

Officials Appreciation Week Profile:

Robert Varju

Robert Varju seemed destined to become an umpire.

“As a kid, I had a very good baseball coach, Sterling Grier, who taught us the game inside and out,” he said. “He was very good, and that’s where the love of the game began. Also, back then the announcers on TV explained the game and how to play it the right way. So I was a student of the game.”

Then came the moment that began his extension into umpiring.

“As I turned 18, and my legion season was over, I was asked by one of my coaches to cover a baseball game and that’s where it started.”

He’s now been umpiring for 38 years, from teener leagues in the beginning to high school, American Legion, college and independent ball.

“I’ve been fortunate,” he said. “I sat back, listened and learned. Some very good people helped me along the way.”

He’s also branched out to become the assignor for the Skyland Conference, as well as a rules interpreter for his local chapter.

“The Skyland Conference was looking to replace long time assignor Joey Shaw,” he said. “After several applicants went through the process, I was approached by an athletic director to toss my name into the process. I wasn’t sure at first, but I realized that over the last 25 years, the Skyland Conference coaches and AD’s gave me an opportunity to succeed in the game I loved. So, I sat back, looked everything over and I decided the only right thing to do was apply. The major factor was that I had to ‘Give Back’ to the Skyland Conference, who embraced me as an umpire, and who gave me an opportunity.”

He’s enjoyed that job as well, even with the unique challenges that come with assigning umpires to games that are often subject to change due to the unpredictable spring weather.

Getting to know NJSIAA sports official Robert Varju:

What do you do in your job as an assignor and rules interpreter?

“As the assignor, it’s my responsibility to secure officials for all softball and baseball games on the scheduled dates for the Skyland Conference. I’m also the interpreter for our local association. This job includes interpreting the rules written by the NFHS and applying them in reference to a particular situation. The job also includes teaching officials the new rules.”

What do you enjoy most about being an official?

“I enjoy the camaraderie with the other officials and watching high school student-athletes succeed. Also being a part of a game that I enjoyed playing, coaching, and now officiating for over 35 years.”



Do you have a favorite memory from officiating an event?

“Being involved in a game where a high school pitcher threw a no-hitter.”

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

“Being a former athlete and now officiating, it’s the ‘adrenaline rush’ of preparing for a game.”

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

“Yes...I never did a game at all and was thrown into the fire as a plate umpire in a semifinal because a guy called off and I was the only one available. My Little League coach was the assignor and he said I could handle the situation. The kids were 14 and I just turned 18.”

Do you have a particularly funny memory of an interaction between yourself and a coach?

“After a call at the plate, where the kid was out, the coach came out to argue. He said that I was absolutely right and the kid was out, and I’m out here to tell you that, because if I didn’t come out that they would yell at me - so I’m yelling at you!”

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

“That it’s hard. It’s very easy and really rewarding to be able to do your best.”

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

“Just do it! If you ever played a sport, you must have liked it. So why not officiate a game you loved? You’ll feel so good. And invigorated! And also remember that if you’re into the game, there is no outside noise.”

***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>***