

Written Testimony of Barry Mano

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For consideration in HB 44 Sports Official Proponent Testimony Information

Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony on this important issue regarding the safety of sports officials throughout Ohio. My name is Barry Mano and I am the Founder and President of the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), as well as the Founder and Publisher of *Referee* magazine.

NASO is a national non-profit association representing close to 26,000 members across the United States. Our mission is to advocate and provide education for sports officials, among many other key services. *Referee* magazine is the “go-to” publication for sports officials, covering all issues related to our field.

We have testified and provided critical information many times on the issue of officiating-assault legislation and are honored to share with you key statistics and our perspective on why sports officials should be protected at a higher level of safety than the general populace.

Why Assault Legislation?

News headlines remind us that sportsmanship is on the decline and that fans, coaches and players are crossing the line when it comes to simple civil behavior at sporting events. It seems that fans, coaches and players sometimes think that their participation fee or admission ticket gives them the right to attack officials. It’s time to put an end to such thinking.

The National Association of Sports Officials has championed the assault legislation cause for more than three decades. Currently 22 states have adopted various forms of legislation, all with one goal in mind: Protect sports officials. (For a complete list and detailed review, visit www.naso.org.)

Still, legislation efforts occasionally face objections. Those objections are rarely based on an opinion that sports officials do not face difficult challenges. Rather, objections tend to be based on a more fundamental, constitutional-type argument: There are already assault laws on the books, so why is it necessary to have more laws? Why create a “special class?” It’s a fair debate.

The advantages and benefits of having specific statutory law dealing with attacks on officials are tangible. Penalties are increased. In some states, second offenses are more severely dealt with. Felony convictions may be available. The existence of a state law criminalizing an attack on an official, telegraphs to prosecutors, judges and juries that such an assault is to be taken

seriously – that it is not OK to punch a referee if you don't like a call that he or she makes.

Increased penalties are also a deterrent. When the general sporting public – coaches, players and fans alike – are aware that assaulting a sports official means severe penalties ... that very notion should prevent some assaults from occurring.

Certain segments of the public deserve and need special protection due to the nature of their jobs – police officers, firefighters, teachers, etc. NASO believes that in the sports world, officials are that segment that deserve and need special protection due to the nature of the job.

Why do sports officials need extra protection? It's simple. Officials represent the only authority on the field or court and are therefore in a position – by the nature of their job – to be the object of praise and ridicule. If officials are unable to control the situation, it is likely that chaos will occur.

HB 44 takes a significant and proper step to increase protection for sports officials in Ohio. We encourage members to support this legislation.

Sportsmanship

Sportsmanship applies to the personal safety of sports officials but is also a major issue impacting the recruitment and retention of officials. An unsafe working environment creates conditions that drives current and prospective people from the officiating profession/avocation.

I'd like to insert a short reminder that the large majority of sports officials do this job as an avocation. They have a full-time job they go back to after the game, with all the additional challenges that go along with that. Most officials love the sport and officiate to give something back to the game. They make huge sacrifices of time to train and travel to meetings and games. Unsafe working conditions create a reason for far too many officials to exit the game they love.

A few years ago, NASO undertook the largest survey of sports officials in history. Over 17,000 officials responded to our questionnaire, a huge marker regarding their interest in sharing their views. Sportsmanship was a big one. Here are some key statistics from the survey for your consideration while debating and considering this bill:

- 64 percent of officials have removed a spectator from the court or field for poor behavior.
- 57 percent of officials have had to step in to break up a fight or skirmish during a game.
- Close to six percent of sports officials have been assaulted during or after a game by a fan. Almost five percent have been assaulted by a player and 2.5 percent by a coach. That's unacceptable.
- 53 percent of officials have felt unsafe or feared for their safety due to the behavior of an administrator, player, coach or spectator.

You may find more information at www.naso.org/survey/.

Conclusion

Many steps must be taken to improve safety for sports officials, and the major source of the problem, which is bad fan behavior. Legislation establishing a special protected status for sports officials is an important and significant step towards improving working conditions for officials and keeping the pipeline open for new officials to enter this field.

NASO wholeheartedly supports HB 44, and we encourage swift passage of this legislation. The legislation not only supports the role sports officials play on our society today in a positive fashion, but also establishes an example for other states to emulate.

We have some unique ideas for enforcement mechanisms regarding this type of legislation. If you would like to hear those ideas, or would like any additional information or input from NASO, please feel free to reach me directly at bmano@referee.com.