

Officials' Appreciation Week Profile:

Joe Knipper

Joe Knipper has dedicated much of his life to officiating, and it all began rather innocently upon his graduation from Stonehill College in Massachusetts.

"I wrestled at St. Benedict's Prep in Newark, graduating in 1971, and played Division 2 soccer at Stonehill College, graduating in 1975," he said. "After college, I took a position as an assistant wrestling coach at Burnet Junior High School in Union for the 1975-76 season.

"One fall day, knowing that I had played soccer in college, the Burnet head wrestling coach recruited me to come with him to ref a middle school soccer game," he recalled. "I told him I had no officiating clothes and he said 'no worries' and gave me an officials' shirt to wear. That was my start."

From that, he's been a certified NJSIAA soccer official 1977 to the present, with several years off due to work commitments. He became a certified wrestling official in 1983, and has remained active to the present day there as well.

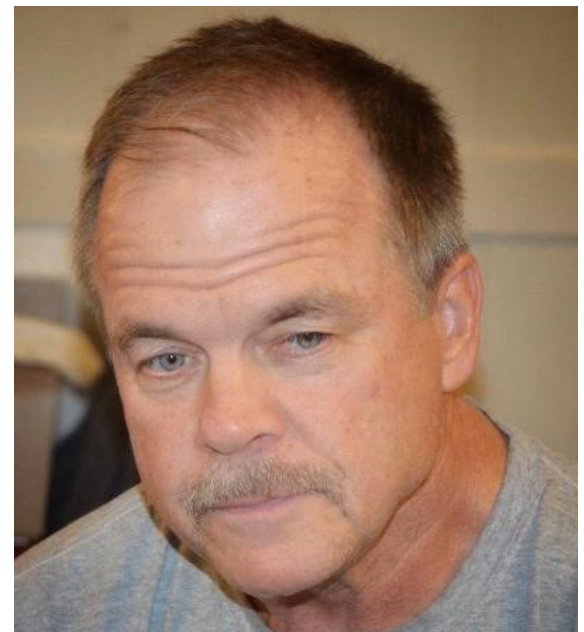
He's been the State Wrestling Rules Interpreter for the NJSIAA since 2019.

What do you do in your job as state rules interpreter?

As the Rules Interpreter, I am responsible for communicating to all the officials in the State the season's new rules and any other communications that come through the main sports association for high schools, the NFHS. I am always on call to help solve any issues that come up, whether to help out the coaches or the officials. I try to provide officials a broad range of support and aid them in their job of officiating throughout the season, culminating in the finals in Atlantic City.

What do you enjoy most about being an official?

The most enjoyable part of officiating are the friendships you make with your brother officials and coaches. These friendships last a lifetime, and it is only these people who truly understand why we do this even though it takes away from our family. They understand the time spent preparing, traveling to an event and officiating and then many times getting home late at night tired, exhausted and hungry. In the end we are giving back to the sports we love and enjoyed when we were young. It is not unusual to get stopped in public when a couple may ask you, "Aren't you a wrestling official?" Your heart stops. You never know what to expect, because remember on any call you will only be half right according to the two sides of spectators. You wait for the axe to drop. But, in this case, the couple mentions "We have seen you ref our grandson and we think you are pretty good." With that you breathe a sigh of relief and thank the couple for their kind words. That one chance meeting makes your life as an official worthwhile and you know the endless hours involved are all special and rewarding.



Do you have a favorite memory from officiating an event?

One of my most memorable events was officiating the finals of the state wrestling tournament in Atlantic City in 2006. One of the matches that I officiated was Jordan Burroughs' last match in high school. There was a crazy scramble in the last 30 seconds of the match. In that flurry, Burroughs pulled out the win with back points finishing what had been an exciting match. Some consider that match to be on an arguably selected list as one of the best in the state tournament history. As an official, to know that you got the call right validates why we prepare and spend the time officiating; truly loving what we do. That feeling is tough to top.

What's the best part about any given day of officiating?

The best part of any day officiating is being there for and guiding the student athletes while giving back to the sport you love. You form friendships that last a lifetime. On one end of my officiating career, I felt the nervousness of my first ever game and now I officiate the young children of fathers I officiated years ago. They tell their kids "This ref officiated me when I was your age." Wow, if that doesn't make one feel old and nostalgic, then probably nothing will.

Do you have any particular funny memories of an interaction between yourself and a player or coach?

Every now and then you come across a comical situation. Well, a match I had in the 90's, I stopped a bout to talk and partially admonish a Point Pleasant Boro wrestler, Kurt Pellegrino. While pointing a finger at him, I was telling him that he needed to stay under control. Of course, he had the innocent look on his face of "Who me?" Well, the funny and interesting part was that an Asbury Park Press photographer took a picture at that exact moment of our talk, and it was published. Well to this day, Kurt, from his place of business, Pellegrino Mixed Martial Arts in Wall, will point out the picture and tell the story to anyone there and proclaim his total innocence. These shared lifetime memories and friendships are unique to us who officiate and the student athletes whose paths we cross.

What's the biggest misconception about the job of being an official?

Probably the biggest misconception of our job is that people don't know the time and training we undertake to be the best official that we can be. We know our job is to get it right and we as officials give one hundred percent to get it right. We do take pride and confidence in the calls we make and review situations, be that in any sport, with our brother officials. We are constantly learning, and that process should never end. We are constantly trying to better ourselves because we know the student athletes deserve the best. If we feel a call could have been different, we will play it in our mind over and over again, long after the meet has finished. That strive for perfection never ends.

What would you say to anyone thinking about becoming an official?

If you are looking to help student athletes, looking for a rewarding experience and a way to make memories and friendships with brother officials, you could not ask for a better job. We are struggling for officials now and I highly encourage you to join our association for whichever sport you love to be a part of that unique brotherhood.

***Think you might be interested in becoming a high school sports official?
Check out this link to learn more: <https://www.njsiaa.org/officials/become-official>***