

New Brunswick

'More games may not have officials' due to poor fan behaviour, says referee

Minor basketball league in Nova Scotia banned spectators for weekend due to abuse of officials



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Todd Messer says bad experiences with fans can push new officials to quit. (Mark Metcalfe/Getty Images)

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Todd Messer has seen it before. A parent or fan sees something happen on the basketball court that they disagree with, and they direct their anger toward the officials. Sometimes, it gets out of hand.

"We've had many situations over the years where we've had to eject a parent or fans from the gym," said Messer, zone president for Fredericton area basketball officials. "Sometimes they've been banned for the rest of the year from the gyms. It's not uncommon."

The problem called for an extreme solution in Halifax over the weekend, when a [minor basketball association banned fans from attending games](#).

The Metro Basketball Association's league manager said incidents of abuse toward officials had become too common. Since then, Canada Basketball posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, saying it supported the association's decision, and that abuse has no place in the game.

- [N.S. minor basketball league bans spectators for the weekend due to abuse of officials](#)

Messer says that if it isn't addressed, it could have a large impact on the sport, and how many games will be able to have officials.

Worse at minor association level

Messer says that there are bad actors across all levels of the sport, but he most often sees bad behaviour among the parents of players at the younger levels, usually from ages 11 to 13.

"Typically, younger levels, the games are very disorganized and the kids are going a mile a minute and they're always on the ground or running into each other," said Messer.

"It is imperative that more is done to maintain a positive experience for everyone at the gym. Otherwise, more and more games may not have officials in the future."

- Todd Messer, referee

On top of that, it's often the first experience a parent has watching their kid play competitively, so they may not understand what's happening, and don't know how they're supposed to act.

"They're not used to it. So when their child is running in the kids are falling down, they react to it negatively, thinking that ... officials can control that kind of play," said Messer.

He says as kids get older and the parents get to understand the rules better, the play gets better, and parents become acclimatized, they become less vocal.

'More and more games may not have officials'

Matthew Raiche coached a game last year where three fans needed to be kicked out of the gym. He believes it's important to hold bad sportsmanship accountable, but he believes an outright ban of fans, like what happened in Halifax, is too extreme.

"I think it has to be something that's handled on a case-by-case basis," said Raiche, president of the YFC Elite Basketball Association in Fredericton.

His association has parents sign contracts that outline what is expected of them. If they breach that contract and behave poorly, they are suspended from games.

"I believe it's a deterrent because we've effectively told parents that if we find out through any means ... that you've been disruptive, we'll, for lack of a better term, suspend you," said Raiche.

Messer says it's important the responsibility for dealing with an unruly fan shouldn't fall on the officials. He says it's on the coaches, athletic directors and the host association. He suggests fans should be told ahead of games what is expected of them and how they should behave.

"Before every game, somebody that's in charge should just make an announcement, stand in front of the fans and set some expectations around fair play and sportsmanship and behaviour," said Messer. "Setting the tone and I think would go a long way to curbing a lot of that."



Messer says parents are more often poorly behaved in the minor associations. (Tom Steepe/CBC)

It's an important problem to solve, says Messer. Most officials who are refereeing the minor age groups are new, and are already facing the pressures from coaches and players.

In Nova Scotia, 12 officials refused to referee games in the Metro Basketball Association following abuse from fans. Another 25 officials did not come back from last year.

In New Brunswick, Messer says there is already a shortage of people available to do games. Bad fans make that worse.

"Sadly, we can lose new officials quickly if their experience is negative.... This reality is making it tougher and tougher to keep officials and cover games," said Messer.

"It is imperative that more is done to maintain a positive experience for everyone at the gym. Otherwise, more and more games may not have officials in the future."

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