

Officials Appreciation Week Profile:

Aaron Schaffel

Aaron Schaffel grew up on Long Island and began playing lacrosse in seventh grade, at a time when youth programs were virtually nonexistent. He was a member of a championship team at Elmont High School and later became part of the first recruiting class for legendary Rutgers coach Tom Hayes.

At Rutgers, Aaron was a four-year letter winner, playing alongside lacrosse greats such as John Danowski, Chuck Apel, Jim Teatom, Bobby Rhodes and Tom Sweeney. Though he considered himself an average college player - earning his first start in the final game of his senior year - he was known for his unwavering commitment to the program. In fact, he never missed a single practice throughout his Rutgers career.

His dedication earned him the Robert Collett Trophy, which was awarded by Coach Hayes to the Rutgers lacrosse player who best exemplified physical and mental spirit.

The qualities that made him a valued team member also steered him to becoming an official.

Aaron began officiating in 2004 with the New Jersey Interscholastic Lacrosse Officials Association (NJIOA) and expanded into field hockey officiating in 2008 as a member of Northeast Chapter 2. He has officiated numerous county and state championship games and serves as an active Executive Board member of NJIOA.

His excellence in officiating has been recognized with several statewide honors, including 2016 NFHS Boys Lacrosse Official of the Year and 2024 NJSOA Boys Lacrosse Official of the Year.

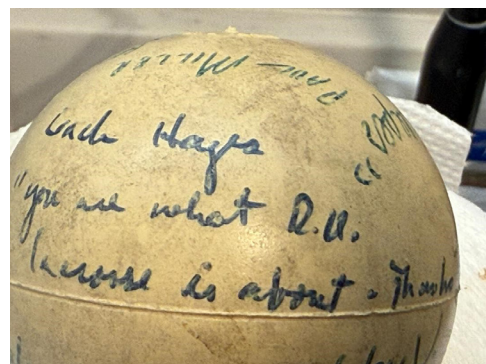
Getting to know NJSIAA sports official Aaron Schaffel:

What do you enjoy most about being an official?

"What I find most enjoyable about being an official is the ongoing opportunity to teach the sport - not just to fellow officials, but also to players, coaches, and even parents. Every game presents a chance to both educate others and continuing learning myself, alongside my peers.

Regardless of the sport, we as officials have a responsibility to elevate everyone's understanding of the game. That means helping others develop a stronger grasp of the rules, the nuances of game management, and the role we play on the field.

Like coaches and players, the best officials are always striving to improve. They're reviewing the rule book,



Ball presented to Aaron Schaffel by Rutgers coach Tom Hayes after scoring his last goal as a senior in 1979.

analyzing game film, and having thoughtful conversations about game situations to gain new perspectives and sharpen their decision making. Ultimately, it's about aiming for that elusive 'perfect game' while helping the entire community grow in its appreciation and knowledge of the sport."

Do you have a favorite memory from officiating an event?

"One of my proudest moments as an official came in 2024, when I had the honor of refereeing the Group final between Summit and Manasquan. Our crew spent over an hour and a half before the game meticulously preparing - reviewing possible scenarios, discussing our communication strategy, and aligning on how we would handle critical moments. The game itself was intense, with Summit edging out Manasquan by a single goal. I left the field confident we had done well, but after reviewing the game film the next day, I was struck by just how close to a perfect game we had called. The level of execution was the direct result of our preparation and I couldn't have been prouder of our crew."



Another deeply meaningful experience was officiating a high school game alongside my son. Though he has since stepped away from officiating, sharing that field with him was unforgettable. He developed a love for the game and for officiating through our connection, and having that bond play out on the field is a memory I will always cherish."

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

"What I enjoy most about officiating is the unpredictability. No matter how much you study or prepare, each game is completely unique - and you're often faced with situations you haven't encountered before. No two contests are ever the same, or even similar."



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

"My very first officiating assignment was a freshman game between Fair Lawn and Montville. I was incredibly nervous - not because of the stakes of the game, but because I didn't want to make a mistake. My partner that day was Joe Bitetto, who is still an active member of our organization."

The game was a close one, eventually won by Fair Lawn in overtime. What stands out most, though, is the support I received afterward. Joe took the time to review the game with me, offering encouragement for the calls I got right and thoughtful encouragement on areas for improvement."

Now, 21 years later, whenever I run into Joe at games or tournaments, we still find ourselves reminiscing about that first game. It's a memory that has stuck with me - and a reminder of how meaningful mentorship and camaraderie are in this profession."

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

“During the same Group final that I mentioned earlier, there was a moment that led to a memorable and humorous story. Coach Davidson from Summit kept shouting out onto the field, looking in my direction, but calling out a different name - Seth. I assumed he was talking to one of his players, so I didn’t respond.

The following Monday, I got a call from a fellow official who works at the same school as Coach Davidson. He told me the coach had praised the officiating, but was confused: ‘Why wouldn’t Seth talk to me when I was asking him a question?’ My colleague replied, ‘Coach, who’s Seth? The referee was Aaron.’

Needless to say, I’ve seen Coach Davidson a few times since then, and every time I make sure to greet him with a smile and reminder: ‘Coach, remember - it’s Aaron, not Seth.’”

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

“One of the biggest misconceptions about officiating is that we’re not allowed to be ‘human.’ What I mean is that in any given contest, players make mistakes, coaches make mistakes - and that’s accepted. But officials? We’re expected to be perfect.

The truth is that officials are human, too. Our decisions are shaped by our training, years of experience, and the situations we’ve encountered on the field. While we all strive for mistake-free games, errors can still happen. Sometimes they can be corrected in the moment, and sometimes they can’t.

Even now, after two decades in this role, I still review games - and feel genuinely disappointed if I spot a mistake, no matter how small. There have even been times that I’ve followed up with coaches via email to acknowledge an error, ensuring that if the same situation arises in a future game, it’s handled correctly. That kind of transparency helps maintain trust and prevents a previous mistake from being misunderstood as the correct call.”

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

“While many officials might say ‘Just do it without question,’ I take a slightly different approach. I believe that anyone considering officiating should first ask themselves a few important questions:

- Am I doing this for the love of the game?
- Do I have the time to truly dedicate to officiating?
- Am I open to learning, asking questions, and constantly improving?
- Will I be willing to share my knowledge to help others grow?
- Can I collaborate with fellow officials, regardless of their experience level?
- Can I communicate professionally with coaches and players - even in high pressure moments?
- Can I tune out the fans who think every call you make is the wrong one?

If you can honestly answer “Yes” to all of these, then you’re exactly the kind of person we’re looking for. Not only will you make a great official - you’ll also be a successful and respected one.”

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>