



SPORTSMANSHIP APPRECIATION WEEK

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NJSIAA Student Ambassador Joe Stern has a message for his peers: Become an Official

There may not be a student-athlete in New Jersey who is more immersed in sports than Joe Stern. The senior from St. Joseph Regional in Montvale was a backup quarterback on the football team during the fall and is a pitcher on the baseball team in the spring. During the winter, you can find the Bloomfield resident reporting on Green Knights' sports events on the school website. When he's not at St. Joe's games, you might catch him watching his younger sister, Gianna, play basketball or softball for Mount St. Dominic, or just taking in a big game in any sport as a fan. And if his own sports schedule permits, he can be heard as the PA announcer for high school softball games at Ivy Hill Park in Newark, a job he's performed since middle school.

For the past two years, he's added a pair of other roles. The first is his service as an NJSIAA Student Ambassador, where he's been one of the most vocal participants at the meetings of statewide student-athletes at the NJSIAA office in Robbinsville. The other is his interest in officiating, something he took to a new level by becoming deeply involved in umpiring youth baseball last year while sidelined from pitching due to a shoulder injury.

His Student Ambassador experience, coupled with his umpiring work, has resulted in a new message he wants to spread to fellow student-athletes: Become involved in officiating - it's a way to give back, have fun, and also earn money.

"I've been watching games since I was a little kid, like when I was 4 or 5 years old," he said. "I've always loved being around games, and in the future, I plan on coaching. I've noticed that there's a shortage of officials at games. In the last couple of years especially, they've had a real problem getting umpires. At my school, I felt bad last year for the freshman and JV kids, they had a couple of games canceled. And at St. Joe's, a big-time program, we'd be lucky to get one umpire on a JV game."

Having seen that, Stern decided to get involved in officiating.

"Last year, I started doing baseball and softball," he said. "I had a shoulder injury, so I had a lot of downtimes. I was doing games mostly between 8 to 14 years old. I was able to make some money, I really enjoyed it, and got to help the kids out between innings. Before I knew it, I was doing 10-12 games a week. I'm really into it and enjoying it. And it's a great way to make money. I was doing it part-time for four months last year and I made more than I've ever made, and I don't look at it as a job. I also love helping the kids between the innings as much as I do making the money."

His appeal for students to consider officiating coincides with NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, which is sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy. The connection between athletes and officials is linked to sportsmanship, and an appreciation of officials is one of the most important aspects that the NJSIAA stresses in each season's Sportsmanship Week during the school year.

"I have 100 percent respect for them," Stern said. "They're out there because they love it, and we need more younger people to think about getting involved. I've gotten to know a lot of officials starting from when I was on the sideline over the years. I've told some of them what I'm doing, and they love it."

"I applaud Joe's efforts to get involved in officiating - he is a role model for his peers, and I am especially proud of Joe as he is a current Student Ambassador," said Colleen Maguire, the Executive Director of the NJSIAA. "We need more young people to take this same initiative and strive to get involved with the sports they grew up loving to play. There is no better way to give back to your local community than by engaging with the next generation of student-athletes. I encourage all current and former NJSIAA student-athletes to get involved with either officiating or coaching - they will have as much fun as the kids."

Stern's involvement in sports didn't begin when he reached high school. The first game he remembers attending was a frigid football playoff game at age 4, when his father, Rob, was head coach at Hudson Catholic.

When his dad moved over to St. Joseph soon after as its offensive coordinator, he grew up spending his Saturdays on the sideline as a water boy. When his father coached softball, at Cedar Grove and currently at Mount St. Dominic, Joe was there, soaking up strategy and even sitting on the bench with the coaches going as far back as fifth grade.

He's also watched hundreds of additional club softball games played by teams coached by his father and played by his sister. He's always been an astute observer, and that includes watching the work of officials. He's also seen them in action firsthand for a long time, given his time with football and his years hunting for strikes as a crafty left-handed pitcher.

"It's definitely hard to make those calls," he said of the role of a home plate umpire. "Especially to get those corners. You get some young catchers who are still learning and it can be tough. I've seen some really good guys. Once I started working, I would also notice things in their rotations that I never saw, their footwork, and how they work around the bases. I have a lot of respect for all that they do."

Next year, he'll be off to Muhlenberg College, where he'll play baseball in the spring and work with the football staff as a student assistant. And he'll continue officiating when he's back home, also adding basketball into the mix.

"I love being around the games," he says. "I've always wanted to be around sports, and officiating is a great way to give back and stay involved."

