



# Character

## The Impact of Officials on Sportsmanship

**The state association, schools and officials have come together to improve sportsmanship in Arizona through "Pursuing Victory With Honor."**

By Matt Moore

Sportsmanship problems are most likely learned behavior. High school athletes don't think of cheating on their own.

"Where did you learn how to cheat? Probably from an adult," said Chuck Schmidt, the chief operating officer for the Arizona Interscholastic Association (AIA).

So how does a state association like the AIA counter the idea that the only thing that matters in sports is winning, no matter the cost?

In the case of the AIA, the problem of sportsmanship has been met head on. Starting in the late 1990s, the leaders of the AIA recognized that sportsmanship issues were costing them. The integrity of high school sports was being challenged and the state was having a difficult time retaining officials.

Address the problem with an aggressive solution or it could become more severe — and maybe even insolvable.

"We needed to create a clear understanding, a clarity of what high

school athletics is about," said Dr. Harold Slemmer, the executive director of the AIA. "Where we saw some of our schools and some of our coaches and our constituents, our fans, even our officials losing sight of is the whole purpose of interscholastic athletics, and that is character building.

"Sportsmanship has got to be at the forefront as well as helping kids understand that their participation in athletics is going to mold their character for a lifetime. It is an educational component."

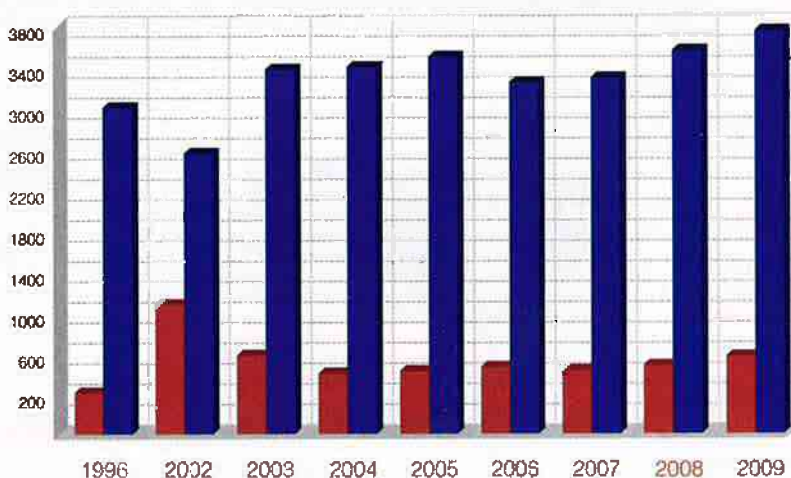
Slemmer noted that sportsmanship and the educational component of high school athletics were being corrupted by the other goals — recruiting of kids (both for colleges and away from other high schools)

and winning at all costs by coaches who feared losing their jobs were just two of those contaminants.

With the help of then-Governor Jane Hull, Slemmer and his staff adopted the "Pursuing Victory With Honor" (PVWH) program in many of the schools throughout the state in May 1999. The PVWH program is designed to create an environment in Arizona where the student-athlete, coach, official and spectator are each committed to "pursuing victory with honor and teamwork through trustworthiness, respect, responsibility fairness, caring and citizenship."

**Adopting "Pursuing Victory With Honor" in Arizona has helped to contribute to a decrease in ejections and an increase in officiating registrations.**

**EJECTIONS VS REGISTRATIONS**





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Objectives of the program include developing standards of accountability for all AIA member schools, student-athletes, coaches, administrators and spectators and implementing a program of assessment and accountability so that the success of each school can be measured.

Getting educators to buy into a program such as PVWH was not difficult. In fact, Slemmer said, one thing that pleases him to this day is when he is at an event and someone comes up to him saying, "Dr. Slemmer, that's not pursuing victory with honor, is it?"

"When people say that's not what it should be, that's a step in the right direction," Slemmer said. "That's a step in the right direction because at least they know what it should be."

What makes the program in Arizona unique, however, is that along with educators buying into the program, so have officials. "We wanted to take the perspective that officiating is not just officiating, it's educating. (An official) is an educator on the court, an educator on the field," Slemmer said.

In fact, according to Gary Whelchel, the AIA commissioner of officials, the success of the program hinged on getting officials to buy in to the program. "No sportsmanship program will be effective without the involvement of officials," Whelchel said. "If an association or group of schools is struggling with sportsmanship and bad behavior, it cannot be fixed without officials. It *cannot* be done."

Slemmer, Whelchel and the AIA leadership firmly believe that the PVWH program is responsible for the results that their state has seen. Nearly half of the state's 2,800 officials attended the session that preceded the 2009 NASO Summit in Tucson in July.

"We're constantly talking that

officiating high school sports is a higher calling," Whelchel said. "It's a calling that (officials) have been called to us to perform out there and work with young people."

The PVWH program began in earnest in 2002, when the state of Arizona was averaging more than 1,200 ejections per year. And even though Arizona is the sixth largest state, it does not have a population to match (ranked 16th in 2007, according to the U.S. Census Bureau).

Move forward to 2009 and there were 42 percent fewer ejections — less than 700. And there are more high schools, which creates more opportunities for ejections.

Looking at ejections per game played, the state averaged an ejection for every 28 games played in 2002. That number is now one in every 70 games — a tremendous change.

"Our officials are in control," Whelchel said. "They're in the educational process of taking care of the moment and they have unwavering support from us."

Whelchel said that with that support, officials know they can do their job and not worry about repercussions. "If there are issues that we have to deal with behind the scenes, we deal with them. In nine years, I've only dealt with the media once publicly on an official that made a mistake that had an impact," he said.

One thing that is unique in Arizona is that the state office controls the assigning process for all varsity games. Officials don't have to fear repercussions because of an ejection, because the process of "blackballing" or "red-lining" an official is not permitted.

"I'm very clear that when I get an ejection report in and then I get the coach calling me, telling me how bad that official is and 'I don't ever want to see them again,'" Whelchel said, "I

can guarantee you there's a very good chance within the next week they're going to see that official.

"They need to understand who is in control. It isn't the coach's game, it's the kids' game and it's my game, and you're a participant in it. I will control the sportsmanship issues involved."

Sportsmanship issues were directly related to the number of officials' registrations (see chart), according to Whelchel. In 1996, there were 3,146 processed registrations of officials (a multi-sport official would be counted in each sport worked). Six years later, when PVWH was instituted, there had been a 16 percent drop (2,727 registrations). In 2009, the state was at 3,840 registrations (a 41 percent increase).

"We've had economic issues that helped with the growth," Whelchel said. "But it dropped because we had the problem with sportsmanship; we implemented Pursuing Victory With Honor, we sold our officials on the vision and look what happened."

"A solid sportsmanship program involving officials will result in an increase of officials. You are involving them in their own activity. You support them tremendously in what they do."

To that end, the AIA has done numerous clinics for youth organizations in order to educate the parents and athletes that will eventually be playing under the auspices of the AIA.

"We've got to get people to understand what the high school sports experience is all about," Schmidt said.

"One of the first to be involved with us was Special Olympics," he continued. "Special Olympics of Arizona came to us because they were having problems with coaches going after officials after contests. Special Olympics. That's scary." *Matt Moore is a Referee associate editor.* □