



SPORTS

IT TAKES A SPECIAL PERSON TO BE A REF

Worthington
Thursday evening illumination? Saturday afternoon shining? That just doesn't offer the same optimism and anticipation for high school football fans as "Friday Night Lights."

But because of a shortage of officials in all high school sports, including football, it's possible gridiron games in future falls might not always be on Fridays.

"It's changing already," said Colby Pack. "And it could change even more so in the next five to 10 years if we don't get more officials. Because there aren't enough to go around on Friday nights. And you can't play a football game without an officiating crew."

Pack is the athletic director at Fulda High and serves as the head boys basketball and golf coach for the Heron Lake-Okabena/Fulda squad. The Lambertton native has been a football referee for nearly 20 years, ever since he was a star athlete at Southwest Minnesota State, and along with several brothers he is carrying on a family tradition in athletics established by his father Bryce.

Pack recently worked the Class A state championship football game between Minneota and Mayer Lutheran. It's not the first Prep Bowl he's been privileged to work, thanks in part to his creditable crew made up of friends, buddies and former teammates on the Lambertton Long Sox amateur baseball team.

Pack sees his work with a whistle as a way to give back to the sports world that has been so important to him.

"Especially in today's world, where there's such a shortage of officials," he said. "It's just extremely important now to give back." And there are reasons to enjoy it.

"It's like playing a sport," he said. "You have to do your studying. And it's exciting to watch the kids compete at



SCOTT MANSCH
The Globe sports reporter



Tim Middagh / The Globe

A high school basketball referee works the floor during a recent boys basketball game. High schools are finding it more difficult to locate referees and officials.

that level." High school sports are more popular than ever. But working as an official, not so much. It's a problem throughout the state. Why the shortage? Well, the pay isn't significant, certainly not compared with the complaints — both on and off the field — one might hear. To be sure, an official's

job is pretty much thankless. "You go to a game and all you hear is yelling from the fans," Pack said. For certain, an official's skin needs to be thick. "You can't take everything personally," Pack explained. "You've got to know that kids are going to play with emotion and coaches are going to coach with emotion. It's a little easier for me,

because I'm an official in one sport and a coach in another, and I know that officials aren't perfect. We make mistakes." He tries never to let the give-and-take with coaches get too heated. "You've got to be able sometimes to agree to disagree and move on to the next play," Pack said. "And

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West wrestlers do the best that they can

Oliva, Kaat counted among the game's best

Question: What does the Minnesota West wrestling team have in common with former Minnesota Twins Tony Oliva and Jim Kaat?

Answer: All three are mentioned in this column.

Bluejay blues

We begin with the Bluejay wrestlers and the unique situation they find themselves in during this 2021-22 winter campaign. There are several good wrestlers on this team, and if

head coach Randy Baker still had the recruits he expected to have in camp, they'd be competing more often and they'd be winning dual meets, too.

Those expectations have vanished, however, because some wrestlers who'd planned to compete decided later, for one reason or another, that they would rather sit out the season.

The point here is not to question anyone's motives. Wrestling is a tough sport, and it demands a serious commitment. Sometimes a guy feels burned out after high school, and some other times he chooses to focus entirely on academics.

But Worthington area wrestling fans are understandably anxious to see a return to the good ol' days of Minnesota West wrestling. The sport had suffered in recent years, prior to Baker's tenure, and last season was another less-than-glorious campaign due in part, at least, to Covid. Baker, who last coached at Jackson County Central High School, has had amazing success in the high school ranks, and I can't think of a better mentor to return the Jays to prominence. I still think he'll do it, too. But this year's season shapes up as a mixed bag.

Some other two-year colleges, unfortunately, find themselves in the same boat. St. John's, which was scheduled to compete in February at Minnesota West, has canceled its plans.

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DOUG WOLTER
Sports Editor

Trojans' Benson gives something extra to hockey

By Doug Wolter
The Globe

WORTHINGTON — You've gotta be nimble on your feet to be a hockey player, and it helps also to be ready to engage in physical contact.

Andrew Benson, a co-captain on the 2021-22 Worthington High School boys hockey team, learned to skate when he was young. Now a well-built senior who played tight end and defensive end on the fall football team, he easily carries his talents over to the winter sport that combines toughness with finesse.



When asked which positive hockey attributes he most sees in himself, he chooses one — then adds something a little extra. "I can see the ice really well. I know where all my teammates are at. I know just how to get the puck around, how to keep it flowing," he explained recently. "The

physical aspect of the game is probably the best part, besides scoring. Yeah, hitting people is fun, the body contact." The season is still young for this new Worthington Trojans boys hockey team, so coaches and players are feeling optimistic. The squad posted a 4-16 record a season ago, though it could have been much better with all the close games the Trojans wound up on the wrong side of. This year's team is more experienced.

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Andrew Benson, foreground, has many talents, including a love of hockey, that he brings to the Worthington Trojans.
Tim Middagh / The Globe

Andrew Benson
Worthington High School Senior Hockey

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REFEREES

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next play,” Pack said. “And to never hold grudges.”

The best officials? “They’re the ones that are there for the right reasons and take it seriously,” Pack said. “I didn’t go into coaching to make millions of dollars and I didn’t go into refereeing to make millions of dollars. I do it because I enjoy it and because it’s a way to give back to kids and let them play the sports I enjoyed

when I was growing up.

“The best officials are the ones that know they’re not perfect and don’t pretend to be perfect, and try to call what they see and always have an open dialogue with coaches.”

The benefits of working games as an official are subtle, but they’re there.

“It drives my wife (Sarah) crazy when we’re watching a game with our boys (Braiden, 11, and Dylan, 9),” Pack chuckles. “Because our kids now are watching for penalties. They’re looking for

holding all the time, and I don’t think the average fans are doing that.

“It’s kind of fun.”

The problems don’t appear to be going away anytime soon. Pack is hoping more former athletes will decide to get back into the game as referees. And he’s not alone. A recent radio ad sponsored by the Minnesota State High School League that touts the officials shortage has been running for weeks, attempting to recruit young men and women to the profession. The ad notes the

high school stars who shine, and says there can be no stars without stripes, referring to shirts worn by officials.

“As an AD you try to find officials the minute you get your schedules,” Pack said.

Pack, 38, is no longer an active athlete. He was recently inducted into the SMSU Hall of Fame for his baseball exploits.

But he remains connected to sports in southwest Minnesota. And a lot of that is because he’s an official.

He returns to the goal of

giving back. That, says Pack, is the reason he’s a football official.

“I think it’s like a farmer whose kids have all graduated from the school that continues to vote ‘yes’ for a referendum to build a new school,” he said. “Even though you’re not directly tied to it anymore, if you’re healthy and able it’s just a great way to give back to the sports you love.”

Scott Mansch is a part-time writer at The Globe. He welcomes story ideas and tips and can be reached at smansch5roquets@gmail.com

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It turns out that St. John’s lacks lightweights this year. Since West lacks wrestlers in the upper weights, there was no real dual meet to plan for.

“It hurts, because you don’t sell your program, because you don’t have local events. It’s frustrating,” said Baker on Sunday.

Other events are also suspect. West will not compete this year at the National Duals in Kentucky next month. With only six wrestlers on the team, the Bluejays would be giving up 24 points in each dual.

Besides that, there are other considerations Baker and the college must think about. For instance, is a trip to Kentucky financially reasonable? Think

of how much would need to be spent on hotel rooms, and the fuel required for two vans, for a two-day tournament where the team would have to forfeit several weight classes.

Thankfully, Baker did manage to send his team to the Dragon Open at Moorhead last weekend, where 165-pounder Damon Ashworth won his weight class by getting a fall in the finals. Jacob Vogel, at 141 pounds, placed sixth by going 2-2 with a bye. He wrestled well, said Baker, against some outstanding opponents. Two West 149-pounders, Kyler Grams and Ryan Fierro, each went 0-2. Aiden Reinhart also failed to place at 133.

Incidentally, former Worthington High School standout Jacob Prunty, who’s competing for



Tim Middagh / The Globe

Minnesota Twins Hall of Famer Tony Oliva signs autographs at Jaycox Implement in Worthington in January 2020.

Concordia, finished third at 141 pounds.

Oliva, Kaat finally in Hall

On Sunday, Minnesota Twins greets Tony Oliva and Jim Kaat finally got the call. The Golden

Days Era Committee of the Baseball Hall of Fame informed them separately that they’d been selected to be enshrined in the immortal club.

Every Twins fan should be jumping for

joy. Tony-O and Kitty Kaat are now in the same place as other former Twins Harmon Killebrew, Rod Carew, Kirby Puckett and Bert Blyleven, and everyone who remembers Oliva and Kaat’s careers should be saying, in unison, “It’s about time!”

The two newest Twins Hall of Famers were stars of the Sixties. Oliva’s career was spent entirely with the Twins, from 1962-1976, and it was a career cut short due to knee problems, but in his heyday he was one of the best hitters in baseball in an era chocked full of great hitters. If he had been a New York Yankee instead of a Twin, he’d have been in the Hall 40 years ago. Thank goodness he wasn’t forgotten this year by the Golden Days committee.

Kaat won 283 games in 25 major league seasons, and he won 16 Golden Gloves, too.

I’d been saying over

four decades that Oliva deserved to be in the Hall. He not only was a great player, but since his retirement he’s been an outstanding ambassador for the game. The Cuban native has always been classy, modest and grateful just for the opportunity to play.

He said upon his selection: “My mother, my father, my brothers, some sisters, they never saw me play. I wish they had this opportunity to be here today, but they’re in heaven right now, my father and my mother. They would have been very proud that a little country boy from Cuba is in the Hall of Fame today.”

Perhaps the best part of all of this is that both Oliva and Kaat are alive to enjoy it. Both are 83. The other four new Hall of Famers – Minnie Minoso, Gil Hodges, Buck O’Neil and Bud Fowler – are no longer with us.

SPORTS BRIEFS

Busy days ahead in local sports

The second half of this week is filled with local sports activities.

For the Worthington Trojans it kicks off with

the wrestling team’s first home meet of the season, and it’s a triangular meet with Pipestone Area and Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg beginning at 5 p.m.

The event features several state-ranked wrestlers. Pipestone Area’s Brayden Burmeister (fourth at 106 pounds), JJ Martens (eighth at 113), Hudson Burnett (first

at 120) and Jayden Hoss (sixth at 285) are listed among Minnesota’s best in Class A. Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg has two of its own matmen rated in Class A:

Trey Gunderson, first at 106; and Coy Gunderson, fourth at 160.

Worthington’s Cole Hennings is ranked No. 7 at 285 pounds in Class AA.

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