

Officiating is a Calling for These Referees

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An ailing referee is in the doctor's office, the joke goes, and the doctor pronounces him fit.

"I want a second opinion," says the referee.

"Fine," says the doctor. "You're also a lousy referee."

Despite being yelled at, argued with and otherwise disrespected on a regular basis, North Bay referees David Clark of Santa Rosa and Dave Carter of Penngrove are unusually committed to their craft: They are part of a tiny contingent of referees around the country who officiate amateur sports full time.

"If someone enjoys sports and people, I would absolutely recommend it," Clark said.

"You have to want to be there and it still has to be fun," Carter said.

"People skills are very important," Clark said. "You are often trying to diffuse a situation, get a game back on track."

"We are only as good as our last call," Carter said.

Clark, 45, worked as a chemical engineer for 10 years before discovering refereeing and deciding it was what he wanted to do. Carter, 46, ran out of gas in Petaluma on a cross-country road trip in 1979 and never left. A college friend eventually persuaded him to give officiating a try.

Clark has now been refereeing full time for 15 years, Carter for 14. Although both men concede the profession can take a mental toll, neither one appears to be slowing down.

Carter estimates he officiates 500 to 600 games a year. For Clark, a recent work week went like this: Tuesday: doubleheader high school volleyball; Wednesday: varsity volleyball and then a football meeting and exam; Thursday: doubleheader volleyball; Friday: doubleheader high school football; Saturday: junior college football; Sunday: tripleheader Pop Warner football followed by college volleyball.

In the winter, the focus shifts to basketball. In addition to nightly high school games, on Sundays Clark will sometimes go to a gym in Novato and work as many as 12 youth and adult league games in a day.

"On Mondays, Dave sits around a lot with ice on his knees," Carter said.

"One of my biggest kicks is third-grade basketball," Clark said. "They haven't picked up bad things yet. They're just out there running around and having a good time. It kind of reminds you why you got into it in the first place."

Carter, in addition to officiating volleyball, football and basketball, referees ice hockey and umpires college softball, where he has done Division 1 tournaments.

"Softball is where I showed the most aptitude early on," he said. "Ultimately, I'm hoping to get into the Pac-10. Pac-10 softball is the best in the world.

"I used to do baseball, too, but baseball is a lot slower," he said. "Also, female athletes have come so far in recent years that it is a pleasure to be involved in their games."

Carter's favorite sport, which he has played throughout his life, is soccer. But he no longer referees it.

"I reffed soccer for probably two years, but I didn't enjoy it," he said. "For some reason, sportsmanship is lacking in soccer as opposed to the other sports. Even in football there is more respect, sort of like the players are all gladiators going to war together."

Regardless of the sport or level, one of the most demanding aspects of the job can be dealing with coaches.

"If you ignore them completely, you are going to have trouble," Clark said. "You need to communicate. For me, they really have to earn an ejection. But sometimes you have no choice. It's just part of the business."

"Every situation is different, but 'personal' is the key," Carter said. "You can say that was a horse -- call, but you can't say I'm a horse -- referee."

"It's a fact that the more a coach gets after officials, the more the players will," said Analy's Jim Fagundes, a four-time Sonoma County League girls basketball coach of the year. "

"Many basketball coaches don't really know the rules," said veteran Sonoma County official Gary Frieders, who made a presentation last

year at a North Bay coaches' meeting on "the myths of the game."

"One of their biggest pet peeves is 'over the back,'" he said, referring to a move in which a player reaches over an opponent for a rebound. "But a player can go over the back without committing a foul -- you need contact to have a foul. Another is reaching in -- but reaching in is legal as long as there is no contact," he said, referring to when a player tries to slap the ball from a dribbling opponent.

"Another one that always gets fans and coaches yelling is a moving screen," Frieders said.

"But there is nothing illegal about a moving screen -- again, you need contact for a violation. Then there's shuffling the pivot foot from out of bounds. That's not traveling -- you don't need to keep a pivot foot during a throw-in, but it's something they scream about."

"One thing I tell young officials is we do not threaten," Carter said, "We don't dare coaches

to step over a line. The refs that get the least respect are the ones that throw their weight around."

It's an unfortunate reality that there is an ever-present, potential dark side to being an official, something Clark and Carter are well aware of.

"Something can happen in a heartbeat, in any game, at any level," Clark said. "You need to shut it down before something bad happens."

Carter said he has been confronted in school parking lots by angry parents, and knew a referee who once had a gun pulled on him after a game.

"One of my concerns is how seriously people take this stuff," Carter said. "It's hard for people to just be spectators. They want to somehow involve themselves."

Both men agree that the best part about being a fulltime referee is interacting with the kids who play the games.

"The high point for me is giving the kids the opportunity to showcase their skills," Clark said.

"I don't have my own kids," Carter said. "But I get to work with hundreds of kids at their best. Every once in a while, I actually feel like I have a positive effect on one of their lives."

-by Ted Gross

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