

CEASE-FIRE ON THE UMPIRE!

Lawmakers want to protect sports officials from aggressive parents and fans.

BY GARRY BOULARD

When a high school softball coach in Hamden, Conn., was hit over the head with a baseball bat by an angry parent, Representative David Labriola knew that he had to do something.

“This was an outrageous incident,” says Labriola of the 2005 assault that started after the coach benched the man’s daughter for skipping practice. “We were seeing more and more incidences of this type across the state, but this was a particular assault that really got my attention.”

In response, Labriola, along with Representative Paul Davis, sponsored a bill that year calling for a maximum prison sentence of five years and up to \$5,000 in fines for anyone convicted of attacking a sports official.

Labriola’s legislation specifically called for making sports officials a protected class in criminal law, a facet of his bill that sparked criticism. “The opposition asked why we wanted to protect just this one class of people—why not protect librarians and nurses and others?” explains Labriola. “And my response was that there have not been a lot of assaults against librarians and nurses in our state, but that the number of assaults against sports officials was large and appeared to be growing.”

Ultimately Labriola’s bill failed in the Connecticut Senate after twice winning overwhelming approval in the House. Undeterred, Labriola says he intends to reintroduce the measure when the Connecticut General Assembly meets in 2009.

Labriola’s determination reflects a concern not just in Connecticut but across the country. “We continue to see dozens of assaults



REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID LABRIOLA
CONNECTICUT



SENATOR
EDWARD MALONEY
ILLINOIS

on sports officials coming across our desk on a regular basis,” says Bill Topp, vice-president of publishing and management services with the National Association of Sports Officials.

“And although the assaults may have decreased in some places, they are taking place in all sports at all levels,” says Topp.

WHY THE INCREASE?

No one is entirely certain why such attacks went up during the last decade. Illinois Sena-

tor Edward Maloney believes that as parents have become more involved in the athletic pursuits of their children, they also have felt a greater freedom to criticize the decisions of coaches and referees. He sponsored a 2004 bill increasing sentences by up to three years in jail and \$1,000 in fines for anyone convicted of an assault on a sports official.

“You particularly see this kind of interference at the grade-school level,” Maloney says. “These parents or family members are much more likely to go off on some tirade

Garry Boulard is a freelance writer in Albuquerque, N.M., who frequently writes for State Legislatures magazine.



that could pose a threat to an official.”

Labriola thinks the escalating violence is related to the perceived “sports scholarships that are available these days for kids to go to college and the money involved in pro contracts.”

“The amount of potential money available might be ratcheting up the intensity levels of these parents,” he says. “To many of them, these games are no longer just games, but financial opportunities.”

Jeffrey Caminsky, author of the *Referees Survival Guide*, believes the assaults from spectators are a sign of “the general anger that you see in so many other situations today with people who either cannot control their tempers or have no desire to.”

He says that the cost of kids’ sports programs may have something to do with it, as well. “Because they have a large financial stake in such programs, they think it gives

them a right to express their displeasure in any way that pleases them during and after a game.”

STATES GET IN THE GAME

Whatever the causes, legislatures have been passing laws that enhance penalties for assault and battery when they involve sports officials. “The states have really stepped up and addressed this problem firmly,” says Topp. “We think it’s a good idea not only because such new laws punish anyone who engages in this sort of thing, but they also appear to serve as a deterrent.”

To date, 18 states have passed legislation establishing enhanced fines or imprisonment or both for anyone convicted of assaulting a sports official. Oklahoma doubled fines for assaults on sports officials raising them to \$1,000 from the \$500 fine for regular misdemeanor assault.

One of the strongest new bills became law in 2005 in Florida. It allows for fines of up to \$10,000 and three years in jail. “We were getting reports from every corner of the state on people who just lost control of themselves, pushing and shaking referees and umpires, spitting on them, and just generally behaving in an aggressive manner,” says Eleanor Sobel, a former Florida representative and current member of the Broward County School Board who co-authored the legislation.

A former girls’ softball coach, Sobel was herself assaulted during one game by an angry fellow coach. “He grabbed me by my shoulders and screamed ‘What are you doing?’ as he also shook me,” she recalls. “It was horrifying.”

But the experience proved instructive. Sobel believes that the man might not have been as aggressive physically if he knew that there were criminal consequences to his actions. “Everyone says that when people behave in this manner they are not thinking,” says Sobel. “But I believe not having to worry about going to jail or paying a \$10,000 fine allows people not to think. When they know beforehand that they will be in serious trouble if they try anything like this, they tend to restrain themselves.”

A SOBERING EFFECT

Maloney, who served as a basketball official for 15 years, also believes that debating the issue in the legislature tends to have a sobering effect on bad behavior. “It keeps the

issue in the news and that gets people talking,” says Maloney. “Now if a parent at a youth league game gets out of line, the other parents are much more likely than before to try to calm that person down.

“I am not certain if it is a direct result of the legislation we passed here,” says Maloney, “but since 2004, the number of such assaults in Illinois has decreased. I think it’s because spectators and parents are doing a better job talking about these things and self-policing.”

Barry Mano, the president of NASO, acknowledges that while there are no statistics available showing the effect of legislation protecting sports officials, he thinks legally defining them as a special class has had an impact where laws have passed.

“We don’t have any exact numbers,” says Mano, “but when lawmakers put sports officials in a defined class, the way they might with policemen or teachers or transportation drivers, there is a much better chance of imposing more severe penalties when assaults happen. You are raising the charges to another level.”

Topp agrees: “The more the word has gotten out that we have a judiciary system willing to put people guilty of such assaults away, the more likely it is to have a chilling effect on this kind of activity.”

Lawmakers should continue in their efforts to enhance penalties for those who attack sports officials, Topp says. “The legislation we particularly like pushes penalties from misdemeanor to felony,” he says. “Legislation that ties assaults on sports officials to assaults on teachers, police or any other protected kind of worker, particularly those who are working with children, also tends to give these new laws the teeth that they need.”

For Sobel, legislation to protect sports officials became more imperative as she talked to school officials and parent groups throughout Florida. “I could just tell that this had become a problem that was really bothering everyone,” she says.

“And what really upset me is that we are talking about something that is supposed to be fun and healthy, particularly for our young people.”

CHECK OUT the author’s Q and A with Steven Ellinger, executive director of the Texas Association of Sports Officials, an organization of 17,000 high school sports officials. Find it at www.ncsl.org/magazine.