

EDITORIAL

Poor sports in the crowd

Verbal abuse of youth-sports referees poisons competition and hurts kids

The great irony of sports is that while it purports to teach the value of sportsmanship to players, the lesson goes unlearned by many parents, spectators and coaches.

Sometimes it seems riding the ref is America's real national pastime.

If you have a child who has played organized sports, you likely have witnessed more than one example of egregious behavior by someone who criticizes the game official — relentlessly, loudly, insultingly. Perhaps you've seen a coach lose his or her temper toward a referee, or a parent come onto the field of play to protest a call. Most likely, you know someone who's been banned for their misbehavior — from a game, or an entire season.

Over the years, it has only gotten worse.

A recent Newsday investigation revealed that the staggering amount of verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse in school sports is forcing referees and umpires to leave the game. The exodus is happening in all 20 high school and middle school sports played by both genders in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Baseball and basketball have been hit hard; sports that are facing a crisis because of an already-small pool of officials include field hockey, girls lacrosse and gymnastics.

Fewer officials means the scheduling of games gets difficult. Too few officials means fewer games will be played, and then everyone loses. Stepping up recruitment to try to fill the gaps won't help if coaches and spectators don't change their behavior.

PATRICK MCCARTHY

Tom Cully umpires a softball game at St. Anthony's High School in South Huntington on May 10.

It might be tempting to write off what's happening here as a reflection of a national trend — 70 percent of new sports officials are gone within three years, unable to handle the abuse. But that doesn't make the local situation any more tolerable. And the supposed context that dialogue in general has been dialed up — online, in political conversation, and elsewhere — doesn't work, either. Yelling at a referee is even worse than an impersonal attack on Twitter. It is, literally, in someone's face.

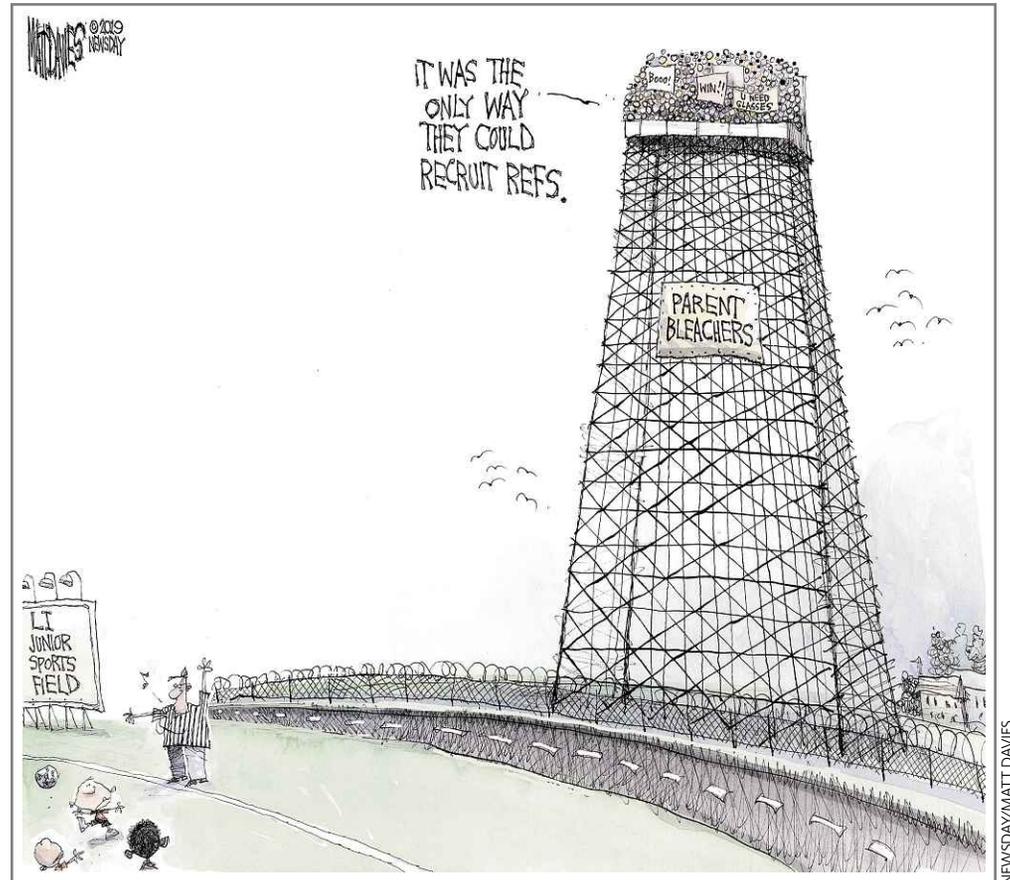
What are we teaching our children, those playing and those in the stands? Why do we think this is acceptable when none of us would tolerate this in our own workplace if the behavior were directed at us? Is there anyone whose job performance improves in the face of intimidation? Is there anyone who does not make mistakes?

Coaches know this. They know their actions are a guide to parents and spectators. Reform starts with them. Parents and spectators can call out misbehaving peers from their own teams. Leagues and schools can be tougher with ejections and season-long bans. Players can ask their parents to tone it down.

Yelling at professional athletes and coaches is bad enough; it often makes others uncomfortable, especially those with kids, and ought to stop. Dishing it out at school sports — or worse, on the youth level, where coaches are volunteers and players are young, impressionable and learning — is abominable. When officials endure physical assaults and need safety escorts to their cars after a game, sportsmanship has died.

We like to think that sports builds character. Often, it does. But it's also true that sports reveals the character we bring to it. We do a disservice to our children when we forget that. — *The editorial board*

MATT DAVIES



■ See more Matt Davies cartoons: newsday.com/matt

LETTERS

Many public places remain inaccessible

I applaud your story "Access remains a challenge for disabled" [News, May 27], a topic that has been ignored for far too long.

As one who uses a wheelchair, I have seen that not only most municipal buildings and services be accessible to people with disabilities, but all facilities used by the public, including stores, restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues and medical offices.

One would think that all medical facilities would be accessible, but it is shocking how many have steps to get in and restrooms that cannot accommodate a wheelchair.

Wheelchair access is a focus of the Town of Huntington's Citizens Advisory Committee for Persons With Disabilities, of which I am a member. We have worked to make the town's parks and

beaches accessible.

People have to do more than "make a wave about it" to get the Americans With Disabilities Act enforced, as Therese Brzezinski, director of planning and public policy for the LI Center for Independent Living Inc., is quoted as saying. We have to file a formal complaint with the Department of Justice and file a lawsuit.

*Tamar Asedo Sherman,
Northport*

Some post offices are among the offenders for access. At the post office at 830 Stewart Ave. in Garden City, I watched an older woman with a cane struggle to open two sets of heavy glass doors. These federal properties should have been addressed when the Americans With Disabilities Act became law in 1990.

*Clara Toledano,
East Meadow*

America's history isn't all heroic

William F.B. O'Reilly's May 27 opinion-page column, "Are any of us worthy of our brave ancestors?" could leave the impression that all Americans in the past were heroic and patriotic. Far from it.

Consider the draft riots in New York City in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. One reason for the riots was a protest against rules that let people of means buy their way out of the military draft for \$300, which forced poorer men to be drafted in their place; \$300 in 1863 would have a value of roughly \$6,000 today.

America's history is messy. It is chock-full of heroes, villains and cowards, and for as long as this great republic lasts, it will be that way.

*James A. Clark,
Syosset*