

Associations Are Accountable

By Donald C. Collins



Officials cannot be held accountable unless their associations recruit a sufficient number of members. Once associations recruit a sufficient number of officials, officials still cannot be held accountable unless associations pool their resources to account for the rise of the modern, multi-association official.

It is assumed that officials associations have a built-in interest in recruiting, evaluating and holding officials accountable. That's good for the game, and you have always assumed that officials will only take acts that are for the good of the game.

Yet, even well-intended groups of officials can create structures that unconsciously promote their own self-interest. Indeed, the often criticized good old boy system was a case where well-

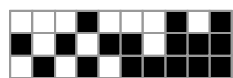
intended groups of officials continuously dispersed assignments to officials based upon factors other than the officials' merits.

Most practitioners of the good old boy system were fair-minded people who sought to best serve the interests of sport. They lacked the knowledge, tools and ability to effectively evaluate; thus, they dispersed assignments to people they were comfortable with. Those practitioners of the good old boy system assumed that their comfort was commensurate with the best possible service because they had good intentions. The good intentions the assigners had also were not swayed by any emotional stake in the games they assigned.

Unfortunately, the practitioners of the good old boy system had their decisions
(See "Associations Accountable" p.7)

Changing of the Guard

By Brian Goodlander



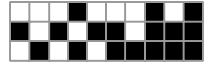
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While on a recent visit to London, I went to Buckingham Palace and saw the majesty, the precision, the pomp and circumstance of the "Changing of the Guard." The ceremony lasts 40 minutes and takes place inside the palace railings. The Queen's Guard, accompanied by a band, leaves Wellington Barracks and marches from Birdcage Walk to the Palace. The ceremony is a celebration of the British royal heritage that has occurred for decades upon decades.

In reality, the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace is really a simple exercise in making a smooth transition from one group to another. Your association will have a number of changes over the years of its existence. Some of those may be ceremonial like at Buckingham Palace, some may be smooth and transparent. The ones that you and your membership remember are the ones that were neither smooth nor transparent.

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refracted through the prism of their own life experience. Even the most well-meaning of those practitioners fell sway to some inherent biases that influenced whom they gave game assignments to. That does not mean that the good old boy system was incapable of distinguishing excellent officials from poor officials. It does mean that the system was not a good system for distinguishing at the margins. Good officials may be promoted too slowly in cases. An excellent official may be bypassed by an official who was excellent one year ago, but now was merely pretty good. The good old boy system still exists in many places, but its credibility has been doomed by its failures at the margin. Those failures led to the usual charges of racism, sexism and numerous other “-isms.” Some of that may be true. Indeed, in some places much of it could be true. But the system’s flaws did not depend upon ill will. The good old boy system couldn’t make the tough evaluation calls. It didn’t work at the margins; it was only effective in clear-cut cases.

Obviously, some practitioners of the good old boy system were not well intended. Example: The head of one association, who literally could no longer run up and down the court, gave himself a state championship assignment and clearly abused the good old boy system. That official may have been the focal point to the elimination of local associations selecting the officials for state championships in one state. That state now uses neutral observers.

The good old boy system is not the only system that doesn’t base assignments upon evaluations. Numerous flawed systems exist. It can be assumed that officials generally mean well, and simply lack evaluation tools or other necessary means of assessing performance and linking it to evaluation. Yet, that’s not necessarily true in every single case.

Even the most well-meaning officials association can fall prey to a system that creates a conflict between the officials’ best interest and the best interest of a sport. You’ve seen those associations. The association is filled with well-meaning, even respected, officials. Yet, the association either doesn’t meet enough, train enough, evaluate enough, properly

groom new members or commits some other very evident series of organization errors. If you asked the individuals in such associations, they’d acknowledge their flaws and either say, “What can we do when our structure hinders us?” Or they’d point to the excellence of their top officials and say, “Despite your negative and accurate observations about our deficient training, recruiting and evaluation system, look how good our officials are.”

Systemic flaws must be resolved — yet, the most difficult one to resolve is the flaw of poor recruiting. It is terribly difficult to determine whether an association is trying to resolve that flaw.

Case in point: There is an actual, traditional association in one state. That association meets one time a year, does no recruiting and attempts to fill its surplus assignments by raiding neighboring groups. People familiar with that association will tell you that they are making no effort to recruit and criticize the association for that.

“ ... It reduces officiating to the equivalent of a Rotary Club.”

There is a two-person association in another state. That association exists solely to meet a governing body requirement that schools be served by accredited officials associations. The members don’t recruit. Few people in their region would blame them for that. Their crime — if there is a crime — is not a failure to recruit, but the use of subterfuge in meeting a requirement that they be an association. Yet, you must concede that an association of two is at a severe disadvantage when it comes to training and evaluation. In many ways, those are two officials who stand alone — it’s officiating as independent study.

There is a 40-person association in one state. They go out and recruit at colleges, junior colleges and even advertise at ballparks. They don’t recruit enough people despite their best efforts. Yet, most would contend that they try.

You assume that associations want to fix their flaws, but the ugly truth is that there

are times when a small group of officials can gain some advantage from a shortage of officials. Now, the game itself doesn’t benefit, but the small group and its officials do.

You must acknowledge that where an association lacks sufficient members officials advance too quickly, gain access to big games that they may not be “ready” or good enough for, gain an increased ability to turn down games that they don’t really want, gain increased leverage to threaten to withhold services from schools and leagues and have an easier time negotiating for more pay.

If the wrong subgroup of officials gains control of an association, it may reap the benefits of those flaws while at best paying lip service to the greater good of the game. You know of those associations.

There was one association whose assigner based one championship assignment on the fact that a veteran never received a playoff game before from previous assigners. Another official got a championship assignment as a parting gift. The assigner was asked why championship assignments weren’t based on evaluations and replied that the officials were good enough to handle a varsity game. Perhaps, perhaps not.

That association took advantage of a shortage of officials to muscle its client league. It didn’t use a good old boy system and give assignments only to a favored few. Rather, it sought to give officials elite assignments on a revolving basis, as a reward for long and good service. That was egalitarian, but it reduces officiating to the equivalent of a Rotary Club.

Quite frankly, a selfish subgroup of officials that gains control of an association may have difficulty finding a good reason to recruit. Once that type of group dispenses with recruiting, they no longer will need to link assigning to evaluation. There will be virtually no way to hold the member officials in such a group accountable.

Fortunately, most associations are well-intended. However, even a well-intended association must confront that problem of recruiting, training and evaluating officials. (Donald C. Collins is the executive director of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. He is a longtime basketball official and lawyer.) □