

# THE CHALLENGES OF WEATHER

By Donald C. Collins

**Q** What are some things outdoor officials should keep in mind when it comes to bad weather and lightning? What are the safety and liability risks to keep in mind? What guidance should all officials follow?

**A** When it comes to weather, safety is the first priority. An official should not gamble that they can get a few more plays in.

There have been lawsuits over weather-related injuries, and injuries caused by bad facility conditions. Vigilance is essential, but it's not always easy.

An official must know his or her sport's weather rules and safety procedures. However, this knowledge isn't enough. Our pregame inspections may need to become a continuous monitoring when weather comes into play.

Our sports weather rules are now supplemented by rules that aren't in our rulebooks. We now confront air quality issues, satellite storm alerts, and even heat index procedures that can be set by entities ranging from cities to school districts to local leagues and governing bodies.

The modern additions to weather rules mean somewhere, someday an official will be sued for an injury we wouldn't have heard of 20 years ago. The official can attempt to defend themselves with the legal argument they are not contractually bound to enforce rules not contained in their sports rulebook. The official might even argue these modern

weather rules and procedures are duties of game management, not of officials. However, it is legally safer to step in and suspend games for safety reasons than to engage in post-injury legal arguments.

Weather rules force us to go beyond the rulebook. Associations must work with leagues and governing bodies to disseminate information about their rules and procedures. Associations, leagues, teams and governing bodies must work together or officials won't know of some of the weather rules and procedures that aren't in the sport's rulebook.

Weather rules also drive home the odd fact that we do not always act alone. We are often part of committees or crews. There are times where we have multifeild tournaments or we work a sport with multiple events. Sometimes one field will be playable and another won't, or one event can be held while another shouldn't.

Even odder, there are sports in which the initial determination of playability is made by the host site or league; the official then gains jurisdiction after that initial determination.

We must document our weather-related decisions with personal postgame file notes. It's the only way to protect ourselves. The truth is we don't always know if our weather call led to an injury or even created an administrative disruption or some unknown economic harm. We may not find out for quite some time as injured parties could have a year or more to sue due to statutes of limitations. Between the multiple parties involved in a weather and

member information  
**[micp]**  
consultation program  
**YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

field playability situation, the different duties that various sets of officials and site officials have, and even the wide array of rules and regulations that come into play, we just have to record the details of our weather-related decisions. If we don't, they'll come back to haunt us.

Finally, we must have a feel for the expectations of the people whose game we're officiating. Courts do judge whether we acted reasonably. The problem is what's reasonable in Wisconsin may not fly in California where the local expectations might not be as tolerant of a 15-degree day in a youth league. Communal expectations based on climate and age simply can't be written down in a rulebook, but when somebody's injured the local courts will apply the unwritten communal expectations.

So, be vigilant when it comes to weather. And remember, the sports rulebook will not be enough to get you through.

*Donald C. Collins recently retired as commissioner of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. He is a longtime basketball official and lawyer. This article is for informational purposes and is not legal advice. ■*