

I am a survivor of sports official assault.

On April 24, 2006, I was cornered between the field and my dressing room by 35 college baseball players, most screaming wildly — some carrying metal bats — and a parent who had run 300 feet from his seat to obstruct me from reaching the front door and safety of my dressing room.

My crime was a serious one: I had correctly called a rundown play that had allowed the winning run to score, therefore clinching a small college conference championship. Of course, none of that mattered in the moment. It wasn't until four days later when someone thought to access a security camera video feed from an adjacent building to confirm my call: the runner had clearly touched third base on his way home.

I literally had to fight my way off the field. I feared for my life. Police officers didn't charge me with assault, but gave the parent who cornered me and placed his hands on me an escort to the county line.

I tell this terrifying tale to tell you this: I'm more concerned about assault today than I ever was in 2006, at Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana.

Today, there's at least one parent or coach at every football or basketball game I officiate who goes from unfiltered to unglued as fast as a Corvette goes from 0 to 60, while modeling behavior that was considered obscene 15 years ago. Today, it's commonplace.

I'm here today because our society has turned a blind eye to these transgressions for too long. We make no attempt to speak to our fellow parents and fans. We shake our heads, turn the other cheek, get in our car and go on our way.

There's a price to pay for doing nothing, and Maryland, as one of 24 states with no legal protections in place for sports officials, can no longer afford to do nothing.

I'm advocating for the passage of State Bill 1034 because officials are voting against officiating youth and high school sports with their feet. It won't be officials who walk away who will pay the price of doing nothing — it'll be the children, the high school athletes and the communities where you bought your home, and send your children to schools.

This is the truest cost of doing nothing. Fewer officials means fewer opportunities, fewer games or no games at all. In Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Queen Anne's counties last season, high school football games were played with fewer referees than contracted for. A handful of games had to be rescheduled on the basis of next-day availability of officials.

In Washington, D.C., IAABO Board 12 doesn't tell schools when to schedule basketball games, but they close out dates when they run out of referees. By not being able to staff all games, some schools choose to play on other nights. Some don't play at all.

The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) offer these sobering snapshots from a 2017 poll:

- In 1990 the average age of a rookie official was between 20 and 25 years old
- Today the average age of a rookie high school official is 43
- The average age of an official is 53.

Most of our local officiating associations are operating at a 3-to-1 deficit. For every new official we recruit and train to proficiency as a varsity-level official in a three-year window, we lose three experienced college or varsity-level officials. Just Us Sports Officiating in Washington, D.C. reports a 1-of-7 retention rate among new officials from Year One to Year Two, and that's without considering the departure of experienced officials. Most of these negative metrics are tied directly to a significant uptick in unsportsmanlike behaviors at youth and high school contests.

We've also placed ridiculous expectations upon youth and high school officials. As an example, most coaches, parents and fans see two kinds of baseball umpires: the highly-

trained, highly-skilled Major League official making between \$250,000 and \$300,000 a year, and a teenager or adult earning between \$25-75 a game is working a youth or high school baseball or softball game.

It would be absurd to expect that official to be as proficient as an MLB umpire. Yet at game after game I attended when my sons played, I heard insults and threats every day, and then heard this behavior justified with phrases like, *“It’s part of the game!”* and *“You have to be thick-skinned!”*

If your employer took \$5 from a few hundred strangers who hurled insults at you and threatened your safety, would you look for a new job? This is the cost of doing nothing. It's no longer enough to say, "Enough!" We have to do something to address the unsportsmanlike behavior driving officials out of youth and high school-level sports.

In urging passage of SB 1034, it is not my hope ensnarl a few in the clutches of the state’s criminal justice system. Instead, it’s my hope that passage of this bill will deliver three key messages:

- The State of Maryland recognizes and supports the contributions of the thousands of local youth and high school sports official who facilitate youth and high school sports

- The Maryland sports official is protected from thoughtless and unnecessary threats of violence
- The behaviors that are commonplace at too many youth and high school events are not acceptable and will no longer go unchecked.

Sports play an important role in our children's upbringing and the identity of our communities. We can no longer take the availability of sports officials for granted. SB 1034 supports the hopeful child watching his brother or her sister play today. It offers protection to officials to ensure the opportunities

Please pass SB 1034. It's a good call for us all.

— T.C. Cameron has lived in the Annapolis area since 2009 and is a former sports reporter at the Capital-Gazette newspaper. A former college and current high school official, Cameron officiated Washington, DC's state championship games in basketball and football in 2019. He's a member of IAABO Board 12 and Just Us Sports Officiating.