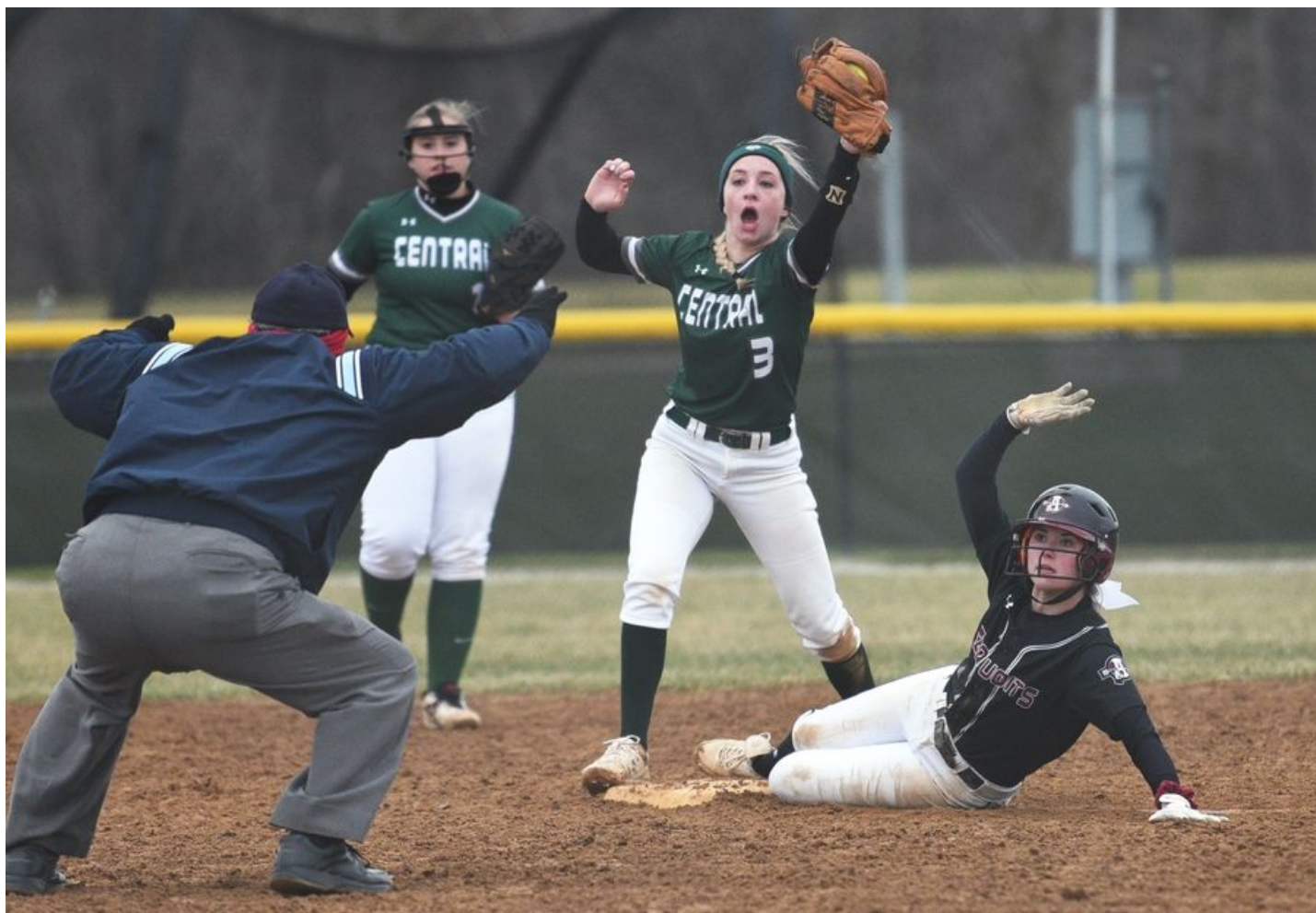


They want you: Need a job? Youth, prep sports desperately need referees



The United States is "officially" experiencing an officials shortage, particularly in youth and high school sports. (*Paul Valade | Staff Photographer, File*)



Patricia Babcock McGraw

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If sporting events had fewer referee whistles, and fewer controversial calls from officials, would anyone mind?

Coaches, athletes and fans would probably all be down with it.

But what if there were no whistles at all? And zero calls?

What if there were no officials and referees and umpires at all?

That could very much be a reality if a very alarming trend in officiating continues in Illinois, and throughout the country.

The United States is "officially" experiencing an officials shortage, particularly in youth and high school sports.

"The problem is a trend, and it has been for years," said 70-year-old Tinley Park resident Gary Grohovea, who has been officiating youth and high school football and baseball games for 34 years.

Grohovea is the recruitment chairman for the Inter-Athletic Council of Officials and is trying to sell the benefits of being a sports official: to men, to women, to teenagers, to college kids, to retirees, to people looking for a flexible extra income, to really anyone he can think of.

"I fell in love with officiating, especially football, and I never even played football," said Grohovea, who has officiated multiple IHSA state championship football games. "You don't have to be a former athlete to enjoy officiating. It's so much fun, and I love the camaraderie with the other officials.

"It's also challenging and competitive and it's a great opportunity to make extra money in a way that can be flexible with a lot of people's schedules.

"I think officiating can be a great opportunity for a lot of people."

The Inter-Athletic Council of Officials is currently offering a free instructional class for new officials, and those who take the class will get

a 50 percent discount on their licensing fees with the Illinois High School Association.

"Our numbers are going in the wrong direction," Grohovea said. "We aren't getting a lot of new, young people. And the average age of our officials here is in the 50s. When we lose officials, we're not getting enough to replace them and restock. This is coming to a head now and in five years from now, I don't know how bad it could be.

"We are getting to the point where we've got to turn this around."

As an example, Grohovea cited numbers for high school football in Illinois.

He said that for the 2013-14 season, there were 2,708 football officials in the state. That total has decreased every year since then with the 2020-21 school year seeing only 1,853 football officials in Illinois.

That trend is the same in every other sport, from basketball to softball to volleyball and wrestling.

"COVID gave us a lot of challenges last year, obviously," Grohovea said. "A lot of officials didn't renew their licenses last year because of COVID. We are expecting some of those officials to come back this next school year.

"But even if you throw the COVID year out, the numbers have still been concerning for a long time. And it's getting worse fast.

"I mean, we might someday see an athletic director have to say, 'I'm sorry, we don't have any officials for today's game.'"

Grohovea says that he has read about similar scenarios in other states.

"I think in one of the Virginias they had to make the decision that not every school could play football on Friday nights," Grohovena said.

"There weren't enough officials there for that. So some teams had to play on Saturdays. And a lot of people don't like that."

Most people probably wouldn't want to have to completely cancel games either, due to a lack of officials.

So, what can be done to make sure that doesn't happen?

Grohovena says that while his group is putting an all-hands-on-deck approach to recruitment, and is especially targeting women and young people, the IHSA and schools and fans can do their part.

According to Grohovena, pay for officials in Illinois is not keeping up with the increasing demands of the job.

The average varsity football referee gets about \$75 per game. Basketball and baseball and softball is about the same.

But officials must spend out-of-pocket for all of their supplies and equipment and uniforms and annual licensing, not to mention their mileage to games.

"We've got to look at the pay scale a little bit, we've got to look at respect for officials, especially if we're trying to bring in younger officials. They're going to make mistakes. Expectations that people have of officials will need to change.

"We need to find a way to get new people interested, and I think there are some ways to do that. It really is a great opportunity."

Grohovena, for one, wishes he could start his career all over again.

"I tell all the new guys how great they have it and how lucky they are," Grohovea said. "I tell them that they have more games ahead of them, and I have more games behind me."

To register for the Inter-Athletic Council of Officials training class, visit [iaco-official.org](https://www.iaco-official.org/) (<https://www.iaco-official.org/>).

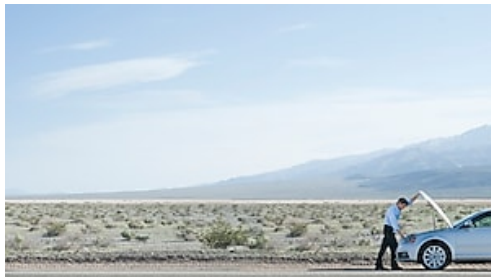
The six-week, online course is open to anyone 17 and older. Classes are held via Zoom from 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays, July 13 to Aug. 17.

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