

Spotlight on Officials

Love for Game Turns Former Athletes into Refs

Written by Julie Perry of the Marysville Advocate and reprinted with permission

Almost everyone who becomes a referee is a former athlete looking to give back to a game he still loves.

It's no different for Marysville Sports & Recreation director Brian Fragel, bank vice president and loan officer Jeff Bartels, probation officer Chris Denner, NAPA parts manager Trent Becker, elementary principal Jason Wheeler or Snap-On Incorporated franchisee Robert Eck. All of them are members of Marysville crews who officiate a wide range of football games from six-man to 11-man, beginners to varsity levels.



For Fragel, Bartels, Denner and Becker getting to officiate a state eight-man football game last November in Newton was the pinnacle of their careers so far.

“I was in court when I got the call from Mark Lentz (Kansas State High School Activities Association assistant executive director) and he said he’d like to offer us an opportunity to officiate a state eight-man football game,” Denner says. “It was the best thing in the world to get that call.”

All of them say it was a blast to work a state game and they hope to get another one this year.

Fragel, 50, is now the oldest among this group. Bert Lord, Marysville, encouraged Fragel to get involved. He started in 2010. He was first a basketball official and a year later added football.

“There used to be nine or 10 officials around here and now we’re down to five,” Fragel says.

Fragel, Bartels, Denner and Becker know the shortage of officials is a serious matter in Kansas. Jeff Sutton, Manhattan, has been a longtime crew member, but he has taken this year off. Wheeler, who has officiated with these guys during junior varsity and varsity games, will step up to be the umpire on the crew. Eck is in his fourth year of officiating and only feels comfortable being a substitute at the varsity level till he gains more experience.

“I understand football, but I don’t know the rules as well as they do,” Eck says.

Bartels has officiated for 19 years and Denner for 18. The two have been with Fragel for six years and four years with Becker.

“I had been looking to get involved,” Becker says.

Anyone can get involved. All of them are willing to help other men get started. Kansas State High School Activities Association officials are constantly looking for those willing to officiate.

“Anyone who wants to referee should contact one of us and we’ll get them going,” Fragel says.

From an official’s perspective, being level with the field doesn’t mean they have best seat in the house.

“A lot of people think we do, but that’s just not true,” Fragel says.

Each person has points of interest on the field he covers, which narrows his view to a small area.

“I still get to be a part of the game without having to play,” Denner says. “A perfect night for us is to go unnoticed.”

“The way I look at it is we’re the third team on the field,” Fragel says.

Football has been evolving in recent years as KSHSAA and the National High School Activities Association strive to make the game safer.

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“There are a lot of points of emphasis that have changed,” Wheeler says. “We used to celebrate violent hits and now we try to keep them from happening.”

“It’s safer now than when I was a high school player,” Becker says.

The focus has been to get coaches to teach players to take the head-first tackles out of the game to try to reduce concussions.

Officials must be watchful for players who exhibit signs of a concussion and escort them to the sideline if necessary. Players who exhibit signs of a concussion must be cleared by a physician before they can return to the field.

This year there are more changes designed to try to make the game safer. Defensive players are restricted from making contact with the ball or the snapper’s hands or arms till the snapper has released the ball, new pass interference restrictions and blindside blocking are among the changes.

For officials to qualify to work postseason games the person has to score 90 percent or better on a test, attend a rules meeting in person or online, attend an area rules meeting and then be recommended by coaches.

“Our ultimate goal is to be recommended by another official,” Bartels says.

They’ve had flat tires slow them down on the way to games, sat through rain delays and postponements, waited out lightning delays, torn pants and busted zippers. They never leave without taking a jar of pickled eggs.

“One of us was asked to a prom,” Bartels said.

“I enjoy working with this crew and I enjoy getting to see good football around northeast Kansas,” Wheeler says. “I’m excited to see good football and excited to be part of the game.”