

Interview Podcast with Roger LaFrancois

Matt Pezzino: Basketball is one of the most popular sports in America and rightfully so. Its breakneck pace and constant highlight moments make it an amazing spectator sport. But when you hear the whistle and the play stops, what's the first thing you think?

Far Away Matt Pezzino: Come on ref! How's that's a foul!

Matt Pezzino: And sometimes you wish that ref would just go away. Well that is what's happening all across the US. Referees are putting down the whistle and walking away. Today I talked to IIABO Board Eight of Connecticut president, Roger LaFrancois about why it's happening and how his board is affected by the referee shortage.

Music Break

Matt Pezzino: So I'm here with Roger LaFrancois. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Roger LaFrancois: Yeah, well thank you, thanks, first of all, thank you for having me on this on this podcast here. Roger, LaFrancois. I'm the assignment commissioner for board eight, here in Eastern Connecticut. There are six boards in Connecticut, and I've been assignment commissioner now for going on five years and I've been a basketball official and part of our board for over 45 years. So it's ah, something I really enjoy doing. and I'm looking forward to talking a little about our board, our officials and the state of officiating in today's game.

Matt Pezzino: So real quick to start, what towns does board eight cover?

Roger LaFrancois: Well board eight does mostly eastern Connecticut. We have around 20 schools we cover, we go as far as Griswold, and we do games all the way to Westbrook and Hale Ray. We do the ECC. We have many schools in the ECC, with New London, Waterford, East Lyme, Fitch, schools like that. And then of course in the Shoreline with Old Lyme, Westbrook and Old Saybrook. And we also do a few tech schools with Norwich Tech, and Grasso Tech. But we also do a lot of travel leagues in Connecticut. in fact we have, we have a league up here in Coventry where we cover. So we do a lot with the travel and the rec and that's what basically we cover you know, throughout our area.

Matt Pezzino: So there's been a lot of talk in the NCAA about a ref shortage. That's what we're here to talk about today. Would you say that Board 8 has a ref shortage?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, I believe not only Board 8 has a ref shortage, but also every board in Connecticut and nationwide. It's been an issue here especially probably over the last 10 years and it seems like it gets worse every year. You know, eight years ago our board had over 220 members and today we're down to 160. And out of the 160 probably 120 are actually working members. So you know, with the ref shortage, it makes it tough to cover all these games. And it's a challenge. It's been a challenge. And that's part of my job as assignment commissioner is recruiting and retention. and it's a constant work in progress and I get a lot of help. But it's been tough in the last few years and it's a major challenge.

Matt Pezzino: So what would you say is the initiative Board 8 has started, to retain or add new refs?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, we have several programs in place and starting with our, we have a recruiting retention committee that we put together a few years ago. Michael Thomas, our interpreter, does an amazing job, helping me out with that. We do a lot of marketing through the schools, through my constant contact email, program, social media, we go out and talk, talk to schools. And we get a lot of referrals from our present members. That's a huge thing. And again like I said, it's you know, we get the word out there the best we can. Last year we had a great recruiting class of almost 18-20 new officials come to our board. And so I'm really hoping that this year we be able to match that or even do better.

Matt Pezzino: So how many referees did you guys lose in the past three years?

Roger LaFrancois: In the last few years, we've lost probably 60 over the last three or four years. And again, you know, sometimes you know, people just move on. After Covid, it was a challenge. We lost a lot after Covid. And so we try to replenish that with our recruiting and retention program. But yeah, it's been a big hit the last few years because when we lose officials, you know, I don't have enough officials to cover games. And especially in the afternoon, those three thirty middle school games and four o'clock freshman games. It's you know, the normal person works from nine clock to five o'clock so that's been a challenge to cover those games and sometimes even on weekends.

Matt Pezzino: So what happens to the schools when you can't cover a game?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, that's the worst thing I can do. When I'm assignment commissioner, to tell a program a Travel program, rec program, and especially the middle school program and the freshman programs that I can't cover the games because we don't have enough officials. So I hate to do that. We sometimes for the most part, just make the game on a different day and we end up covering the games. But there's a lot of back and forth with that. And that to me is one of the biggest challenges I face as assignment commissioners to covering those afternoon weekday games.

Matt Pezzino: The US Soccer Referee Board has instated a no, tolerance policy with rough sidelines do you think, or, my bad, I'll rephrase this. How has youth basketball been impacted by these rough, tough parents?

Roger LaFrancois: You know, we, and I commend a lot of our are travel leagues and town leagues. You especially towns like Coventry and Norwich, you know, East Lyme, and Waterford that I deal with. They have you know, the rules where if you get thrown out of a game, basically you have to sit out, sit out a couple games and then if you get thrown out again, you're done for the year. And the CIAC has adopted a very strong policy where if you do get you know, ejected, there is a penalty where you have to sit out one or two games and take a course and things like that. So I think we're finally hearing you know, what the officials, you know, are saying, you know, and some of these programs, you know, whether it's the CIA or these towns or the schools themselves, the principals, the superintendents and athletic directors, they're you know, they're coming down a little stronger on the actions, not only from the coaches but also the fans. I mean we've had many fan ejections and our officials have to walk out to the car with a policeman. And I was just in a situation a couple weeks ago where I walked out, you know, to the car, with the policeman. And those are just you know, it's not called for, you know, and I'm talking like eighth grade, eighth grade, travel games, you know, where you know. And it's not a good look for the game. And we just you know, I think we you know, need to do better.

Matt Pezzino: Most referees start at a young age at least. Do you think that that younger age has an impact on how those parents and fans treat them?

Roger LaFrancois: A little bit, because you know, we have, you have to be 18 to, to get certified. Through our board we have a process where you go through IAABO University and then we have a training program and mentoring program and things like that. But you know, when they start out at 18, they're out there, they're new, they're a little nervous when they go out there. And some of these, you know, we started them out usually at a rec program or a travel program or a low level, you know, middle school game. But yeah, you get, you know, you go out there first few times and you start getting yelled at a little bit. And you know it does have an impact in some way and we've lost officials just because of that. Because of, you know, hey listen, you know, you could pay me \$200 a game. This just, I don't want to deal with this abuse, know. And it's a professional way to approach an official. and sometimes some coaches and fans, they lose track of that. but yeah, as a young official they're going to hit some bumps in the road. But in the long run they get through those first two years, they're gonna be better off for it. And it's about, like I said, it's about, you know, we got to know the rules inside and out. But it's about managing the game, managing people, managing the coaches and the sometimes the fans.

Matt Pezzino: Now about managing the game. do you think there's any way that the town boards for these youth games could help, Help the refs manage their players?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, no, most definitely because there are situations where it happens every week, every week, during the week, every, every weekend where you know, and like I say, I go out and see over 100 games a year. I watch a lot on the NFHS channel and a lot of these schools and programs nowadays, you know, have games on YouTube. But you know, what we ask is there be a site director at every facility that we have. So if we do have a problem, whether it's with a coach or a fan, that the site director will take care of it. I mean the officials are there, they go out in the court, you know, to officiate the game, you know, they're not there, to you know, monitor the fans and things like that. Of course coaching is a part of that. But you know, sometimes I think we can get a little more help, from the site directors, which I think some do a better job than others. So that's something that I you know, hope to enforce or kind of make known a little more as we you know into going into next season.

Matt Pezzino: So what do you think is the number one reason boards are losing their referees?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, I think that to be honest with you, I think it's what we were just talking about. I think it's the you know, the attitude or you know, from the fans and the coaches, and at times, and believe me, I'm not, you know there are a lot of great coaches out there who are very, very professional. But it's that 5% that that really have a negative impact on the game itself and negative impact on our officials. And you know we've had 20 new officials this year and I think we're going to retain probably 14 of them and the other six, for various reasons, you know, will probably drop out because of that situation. And like I said, sometimes it's become a norm now that it's okay to yell at a ref or to abuse a ref or you know to yell at him when he's walking out of the gym or things like that. And it's just, it's just such a negative impact on the game itself and what we're all about, you know in our game today.

Matt Pezzino: Yeah. Is there anything you would like to say to refs who may be thinking about coming back or starting up?

Roger LaFrancois: Well, geez. Hey, I think officiating is one of the best things, best jobs you could have. You know, even though I kind of said a few negative things here about it. But you know, God, you know, you go out there and you know it's a challenge every single night. you know you can you know, you kind of whistle while you work. I mean, you know you're running up and down the court doing something you love. People who have had who are in the game as far as players, and have a love for the game. You're able to give back a little bit. and you know you make a little money on the side sideline. You know, you can make a little bit for younger, a younger you know, a young man who's in college or whatever. It's a great little part time job and you know, and you could take it as high as you want. We have officials who are, you who love just doing the rec league games. We have officials who do middle school, and we have other officials who have aspirations of. Of doing varsity games at the high school level. And we have several officials who have aspirations of doing, college games. And like I said with Matt and Josh and A.J. we have officials who have aspirations, of one day, officiating and in the NBA, and something that you know, our board is very, very proud of. So you can take it as far as you want. And if anybody's interested out there that wants to get involved with officiating, you know, please, send them my way because it, like I said it's a great profession. And it has a lot of rewards.

Matt Pezzino: Awesome. Thank you so much.

Roger LaFrancois: Awesome. Thank you.

Matt Pezzino: Thanks for listening. I hope you enjoyed. If this episode made you want to help with the growing referee crisis. Type I-A-A-B-O, that's I-A-A-B-O and your state name to find out how you can get involved. Youth sports are an integral part of any community, and you can make a difference.