

Which is better -- three basketball referees or two?

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Referees Jim Benz and Nick Masterpole worked as a two-man officiating crew during the game involving Christian Brothers Academy and Cicero-North Syracuse last week. Here, they confer with CBA coach Buddy Wleklinski. - (Jim Commentucci / The Post-Standard)

Go to any boys high school basketball game in Central New York. Then go to another one

If you go to enough games, you'll likely notice something is different.

Some games use three referees, some use two.

Why the discrepancy?

The Central IAABO Board 38, or more simply put, the officials who referee scholastic basketball games in Central New York, are experimenting with three-man crews. For the last several years, the board has been offering schools three referees for the price of two.

"We believe we're representing the rules and of the game and the safety of the game," said Tom Sprague, the referee assignor for Board 38. "The game has changed so drastically over the years from the speed of the game to the size of the players. The game is calling for three officials to be on the floor. It is a more controlled environment with the added official.

"To me, it's like putting another teacher in the classroom," Sprague added. "And if it's not costing you anything at this point in time, and it does cost nothing, why would you say no to another set of eyes or another teacher in the classroom?"

But some schools have done just that. Sprague estimates only a little more than 50 percent of the area high schools have elected to use three referees. In the bigger Class AA schools, where theoretically there are bigger and faster players, athletic directors have voted as a group to use only two officials.

"A lot of our coaches still prefer to use a two-man crew, so we try to go along with what the coaches want and what the coaches recommend," Liverpool Athletic Director George Mangicaro said.

"I think the other big reason is finances," Mangicaro added. "The one thing the officials have to realize is that in all of education, at least in Central New York, the only group that has not had any cutbacks or any reduction in salary are the sports officials. When my budget is being cut, and it's been cut more than \$100,000 in each of the last two years, I can't justify adding an official and increasing our costs."

Mangicaro, and other athletic directors in Section III, believe that while the officiating group are now offering the third referee for free, they are eventually going to want all three to get paid the prevailing rate.

A high school referee currently is paid \$78 for a varsity game, and \$58.50 for a junior varsity game. One referee also gets paid mileage at a rate of 41 cents per mile. So, in a three-man crew, the three referees are essentially splitting \$156, so they get \$52 each, less than the two JV officials are getting.

The contract between Board 38 and Section III isn't due to be negotiated for another year. And, yes, Sprague, said, it's likely that a three-man officiating crew will be on the negotiating table.

"But everybody would have to agree," Sprague said. "If the schools say no and it doesn't get passed, then we're at the same juncture we're at right now. Right now, we experimenting with a three-man crew because we believe it's necessary. Why not take advantage of it right now?"

"Right now, especially North Syracuse is looking at some tough financial times," Cicero-North Syracuse AD Tom Tatham said. "I'm trying everything in the world to try to keep some (modified) teams. I think next year is going to be even more difficult. I appreciate what the officials are going after, but I also have to watch what we're doing."

"Instead of adding, we have to start looking now we're going to cut back and save money," Mangicaro said.

In Liverpool, North Syracuse and other school districts too, some modified basketball games that involve seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders, are considered scrimmages, with no referees.

"School districts are laying off teachers and cutting programs," said John Haas, the Cicero-North Syracuse varsity coach. "The money will never be there to pay three officials."

"We recognize schools are in a tough financial position," Sprague said, "but for the better of the game, we're offering three persons for the same price as two. We've been developing a three-man crew for as long as 10, 12 years, anticipating and encouraged by indications that the schools would eventually go to that. Obviously, 10 years ago, maybe, the financial picture was different."

Money aside, not everybody agrees three is better than two. Area coaches are divided on the issue. The current contract allows individual schools and leagues to make decisions on how many referees work a game. Come sectional time, by contract three officials must be used in the quarterfinal, semifinal and championship rounds.

"Since there will be three referees used during sectionals, I think we need to experience it during the season in order to get a better feel for it," Auburn coach Tim Darnell said.

"If the officials association feel they can better cover the court with three officials and are willing to take a cut in fee in order to make it happen, I believe the experiment is worth evaluating, said Buddy Wleklinski, the coach and athletic director at Christian Brothers Academy.

Longtime coach Jerry Wilcox, of Liverpool, though, is vehemently opposed to three-man crews, and finances have little to do with his thinking.

"More does not mean better," Wilcox said. "I prefer quality to quantity. Two top-notch officials give you a better, more consistent flow to the game. I have yet to see a high school game enhanced by a three-man crew. It's varsity-level basketball, not a lab experiment."

"More mistakes will be made from three referees," said Onur Gokce, the coach at Syracuse Academy of Science. "Two refs are better at this level."

Coaches against the three-man crew have a couple of criticisms. They say sometimes with a three-man crew, officials are hesitant to make a call not in their area. They also are concerned younger, less experienced referees who is not quite ready to work a varsity game will be assigned along with two experienced officials.

"Younger, inexperienced referees sometimes do not make calls they should if the call is in front of a more experienced referee," Bishop Ludden coach Pat Donnelly said.

Jamie Evans, the coach at Bishop Grimes, has used three referees for all of his home games for several years, but isn't sure three is better.

"They seem to not want to embarrass another referee if they see a foul/call but are not the closest referee to the call," Evans said. "The referees struggle with rotations and locations which they are supposed to be at."

Colleges use three-man crews and referees at that level are very territorial, Sprague admits.

"In high school, we encourage our guys for court coverage," Sprague said. "Have an idea of where the action is happening, and if you see a call, make a call, regardless of whether there might be some imaginary territorial boundary. If a call needs to be made, make it."

As for the argument that younger, less experienced referees are getting varsity assignments, Sprague says those younger referees are the future of the sport and need to gain experience. All referees who work varsity games have been evaluated and deemed to be worthy of varsity assignments.

"Two well-trained officials can still do a great job," Cortland coach Mick Lowie said.

"Three officials are better than two," Fulton coach Matthew Kimpland said. "Getting more eyes on the court in order to watch more of the little things that do go unseen with just two officials is not a bad idea."

Last year at sectional time, there was talk referees might boycott some games that weren't going to use three referees.

"It was just a misinterpretation of the current contract," Section III chairman John Rathbun said. "That issue was resolved."

Rathbun, a former referee, says he sees both sides of the issue.

"I know the value of three-man as opposed to two," he said. "I think in certain situations it's a great idea. But in other situations it's really not needed. I think the key here is the economic times these school districts are facing, and whether or not they afford that luxury?"

"In theory, refs should not effect the outcome of the game — right?" Mexico coach Paul Callagan said. "Two refs, three refs? It shouldn't matter."

At least one coach just wants some consistency. He's not thrilled he might play a game on Tuesday with three referees and a game on Friday with two.

"If it's not used across the board, it make it difficult for the players, coaches and officials to get used to it," said Whitesboro coach Steve Heitz. "I'm not against using three, but I think it needs to be a decision made by all schools, not just some schools."

Tom Leo can be reached at tleo@syracuse.com or 470-6013.

