

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION



OF SPORTS OFFICIALS

MENTORING IN OFFICIATING

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



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Mentoring centers on a one-on-one relationship: the experienced official and the rookie. That relationship is crucial to retaining newer members and also for engaging veterans – ultimately, mentoring provides positive outcomes for to both ends of the officiating spectrum. Helping train and orient a new official is perhaps the single most important task an experienced official can undertake. Mentoring can be a formal process, perhaps operated through an official program at your local association, or it can be a more informal relationship between an experienced and inexperienced official.

PERSON-TO-PERSON

Mentoring centers on a one-on-one relationship: the experienced official and the rookie. The most important characteristic a mentor can have, therefore, is an approachable, patient personality. The veteran will be asked many questions that cover the most fundamental parts of officiating. Not every official has the patience for that. Before you agree to serve as a mentor, be sure you can handle such exchanges. Signs of impatience, exasperation or annoyance may only serve to relay to the rookie that you think he is stupid or ill-prepared. Foster an environment in which questions are encouraged and you'll be helping that new official develop.

Field experience. Rulebook discussions on officiating theory and mechanics are fine, but there's no substitute for onfield or oncourt experience. Too many groups leave new officials to "fend for themselves" while they cut their teeth on JV, freshman or middle school contests. Rookie officials need to get game experience with game-experienced officials. That is where many mentoring programs fail. If experienced officials are unwilling to "step down" and take a few lower-level games to help out their mentees during game situations, the learning curve is made longer and less effective. Veterans should help rookies get some entry-level games, and then work those games with them. You'll see much quicker results.

TALK IT OUT

Experienced officials know the benefit of a good pregame and postgame conference. For the new official with just a few games under the belt, there is nothing more valuable. Sitting down after a game to go over plays, calls and rule interpretations that he or she just experienced is a fast-track learning method. Those discussions should contain instruction and reinforcement as well as the areas in need of improvement. Tact is the key. “You’ll find that making that call is easier if you are in this location,” works better than, “You were out of position. No wonder the coach ate you alive.”

THE PAYOFF

Let's face it: Officials aren't beating down the door to become mentors. That's too bad. Officials who have become mentors discover that working with new officials has advantages. First, you can find diamonds in the rough. Properly mentored rookies have gone on to fulfilling officiating careers. Second, you can rediscover your love of officiating. Work with a younger person who is excited to be working a freshman game, and you just might rekindle that spark that got you started. Third, you can improve your game. Diving into rulebooks and mechanics manuals with a young official might open your eyes to something you had forgotten or overlooked.

HOW TO ESTABLISH A MENTORING PROGRAM

Mentoring is the buzzword for business, youth organizations, officials associations and just about every other organization or corporation. Officials associations see it as a way to develop new and inexperienced officials quickly, maintain the second- and third-year officials that have struggled and satisfy the more experienced officials when their physical abilities begin to fade.

Many associations that decide to start a mentoring program find out that it is not easy. But it can work with the right steps. Here are recommendations to start down the right path to developing a solid program.

STEP 1

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Before you go diving directly in announcing the mentoring program at your next association meeting, think about what issues you are trying to resolve and how the program will resolve them. Speak with potential mentees and mentors and bounce the idea off them and get their impressions and ideas. Spend time considering your association's future state. Where do you want the association to be in five, 10 or more years? Convince yourself and others that an effective mentoring program is the path to that future state.

STEP 2

COLLECT DATA

Contact the people that handle your officiating needs at a state or national level and obtain some data about average officials' retention, reasons why officials quit officiating and other key facts. That data is critical to tailoring your program to meet those important needs.

STEP 3

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Find out who has successful programs. Find out how they did it and what they learned along the way. Reapplication of successes and avoidance of known mistakes can speed the process and increase the likelihood of success.

STEP 4 **TAKE A CHANCE**

Mentoring is a big effort that requires strong leadership. If you have the skills, the passion and the energy to drive your association toward a successful program, volunteer to lead the program. Be the force that makes the program happen and propel the association toward its future state. At a minimum, find a way that you can help the program. Maybe you are a potential mentor or perhaps you are a skilled administrator that can help organize the program. Get involved.

STEP 5

GET MEMBERS ON BOARD

A successful mentoring program will require considerable support from the association. Make sure your association board members are aligned with your thoughts and ideas. Seek their support. That support could be financial, commitment of association resources or just an official backing of the program.

STEP 6

DRAFT A TEAM

While you may be a strong leader and have considerable passion for the program, get some help. Develop a team that will focus on the key issues and spread the burden of meeting the many issues out to the entire team. Capitalize on the team's diversity and personalities and you have a better chance to succeed.

STEP 7

CREATE A GAME PLAN

Get your team together and brainstorm ideas, draft some options, consider the success stories and ultimately create your plan for implementing the program with your officials. That should include how to identify mentors and mentees, what criteria to use to match the right mentor with the right mentee, how the interaction will occur (on the field or court or off) and a backup plan for those unfortunate mentoring pairs.

STEP 8

TRY IT ON FOR SIZE

Execute your plan. Many businesses and associations are excellent at creating plans, developing ideas, but many also fail in deployment. Even the well-thought-out plan has problems, so don't be afraid to be flexible with its implementation, but never vary from the program's core values and purpose. Stick with the initial plan for a pre-determined period of time to see if the bumps smooth out before you start making major revisions. You must realize that it is a human process. Humans are slow to change and slow to accept other human's opinions. Therefore, the development of a successful mentoring program will be slow. Take small steps. Don't try to get to your future state in three months.

STEP 9

CHECK FOR A PULSE

After the first season or first year of the program, check and see how effective the program was at meeting your success criteria established during the initial planning. Use conventional tools for getting that information. Send out questionnaires, do one-on-one interviews, check statistics and retention numbers. Mentors and mentees will tell you what they think worked, what did not work and what they think would improve the program. Generate a list of options and observations and improve your program from there.

CASE STUDY: **WHY OUR REFEREE MENTOR PROGRAM WORKS**

By Grace Schwanda,
Soccer Referee Trainer For The Wheaton (Ill.) Park District

The Referee Mentoring Program is a training program for soccer referees at the Park District in Wheaton, Ill. The idea for the program began with a camp for new referees. When the turnout exceeded our expectations in the spring of 2011, we began a referee camp before each season in the fall and spring of 2012.

Typically our referees are players from our program who notice that their friends are becoming referees when they turn 14 years old. We also have adults who love the game and want to try refereeing instead of playing the sport. Each season we have about 20 new referees join our roster of trained referees.

Our camps have an outside component on the fields and classroom time on the Laws of the Game. We discuss the philosophy and psychology of being a referee. We examine what it will take to do our first game on the field as a referee. It always amazes me how much information and experience a referee needs to know to do an outstanding job. Our goal is that no referee has to go out to their first game by themselves without first having practice on a field.

Some of our referees have passed the USSF test and two-day training in the winter and feel unprepared to referee but don't have options of how to practice. Studying from a book is not the same as running on a field with a whistle and having coaches, parents and players counting on you to make the call. It's important to devise a way for officials to have onfield training. New officials need practice for a season with mentors assessing and assisting them.

We don't send players out without a coach, so why would we do that to referees? We do a disservice to the spirit of the game by sending out under-prepared officials. The following is what we do to train new officials for our mentor program. Your association or league can adapt the ideas to fit your sport and needs.

REFEREE CAMP

Our plan is for all referees to attend the soccer referee camp for three evenings before the start of the season. The last night is outdoors at a scrimmage being assistant referees and learning what it means to hold the flag. They call throw-ins, goalkicks, corner kicks and offside with a mentor standing with them. Mechanics of where to stand and how to get to the goalline are demonstrated and discussed. The immediate feedback is what makes the time so valuable.

ONFIELD MENTORS DURING THE SEASON

Mentors are assigned fields with the new referees. They are by the touchline, watching and critiquing the mechanics of referees. They are ready to give feedback at every call or at the end of every period. Beginning as assistant referees (AR) helps to take some of the pressure off of the early experience. When they have had a few weeks of AR experience, we encourage them to try a center. We let them shadow a referee who has center experience. They have a whistle and may use it but if they don't, the other referee is there to make the call. I have had new referees shadow me and it is so important that they know where to be to blow the whistle (loudly). One new referee said, "I can't believe you used to just send new referees out alone." The old "sink or swim" method is not acceptable.

WHO ARE THE MENTORS?

I have chosen four of our outstanding referees who have trained with me for over three years to be our first team of mentors. They wear bright green shirts so they are visible on the fields. They not only assess new referees but they give pointers to our experienced referees who have become very interested in improving their skills. When our referees are ready we encourage them to get

certified by USSF if they haven't already and to do travel games in addition to the park district games. We encourage the next steps in upgrading after our referees have become old enough and recorded enough games.

REFEREE MEETINGS

The referee meeting is held between one of our Saturday afternoon games. There are approximately 20-25 referees who attend the weekly gatherings. The mentors and I discuss the good, bad and the ugly that we saw that day. We try to pick a word of the day to think about: courage, anticipation, mechanics, participation or work effort. We sometimes acknowledge the loudest whistle we heard on one of the fields since that seems to be the thing coaches always mention. Each week we focus on an aspect of refereeing.

FUTURE PLANNING

No program is ever finished. We will keep assessing our referees and we will keep searching for the best way to teach them to become successful referees. We will need to choose a few new mentors every year as some graduate and are replaced with our other outstanding referees. We need to study retention and see if having mentors increases the likelihood of referees continuing through high school and beyond. We will examine customer satisfaction – players, coaches, spectators and, of course referee, satisfaction. Experience and striving for excellence is a good beginning.

WHAT MENTORS GAIN FROM MENTORING

GIVING BACK TO THE ASSOCIATION

Sports officiating is a select fraternity. Not everyone can do it, and it's not easy. When we started off in our career, most of us had a mentor or "big brother" who took interest in us (or pity on us) and took the big step to become involved in our development. Without that insight and experience to guide us, it would have taken much longer to advance in our chosen avocation. If left to our own devices, there's no telling how misguided we'd have become. All officials can gain from the mentoring process. Not all can mentor successfully. If you're a good teacher or communicator, give back.

RELATIONSHIPS

The process of being a mentor brings you into the life of a new official, and over time you'll develop a close relationship. There are quite a few officials who I've mentored over the past 20-plus years that still stay in touch, even though they're no longer in the same location. You become a friend, not just a mentor. That's a necessary part of nurturing your protégé. Those can become lifelong friendships, and that type of friendship is well worth the effort.

INFLUENCE

Building and expanding relationships with new officials during the mentoring process will bring a bunch of new acolytes to your "sphere of influence." If you're

interested in becoming involved in the governing of your association, that is a good way to become known to the officials. They'll see your hard work on their behalf, and be there to back you if you're running for an elected board position, or want to become more involved in a specific aspect of your association. That is not the main reason to get into mentoring. It is a returnable benefit.

ADVANCEMENT IN YOUR OWN CAREER

Again, that isn't the main reason to be a mentor. However, it is a natural by-product. When association leaders see mentors helping new officials, and doing it with the right attitude, they'll naturally be looking at that official when it comes to "big" games or postseason assignments.

QUIET PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP

Mentoring is a lot like parenting. There can be struggles, depending on how stubborn your "mentee" is. As they continue to improve and advance in their assignments, you are an integral part of that advancement. When they get that "cream puff" assignment and succeed, inside you can say, "That's my boy" or "That's my girl." You've empowered them to be all they can be. You've given them the necessary tools to be successful in the avocation that you also love.

HOW TO SELECT THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO BE MENTORS

A great mentoring program is only possible with quality mentors. Just as great officials have superior skills and instincts, great mentors have certain attributes that make them right for the job. Here are recommendations to help you identify the right people.

STEP 1

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Check out other mentoring programs that have been successful. Find out the types of individuals that are a part of those programs. You obviously won't be able to use the same people, but you will be able to find out from other association leaders what makes their mentors successful. Find out about their experience, their commitment, their personality – whatever will help you to find similar mentors in your group.

STEP 2

ELIMINATE THE WRONG PEOPLE

There are some officials who are clearly wrong for the job of mentoring. Some groups open up the opportunity to serve as a mentor to the entire association. That can put association leaders in a tough spot if individuals who aren't qualified volunteer. You don't want first- or second-year officials mentoring other newbies, for example. You also don't want individuals who don't have the skills (officiating or personality) to be successful. You want new officials to stay with your association. Picking the wrong people to serve as mentors can chase them out the door faster than they came in.

STEP 3

FIND INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE TIME FOR THE JOB

There are some great potential mentors in your association who aren't right for serving as a mentor simply because they don't have the time for it. You need individuals who have the time (possibly newly retired association members) or those who will make the time (officials who have a full schedule, but don't mind attending JV games prior to their own or who will make time on the weekend to work some youth games with new officials).

STEP 4

LOOK FOR LEADERS

The mentors you identify should be respected in your association. They should be individuals who carry themselves the right way at meetings and games. They should be individuals who have maintained current, up-to-date knowledge and skills (even after retirement, for some). And they should be people who are interested in and willing to help others.

STEP 5

FIND THOSE WHO CAN TEACH

An official might have everything going for him or her out on the field or court, but if the individual can't communicate to someone else how to be successful, the official likely isn't cut out for mentoring. Good mentors demonstrate effective coaching, counseling and facilitating skills. They are receptive to new ways of learning and able to offer feedback in a constructive manner.

STEP 6

GET FEEDBACK FROM MENTEES

After the season, send out questionnaires and/or do one-on-one interviews with mentees to see what they thought worked, what did not work and what they think would improve the program. Find out what they liked about their mentor and what he or she needs to do to improve. Share the feedback with the mentors so they can be even more successful in the future.

REAL TALK: MENTORING PROGRAMS IN OFFICIALS ASSOCIATIONS

Mentoring can make a huge difference for someone new to officiating. As a result, many associations have some type of mentoring program. Three leaders took time to answer questions about the role of mentoring in their associations. They include: Bob Angeli, president of the Northern Virginia Softball Umpires Association; Mike Wint, one of five administrators for the Grand Valley (Mich.) Soccer Officials Association; and Ken Franklin, Metroplex (Dallas-Forth Worth) Hockey Officials Association mentor trainer.

1. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE A MENTOR PROGRAM?

Angeli: The majority of the members are “experienced” and in order to preserve the vocation of umpiring, we must bring along younger members that will ultimately take our place. Using those experienced umpires will enable those tools or tricks of the trade to be passed along. Umpires can attend all the clinics, training sessions, etc., but there is so much value in that one-on-one swapping of “war stories” – this or that happened and how you dealt with it. That is where true learning takes place and younger umpires grow listening to others – both good and bad.

Wint: A majority of our referees are youth. We turn out new Grade 9 referees (primarily youth players) who have a conflict between a “player’s knowledge” of the laws and a “referee’s knowledge.” The mentor program allows them to properly gain experience with positive reinforcement and gentle correction when they make a mistake. Mostly, they need to learn positioning, concentration on the details of watching for an offside violation that may never occur, and self-confidence. Those things are hard to teach in the classroom, but on field with a mentor makes all the difference in the world.

Franklin: Our association is built on a foundation of young or new (not all are young) officials and giving them an excellent start is the key to keeping our association at the forefront. Allowing the new officials to our organization to have the training, evaluation, input and experience provides them with the confidence to reach their full potential on and off the ice. A good mentoring program allows for the new officials to learn the game, but to have fun doing it. While learning any new job is stressful, putting the new officials with a good mentor lets them understand the game while still having an experienced official to make certain the game runs smoothly.

2. WHAT ARE THE MAIN EXPECTATIONS OF MENTORS?

Angeli: For those senior members in terms of level or years of experience to embrace those coming behind and teach them how to survive within the game. Some things simply cannot be taught at a clinic, training or by reading a rulebook. You need to be able to talk about it and peel it back and examine what happened and recognize sometimes there are gray areas and being able to get those being mentored to understand it's OK to deviate sometimes when necessary.

Wint: Teach the right things (approved signals and the rules of competition); remember your training (dealing with feedback issues, communicating with the “new generation”); letting the association know what is happening (how are your mentees doing, are you overloaded and need help, is there a schedule/personality mismatch). Oh, and have fun.

Franklin: We base the selection of our mentors on several criteria. Most mentor officials have several years of experience in officiating ice hockey and they must have proven themselves to be very competent. In addition, they need to demonstrate that they have patience with training and dealing with the challenges of teaching a new official. Many of our new officials are young adults or teenagers, and with the wrong type of attitude or feedback from a mentor, they could choose to walk away from officiating before they have given themselves a chance.

3. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO SERVE AS A MENTOR AND WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO BE A MENTEE IN YOUR PROGRAM?

Angeli: We presently don't have a formal mentor program but it is widely known who the more "trusted" umpires are and, of course, we all know those new or junior members. The board encourages senior members to get involved with those junior umpires. We often will team up senior umpires (those that would be official mentors) with less experienced umpires (those that would be mentees).

Wint: We screen the mentors (they have to have a reasonable soccer ability as demonstrated by onfield action – and we look at their youth work to mentor youth), and we review overall personality. We start at the certification courses, follow up at local meetings and work with assigners to identify officials who need and want assistance, have a strong desire to get ahead and who can be self-critical without fear of trying something and not being successful.

Franklin: Any official who has demonstrated their proficiency officiating the game at higher levels and who has the desire to help out the new officials to the game is eligible to be asked to be a mentor. We currently have in place an in-depth selection and training program for all our potential mentees. Once they complete the sessions, their USA Hockey registration, USA Hockey seminar, testing and other requirements, they are eligible to be scheduled for mentor games. The goal is to train the new official and have them released from the mentor program in 35-40 games.

ARE YOU MADE TO BE A MENTOR?

Just as great officials are born with superior skills and instincts, great mentors have certain qualities that make them perfect for the job. Do you have what it takes to be a mentor and don't even know it? Is someone in your association a mentor in member's clothing?

Consult this list to see if the characteristics fit someone you know.

Good mentors are:

- Officials who are interested in and are willing to help others.
- Officials who have had positive formal or informal experiences with a mentor tend to be good mentors themselves.
- Experienced officials who have a good reputation for helping others develop their skills.
- Officials who have the time and mental energy to devote to the relationship.
- Officials who have maintained current, up-to-date knowledge and skills.
- Officials who are still willing and able to learn and who see the potential benefits of such a relationship.
- Officials who have demonstrated effective coaching, counseling, facilitating and networking skills.
- Officials who are committed to expanding their capabilities.
- Officials open and receptive to new ways of learning and trying new ideas.
- Officials able to accept feedback and act upon it.
- Officials who demonstrate a willingness to apply what they've learned on the field or court.
- Officials who are focused on achieving desired results.
- Officials able to communicate and work cooperatively with others.
- Officials who know when to ask for help.
- Officials with a sense of personal responsibility and commitment.
- Officials who are willing to meet on a regular basis.