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OPINION

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THE JOURNAL TIMES

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Commentary

Beef up penalties for assaults on sports officials

BY BARRY MANO
NASO president

The National Association of Sports Officials takes note of the Journal Times' editorial concerning physical assaults against sports officials. In specific your editorial in Wednesday's edition addressed efforts to have a state law passed making assaulting an official or umpire a felony. The paper's position is that such legislation is not necessary since current laws exist to take care of such assaultive behavior. We don't agree and the historical record clearly shows these laws have seldom been applied to cases involving officiating.

Officials have been subject to poor sportsmanship and egregious fan behavior for a long time and for most of that time the men, women and young people who officiate have simply turned the other cheek. Officials by nature are not prone to want to cause "waves," to have their officiating politicized by the messiness of ejections, police reports about fans and the like. Yes, that is our shortcoming. However our goal is always to have the games be fairly played with as little argumentation and unpleasantness as possible. Unfortunately poor behavior directed at officials had gotten to such a level that

in 1987, many local officials organizations around the country enlisted the support of NASO to help get such behavior specifically covered statutorily and to include severe sanctions. As an association of more than 19,000 active officials, we had an obligation to lend our support and resources to this effort.

The goal in Wisconsin, as it has been in the 13 other states where such legislation has been passed, is to have officials specifically covered by a statute that will place on the record the abhorrence we should, as a society, have of those who engage in assaultive behavior against sports officials. Further, and on a more practical bent, the states that have passed such legislation have done so partially based on the following rationale: Extremely severe batteries will generally be prosecuted under a general felony battery statute. However, there are numerous batteries that lack the severity to merit the economic costs of prosecutions. When a battery is committed against a member of a group protected by special statute, the prosecutors have a "second bullet" that can create strong incentive for the perpetrator to agree to accept a criminal penalty such as a monetary fine or

community service. This has the double benefit of penalizing crimes that would otherwise not be prosecuted and protecting groups that are either in special need of protection or can safely be predicted to be potential targets for assaultive behavior.

The issue here, as your editorial tries to intimate, is not of equating sports officials to teachers, police nor emergency personnel. If we as a society feel these occupations deserve special status, that is as it should be. The very act of accorded them special status defines, in part, what we as a society hold important and dear. They are accorded such status because the activities in which they engage are especially important to us. I submit that sports has assumed such an influential role in our culture, like it or not, that we need to insure as best we can that sports will enhance and support the values in which we believe. Sports is supposed to be a shining beacon for our young people. Ask someone on the street if that vision is being fulfilled today.

Poor sporting behavior is growing. Every week our offices here in Racine receive report of such assaults. NASO started in 1980 as a not-for-profit educational association, yet today fully 20% of our time, maybe more, is being

spent addressing the issues of bad behavior directed at officials. But why are we surprised by this? Sports is simply life with the volume turned up. The lack of civility and respect for authority in the general realm predictably plays itself out in sports and those of us in the sports world are worried.

Never in history have so many national sports organizations (e.g. NCAA, National Federation of State High School Associations, NBA, NFL, MLB, US/Soccer, National Alliance for Youth Sports, to name but a few) committed so much time, energy and resources to address the topic of poor sportsmanship. These august bodies sponsor multi-day summits addressing: the need to bring character back into sports, the need for more severe sanctions for unsporting behavior and the lead role they themselves need to take now. Many state high school associations sponsor annual sportsmanship days which regularly have attendance close to a thousand people. People care and they are concerned about the onslaught of bad behavior on the floor, field and diamond.

Many times unsporting behavior is directed at us, the officials. NASO had no choice but to lend its efforts to help

protect officials and to raise the consciousness of the public about the disturbing increase in assaults on officials. Inside Edition, 20/20, Goin' Deep (Fox Network) and myriad newspapers and magazines have published in-depth reports on this sad fact of sporting life.

The "solution" offered in your editorial is to hire more security. Suggest that to a cash-starved recreation or youth program and you will quickly find such a solution is simply not financially realistic, though lots more security would be welcomed by us officials. We believe a "solution" must contain at least four elements: enhance the broad-based efforts to instill the values of sportsmanship in our young people and at least put them on the radar screen of adults who consider themselves fans, improve training of officials about how to prevent and handle assaultive behavior, step up enforcement of sanctions already contained in many rule books and put additional muscle into the legal penalties for anyone who assaults an official.

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