

Officials' Appreciation Week Profile: Rich Champion



Names like Mike Trout, John Harkes, Tim Thomas, Willie Banks, Heather Wilson, Shaheen Holloway, Bobby and Dan Hurley, Josh Evans, Terry Dehere, Raheem Morris and Adrienne Goodson are part of any list of the state's top high school athletes over the past 50 years.

Aside from their greatness, they have something else in common, which they share along with tens of thousands of others who've played sports in the Garden State during the past five decades.

They've all participated in games officiated by Rich Champion.

This is his 47th year officiating NJSIAA sports, and as a basketball, baseball, softball and soccer official, he is one of the most familiar faces around when it comes to referees and umpires. Known for his outgoing personality as much as his professionalism, he's worked multiple state championship games in each sport, and numerous college soccer championship events.

He's been involved in sports his whole life, having graduated from Cresskill High School before earning degrees from Fairleigh Dickinson and St. Peter's. He's worked as a corrections officer and teacher, spending four years as a Special Needs teacher before teaching History at Irvington High School for 25 years.

In addition to that, he was a Waterfront Director and pool manager for over 30 years, certified in CPR, First Aid, Lifeguarding, AED, Life Support, WSI as well performing as a Lifeguard Instructor for the American Red Cross and New Jersey Pool Managers Association.

"I got involved in officiating after having three knee surgeries from playing high school football, basketball and baseball," he said. "While in college, I coached women's basketball for three years and started their infant softball program at FDU-Teaneck under Dr. Harriet McCormack and Dr. John Hoffman, who got me involved in the officiating aspect of sports in football, soccer, basketball and softball."

He also coached soccer and basketball at Englewood High School while doing student teaching there under Tom Lubin and Bob White.

He started officiating during the 1973-74 school year, beginning with basketball, and then followed by baseball/softball and soccer.

Since then, he's seen plenty of changes. Assignors determine where officials work most of the time, instead of athletic directors. Sportsmanship and parental conduct have become bigger issues. And the increasing lack of qualified officials and the accompanying problems are a growing concern on and off the playing fields.



Working games and dealing with young people, though, bring much fun and enjoyment, and he eagerly awaits his 50th anniversary of officiating all four sports in a few years.

His years on the job have earned him the friendship and respect of coaches and athletic directors he's worked with, such as Jim Baglin, the retired long-time boys basketball coach and athletic director at Mendham High.

"Rich is a friend so I cannot be completely objective, but I always felt he was a really good official," Baglin said. "His best attribute is that he is in complete control of the game. Players, coaches and fans all had to toe the line. You always felt you were going to get a good game when Champ was on it."



Getting to know NJSLA sports official Rich Champion:

What are the keys to being a good official?

The keys to being an excellent official are impartiality, respect, professionalism, promptness, appearance and game management.

What do you enjoy most about being an official?

Being around the games and watching the student-athletes.

Do you have any favorite memories from officiating events?

When a special needs student-athlete scored his first basket in a varsity basketball game and everyone stopped and congratulated him. That's happened several times.

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

Knowing that you will be working with student-athletes trying their BEST at what they do and can accomplish.

Do you have any early memories from your first games as an official?

My first memory was working with a veteran official, Jack Behnken, and he said, "Coach, you wouldn't be here unless you can handle this game." That was over 45 years ago, rest his soul.

One of the most interesting dynamics between an official and athlete is the interaction between a home plate umpire and catcher. What's that like for you?

You need to develop a rapport with the catcher to explain how you will call the strike zone, speak in a



professional manner and add a little humor by telling the catcher in a humorous way that he/she has two jobs to do, to catch the ball and protect Blue, the umpire. You have to do it all in a nice way and tell them that they are doing a great job back there.

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

I had a coach in basketball tell me in so few words that I was having a bad day. I told him wait until you see my next call, and that I will get better by the end of the game.

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

That we have an easy job to officiate and we make good money at what we do. But it is fun!

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

I would tell new officials that they must love the game and love what you are doing out. All eyes are on you.



***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>***