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A referee hands out a yellow card during the Niverville Force match July 31. The referee had to stop the game when the opposing coach refused to leave the pitch after receiving a red card of his own.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK THE CARILLON

Jace Guilford gives an emphatic call at first base during the 17U softball provincial championships. Softball has seen a massive addition of umpires in 2023, as the sport looks to recover from COVID-19.



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An umpire signals a strike during the AA baseball provincial championships in La Broquerie this summer. A coach needed to be kicked out of a game at this event after yelling at the referee.

## Fighting to retain referees across MB

by CASSIDY DANKOCHIK

Fans at the Niverville Force game were left dumbfounded July 31, as the coach of the opposing team launched into an extended tirade against the referee after one of his players received a red card for talking back to the referee.

"You are an idiot," he screamed at the official, asking if he had ever watched soccer in his life and continuing to shout until he was also given a red card.

While coaches behaving badly towards officials isn't exactly surprising, what happened next was. Instead of leaving the pitch after receiving the ejection, the coach refused, forcing the official to halt the game in roughly the 60th minute.

Scenes like that are becoming all too common across all levels of organized sports, as organizing bodies struggle to recruit referees. Numbers plummeted across the board in Canada in the aftermath of COVID-19, and while some sports are reporting the return in raw numbers, they still have to deal with the lack of top-level experienced officials at all levels.

One of the sports which has been pumping resources in recruitment in Manitoba is softball. Tony Kuleza sits on the umpire development committee for Softball Manitoba, and has even held a national position in umpire recruitment and retention. He said the province had 210 registered umpires this season, only five fewer than the 2019 season.

"We've seen a huge bounce back from our low, we were almost under 100," Kuleza said.

"It was a struggle. There were lots of games, especially at the younger ages, that weren't getting officials. That ultimately hurts the sport."

Three-quarters of those 210 umpires are under 20-years-old, with Kuleza emphasising the need for more adult umpires to take up the challenge.

"We have a lot of kids that are taking this on," Kuleza said.

"They're testing it out, and some of them will take, which we love, but we're anticipating losing anywhere between 30-50 per cent of our new recruits from this year.

Kuleza added softball has been able to add experienced officials by recruiting people they think would be a good umpire, sharing an anecdote about recruiting a couple volleyball umpires to sign up and ref softball in the summer.

"(We're) trying to grow dialogue between national sports organizations to work on recruitment and retention, so it's not just a softball thing," he said.



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A referee kicks out a fan for abusing him during the Manitoba High Schools Athletic Association AAAA provincial championships, which were hosted in Steinbach earlier this year.

"This is pan-sport."

Mike Klassen is the Eastman Zone's deputy umpire-in-chief. He said the region, much like the Wildcats' results on the field, is growing stronger.

"Our clinics were really well attended this year," Klassen said, noting they've been advertising to recruit umpires, and managed to add 15 umpires this season, more than doubling their previous number.

"We had a really nice jump here in Eastman. The quality of umpires we got has been remarkable."

Klassen said the umpiring community in the region is tight-knit, with local support key to fending off any abuse.

"The way we develop is we're a family, we're a team, with lots of backup, lots of support and mentorship," he said.

It's a similar story in baseball diamonds across Manitoba, as the province was named the province of the year for umpiring in 2022. Ashton Liske is the vice president of umpires for baseball Manitoba, echoing the exact same concerns about a lack of older umpires. While younger recruitment has increased, the province is hurting for experience.

Liske said the hope is umpires who left during COVID decide to return to the diamond.

"I think it's really just a wait-and-see kind of game to see where we can get officials back," Liske said.

"Hopefully that bridges the gap to the young officials who are 16-and-under."

Overall, Liske gave Manitoba a B- grade for umpiring, noting there were 33 level 4/level 5 umpires active in the province this year, which are the top two levels. Level four umpires get the chance to officiate national-level events.

"I believe we are going about it the right way," Liske said.

"Obviously you'd like everything do be done faster, but that's not going to happen... (Baseball) has always been a patient game, it's always going to be a patient game. I have to keep reminding myself of that."

Liske said Baseball Manitoba usually assigns a mentor to new umpires, noting it has been becoming easier and easier to get certified.

"I know in the Carillon region, there's a lot of nurturing going on," Liske said, name dropping several locals who go above and beyond to help burgeoning umpires.

"They are there to make sure those young guys stick around until they are 18, 19, and hopefully move up."

Refereeing football is another challenge. If you're watching the Eastman Raiders inside A.D. Penner, you might catch a glimpse of Don Van Achete roaming the sidelines. The long-time referee now lives in St Pierre, and while he has stopped donning the stripes on game days, he's still providing guidance for young referees just starting out.

While the cost of becoming a referee has been becoming lower and lower in other sports, (soccer officials in recent years were certified for no charge), that's not the case in football. Van Achete said a referee's uniform

can cost \$200. He praised the Winnipeg Blue Bombers for investing in officiating, even helping recruit new referees and picking up the cost for equipment.

Van Achete is the president for the group of officials in the 15-and-under age group.

"Until this year, recruitment was pretty bad, and retention is pretty bad," he said, noting many of his officials are in high school.

"We seem to get them for a year, maybe two, then they move on to something else."

He guessed a big reason young officials leave the stripes behind is because of the abuse they can receive from coaches and parents.

"The younger kids haven't developed that thick skin, so they walk away rather than try and talk about it," Van Achete said, adding the league has implemented strict penalties for any coach who is even mildly abusing a referee.

"That seems to be helping. We've been going to a lot of our coaches clinics and talking to our coaches, trying to convince them to get off the kid's back. You're not playing for the Grey Cup or the Stanley Cup, you're playing for a \$15 trophy."

Chris Donaldson is the president of the Manitoba Football Officials Association, which handles refereeing at higher levels. He said while their numbers were down after COVID, it's not as bad as other sports.

That doesn't mean any less challenges for scheduling games.

"While we haven't lost that many officials outright, a number of our members have chosen not to work as many games as they did before," Donaldson said.

"That shift in priorities, combined with the few members we did lose, creates a greater need for newer officials that our recruitment numbers aren't meeting and leaves us scrambling to fill games sometimes."

Referee training in football is tougher than other sports, just due to the number of officials who are on the field at one time. While it's no surprise to see soccer, baseball, hockey and baseball only have one referee on the field, in football there are four officials on the field for nearly every game, with higher levels putting as many as seven striped shirts out there.

Every member of the sporting community encouraged more people to get involved in officiating, to help ease younger officials into higher levels without receiving as much abuse.

Klassen noted several of the new stock of umpires came after parents were forced to step in and umpire games for their kids' teams last season.

"(If) a parent is doing it anyway, come do the clinic, get certified and get paid for it," he said.