

18 February 2020

TO: Chairman: George Lang

Vice-Chair: Phil Plummer

Ranking Member: David Leland

I am writing as a resident of Ohio District 60 and as a certified sports official in good standing with the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) as well as the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). I would like to provide personal testimony in support of the pending legislation (House Bill 208 and Senate Bill 118) to make an assault on a sports official a 5th degree felony just as it would if the assault was on a school teacher, bus driver or administrator.

I have been a soccer referee since 1992 and have been a sports official here in Ohio since moving back to Ohio in August 2005. I have been a referee at all levels – youth, amateur, Ohio high school, NCAA college games and we all know that physical and mental abuse of sports officials has only been increasing over the years.

I have refereed several thousand soccer games in my 28 years as a sports official. While I can truthfully say that I have never been physically assaulted in my sport's official role, there have been many instances where game situations have come close to where myself and fellow officials have been threatened by coaches, players and most prevalent, by fans.

I keep hearing in all my referee clinics and training sessions, especially via OHSAA and the NCAA, that "the field/court is an extension of the classroom", and we would never condone physical violence against a teacher or administrator etc. Sports officials should be treated and protected in the same manner as these other academic positions as well as first responders. We are providing a "service" to our clients, "schools", "clubs/organizations" etc.

During a sporting event, at any level, emotions are always high, as the pursuit of victory has become the "end or be all". Society is full of examples, especially in this new era of social media and YouTube, of coaches and fans reacting badly to a defeat and taking out their fury on a sports official, thinking "they" were the reason their team lost the game/match.

On a national level, the ranks of sports officials continue to decline at a macro-level as sports officials must deal with verbal abuse as well as documented physical intimidation and assaults. More and more sports officials are quitting or not renewing their officiating licenses because of the growing violence against them. In Ohio, I believe if assaults against a sports official were a 5th degree felony, more people would think twice against taking physical action against a sports official, knowing the legal ramifications that would occur if such behavior occurred.

While this did not happen in Ohio, I want to provide a case study of an assault on a sports official that occurred in a soccer match that I was refereeing in when I was living in the State of Virginia in the mid-1990's.

I was an Assistant Referee on a weekend Senior Men's Amateur match being played in Fairfax County, VA outside of Washington, DC. The game was being played between two teams of mostly Hispanic immigrant males. During the match, the referee called a foul on one team for a dangerous slide tackle on an opponent. The player got off the ground and did not like the referee's call and lack of further discipline on the offending player. The player got in the referee face and just "exploded" and punched the referee behind the left ear, sending the referee straight to the ground. Fortunately, the league contracted the Fairfax County police department to provide off-duty police officers to "police" the game location for these all-day soccer games. The police officer immediately came on the field and escorted the player off the field. The game was suspended from that moment on.

Moving forward, the assaulted referee asked me to be a "character witness" in the court case that the referee brought on the individual player and his respective soccer club. I was a witness in Fairfax County Virginia Commons Pleas Court on behalf of my fellow referee. After some initial legal wrangling by the defense attorney, the presiding judge brought the proceedings to a swift conclusion by charging the offending player the following:

1. \$500 fine to the court
2. 3-year ban from playing organized sports in Fairfax County Virginia
3. Awarded the referee \$5,000 in compensatory and punitive damages
4. 2nd degree felony for assault

I use this case study as a great example because I always remembered what the presiding judge said that day when he passed sentence on the guilty party. He said, and I believe I quote him as saying, "Young man, in this county, I treat sports officials like first responders and educators. You do NOT lay a hand on them. I don't care how bad the call was or the result of the game/match. You do not assault a sports official."

If we are to send a message here in the state of Ohio that physical violence or assault will not be tolerated in the classroom or out in society, making assaults on sports officials a felony will go a long way in curbing and preventing dangerous behavior. More importantly, it will allow sports officials to continue to do a difficult job while teaching young people and society overall that sporting events, at whatever level of competition, is just that, entertainment and healthy activity for participants and spectators. Ridding society of sports official assaults will be an incredible teaching tool and deterrence going forward. The state of Ohio and the House of Representatives/Senate should move forward in bringing to law H.B. 208/Senate Bill 118.

Michael C. Pugh (Resident of Ohio District 60)

5365 Snell Drive

Mentor, Ohio 44060

Home: (440) 354-2869 Mobile: (301) 775-8120 mpugh4@juno.com