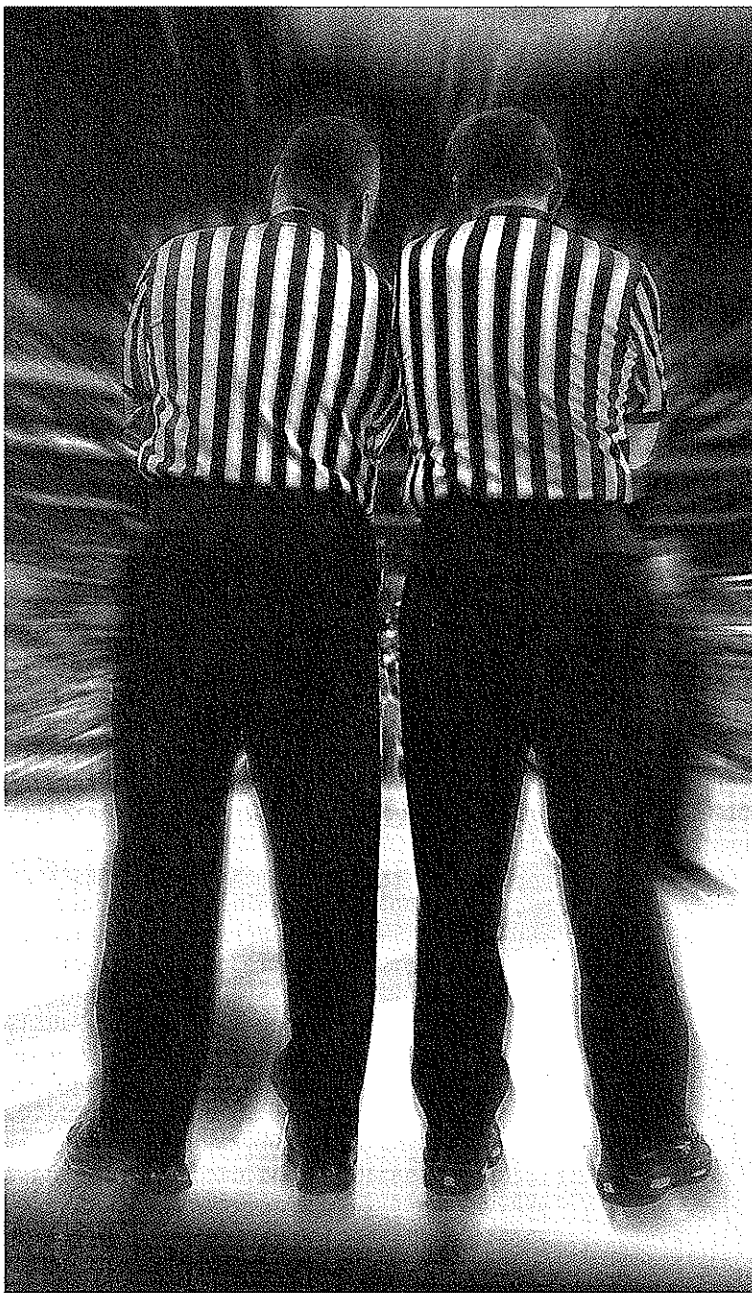
Those are the basics in order to succeed as an assigner. But the assigners on hand, which included NCAA National Coordinator of Softball Umpires Kathy Strahm, also an NASO board member; Diane Plas, an assigner and supervisor of officials for numerous NCAA Division III, NAIA and NJCAA basketball conferences; John Van de Vaarst, National Intercollegiate Soccer Officials Association (NISOA) past president and current national director of instruction; and assigners from various states, including Nevada, Colorado, California, New York and Ohio, also devised a code of ethics that assigners of any sport anywhere should abide by in order to achieve harmony between themselves, officials and the schools/clubs that they work with each season.

## Don't Assign Yourself

Most assigners, especially at the collegiate and professional levels, do not work the games that they assign. That's different at the high school level because there are often more games than referees. Assigners who choose to work games that they assign usually will find themselves in a no-win situation with other officials.

"What it does is create ill feelings with the other people that work with the assigner," said Van de Vaarst. "They feel that here the assigner is picking the games that they want and they're getting what's left. Or the assigner works Saturday, Sunday, Monday and I didn't work at all."

Jim Jorgensen founded Jorgensen Sports Service in Rocklin, Calif., a suburb of Sacramento, 11 years ago. A retired sports official, Jorgensen uses lead assigners for 11 different boys and girls sports to orchestrate 975 officials in 102 high schools and 10 junior high schools for varsity and non-varsity games. All of the lead assigners are active officials in the sport that they assign but do not work any games that they handle unless there is an emergency.



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Assigners should also encourage their officials to be sensitive "in the locker room, on the field and with their words, especially if there are two females and one male or two males and one female or whatever assigned to the game," Van de Vaarst said. "Let's watch what we say in the locker room joking around and let's be sensitive to what we say on the field. If you say something to the female official and she's offended by it, you can have all kinds of problems."

### Know Your Constitution Bylaws

Assigners should know the rules and guidelines of different associations when assigning games. For example, regulations

for an assigner of an association may state that an official cannot schedule his or her own substitute or give an assignment to another official. Or an official can only work three days a week or not work two games in one day.

"You need to know what the policies and procedures are," Van de Vaarst said. "You also need to know that the members are in good status and what constitutes a member in good status versus a member not in good status."

Assigners should be familiar with their state association's bylaws as well as those of their local associations.

Jorgensen works with local associations to assign games and meets one to two months before the season begins with group leaders of different schools to discuss guidelines, planning, meeting dates, payroll and other issues.

"We have policies that we send out to the schools and to the officials so that we're consistent in areas of sportsmanship and common-sense things, like not smoking on campus, don't drink before a game, all those kinds of things," Jorgensen explained. "We're sensitive to match-ups and schools, like ... high-powered schools playing each other. We have a lot of Christian schools and schools with special needs. That's why I rely on the assigner who knows the school, the teams and the coaches to take care of that."

"That's kind of a standing policy," Jorgensen said. "But if the phone rings at four o'clock and someone has been in a car crash and broke their foot, somebody's got to cover the game, so (the assigner) will go."

### Avoid Discrimination

Assignments for contests should be made without regard to race or gender. Age and other factors also cannot be overlooked.

"It's something that we have to take seriously," said Van de Vaarst. "It's critical in today's litigious society for assigners to be careful how they speak and what they say to people, so it's not perceived as wrong. Discrimination is as much a perception as anything. There's blatant discrimination, don't get me wrong, like 'I will not assign you to any men's games because you're a female.' That's obvious, but there are the subtleties. When you're out there assigning and someone calls you and asks, 'How come you're not giving me the games you used to give me?' And you say, 'Well, it's because you're old and fat.' Guess what? You just committed age discrimination."

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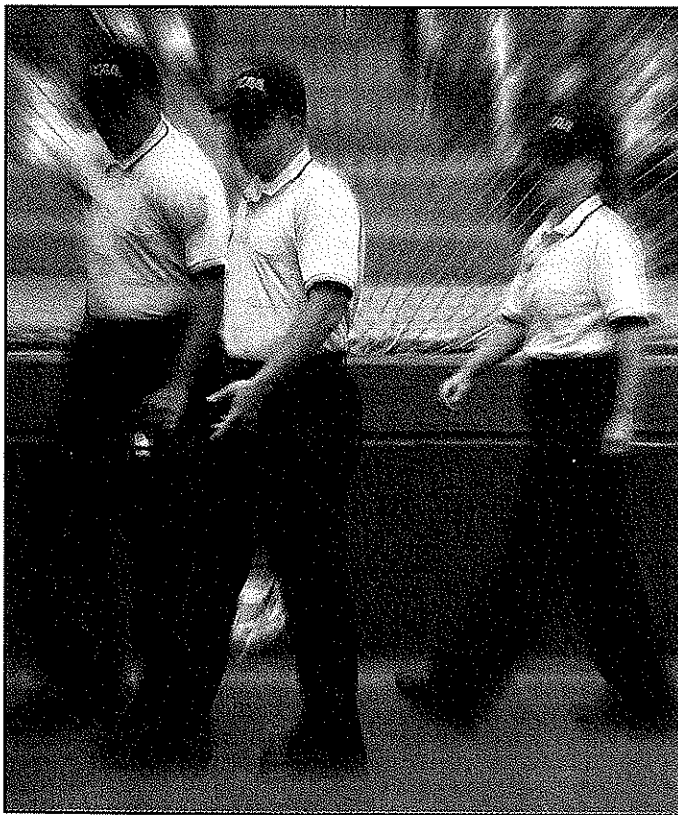
Assigners should be aware that if they fail to follow bylaws and regulations of an association, they could be subject to a fine per violation, public censure, probation and suspension.

## Don't Let Officials Jerk You Around

By a unanimous show of hands, the assigners agreed that they work for conferences and schools instead of officials mainly because the conferences and schools pay the bills.

To make life easier, the assigners need to have timely cooperation and honesty from the officials and conferences/schools. Officials who mess with an assigner by double booking and dropping a game at the last minute and schools that are slow to forward schedules to assigners should quickly land in the doghouse.

"What I always tell the officials that I assign is that if something comes up, like a Division III low level game and you have an opportunity to work a Division I game somewhere, call me as soon as you can and be honest with me," says Van de Vaarst, who has assigned soccer games for the past eight years at the collegiate and high school levels. "Tell me you have this other opportunity and I'll do everything I can to work with you. But don't tell me that your grandfather died again because I'll find out you were on the Division I game somehow by accident and then we have an integrity issue.



The assigner who gave (from left) Willie Newman, Eugene, Ore.; Paul "Smokey" Edds, Anaheim, Calif.; and Susie Benzel, Tulsa, Okla., their game assignment should know about the umpires' talent levels.

"Especially call me and be upfront if you realize that it's one of your children's birthdays that you've forgotten. I'd rather have you home with your family and I'll do everything I can to get the game covered. Just be honest with me."

At the same time, Al Blau, who has assigned lacrosse games for the past 12 years in the New York area and works with more than 100 officials, goes bananas when a school or club decides at the last minute to change the time of a game or fails to provide him with a schedule by a certain deadline.

"Send me a schedule on time, so I can assign the referees and don't change a game or a time two days before the scheduled game," says Blau of Huntington, N.Y.

## Reward Younger Officials

Assigners should not hesitate to promote good officials for more prestigious assignments. But assigners should think about gradually promoting an official rather than placing him or her

on the fast track to a title game and not looking back.

Van de Vaarst says he has used a women's soccer scrimmage each spring that includes a handful of NCAA Division I schools as grounds for exposing newer referees to coaches and the higher-level atmosphere.

"It's no-risk because it's a scrimmage," said Van de Vaarst. "The pressure is not as great, but it gives coaches a chance to see that official and might say, 'Hey, maybe we want to see him move up and do some of our regular games.'"

Many associations have mentoring programs where veteran officials work with younger or newer officials, then recommend candidates to assigners for higher-level games. Assigners also receive recommendations from athletic directors on up-and-coming officials.

"We'll pair up prospects that we think will be varsity officials in another year or two and we'll hand-put them on certain practice games early in the year," Jorgensen said. "If they show good promise, we might put the two together in a league game."

## Apply Rules Evenly

Assigners should refrain from any tendencies to favor one official over another or be lenient in any way in the event rules or guidelines set by an assigner are broken.

"Assigners need to conduct business just as they would officiate the games they're assigning," said Strahm. "An assigner wouldn't play favorites on the field, and he shouldn't play favorites with the officials, either. If an assigner is going to have rules, the rules have to apply to everyone."

If an official creates a problem for a school or

## Assigners' Standards for Officials

club, the mishap should be directed to the association and then the assigner.

"The rules are the rules, however, a veteran who has a great history but makes a first mistake may get a little more 'slack' than a less-experienced official who just doesn't have the history on his or her side yet," said Plas.

### Communication is a Two-Way Street

Most assigners want an open line of communication between themselves and the officials. If there is a breakdown

by either side, problems tend to surface.

"Assigners and the officials who work for them must continually communicate," said Strahm. "Officials' situations and availability change from time to time. Assigners sometimes have to change an assignment. The assigners need to know of changes in order to avoid a 'no show,' and officials have the right to know why one of their assignments has been changed. There has to be communication both ways in order to avoid missed assignments and hurtful misunderstandings."

Assigners also need to communicate well with athletic directors and/or secretaries of organizations for smooth sailing throughout each season. That can often be accomplished through league meetings or meetings with school district officials prior to each school year. It gives an assigner a chance to communicate with athletic directors and discuss invoices and administrative duties.

"That happens often with many leagues," Jorgensen said. "They invite us to league meetings, to coaches meetings, they want to talk to the assigner and put a name with a face. That works well. The ones that don't invite us very often are the ones we have communication issues with. They are kind of invisible."

### Set High Expectations

Assigners should offer a list of standards and expectations of the officials they assign prior to each season. After the season, it is best for the

assigner to evaluate what went well and what didn't as a way to reinforce those standards.

"Setting high expectations for game performance and for communication with the assigner and with game administration sets the bar," said Strahm. "No one wants to disappoint. Set high expectations and make those expectations known. Of course, that goes both ways. The assigner must have high expectations of herself to get a good return on her expectations of others."

How do assigners decide who gets games and who doesn't? Who gets thrown into the doghouse and who is freed from the doghouse?

Assigners at the NASO's Cleveland Summit shared their ideas on how they go about assigning games based on feedback and evaluations received from coaches, athletic directors and other evaluators.

### Assigners require that officials:

- Are available and willing to work down a level or division.
- Communicate with the assigner by providing updates.
- Attend clinics/camps to improve their skills and rules knowledge.
- Do the right things versus sucking up to the assigner.

### Officials will enter an assigners' doghouse if they:

- Turn back or cancel out of games, especially at the last minute.
- Are never available.
- Use improper language on the field.
- Show up to a game looking like "a mess."
- Use poor skills and/or mechanics.
- Gossip about partners instead of providing feedback.

### Officials can get out of the doghouse by:

- Listening to their assigner or supervisor on how to improve.
- Taking advantage of additional opportunities to improve.
- Modifying their behavior.
- Improving deficiencies.

### Know the Talent

One of the bigger challenges for assigners is to evaluate the officials that they assign games to each year. At the upper levels of college and in the professional ranks, video is often available for the assigner and other observers, but that's not always

the case with smaller colleges and high schools. Assigners often will rely on evaluations submitted by coaches, peers, athletic directors, association board members and trainers. Retired or injured officials will sometimes help an assigner. At the high school level, some varsity officials will arrive early to JV games and offer their evaluation of the newer officials.

"Most of the officials I know — some from working with them in the past or you go to the games and you see the guy work," said Blau. "I'm not rating them, just observing them. If I see some pointers, I'll speak to them after the game. ... These are areas you can improve on. These are areas where you do really well. You made a real tough call and that was great. Or, here's a call you should have made. You let the coach go a little bit too far. You should have banged him and you didn't, so. I know the (officials) who I pick."

Blau tries to see as many of his assigned lacrosse games as possible and receives a nominal fee for observing, though, he says it's not enough to make it worth his time. "But if it makes the officiating better, that's what you do. I enjoy doing that," he said. □