

Whistling While They Work

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Wrestling Officials May Have One of Toughest Jobs Going

By Craig Sesker

David Frisch is a consultant for an engineering firm. Tim Shiels owns a fundraising company. Chuck Yagla works in business development. Jim Ramirez is assistant executive director for a community action agency.



Chuck Yagla was a two-time NCAA champion at Iowa. (Greg Latza/NCAA Photos)

They also happen to be among the best college wrestling officials in the country.

You definitely can't make a living as a wrestling official, but the experiences and memories are priceless. For their work this weekend at the NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships in St. Louis, each of the 20 officials will make \$100 per session. Their airfare and hotel are paid for and they receive a \$30 daily per diem.

"We are definitely doing this for love," Shiels said.

"You better have a passion for doing this," Ramirez said, "or you won't last long."

The officials also have to deal with their share of headaches. They are continually questioned by coaches whose livelihood revolves around the sport. And, of course, they are screamed at and booed by fans who disagree with their calls.

"These officials are the best in our sport," said the NCAA's supervisor of officials, Pat McCormick, who officiated the Division I nationals from 1970-93. "They are able to block out what the coaches and fans are yelling at them. They go with their heart, work hard and want the fairest match to be called."

If the officials are good enough, they will make it through the three-day, six-session tournament relatively unscathed.

"If you can get through a match and have the wrestler not even know who you were after the match, that's great," Frisch said. "That means you had no impact on the outcome as an official."

A harsh reality is one of their calls could determine who realizes a lifelong dream and wins a national championship. Or who goes home with a heartbreaking defeat in the biggest match of their life.

Not only that, a tough call also could have a direct impact on the team race.

"There is a lot of pressure," Shiels said, "but that is what is fun and challenging about working this tournament."

Determining whether a wrestler has the requisite one foot in bounds to score a takedown or whether a wrestler should be penalized for stalling may be the difference in any given match.

The pressure is magnified in the NCAA championship matches. All eyes are on the elevated mat in a packed house of 18,000 fans.

"There is one person making every judgment call in a match," said McCormick. "It's a very tough job."

Said Ramirez: "We have nowhere to hide if we make a mistake."

The pressure starts when the first whistle is blown Thursday morning.

"The intensity level is high," Frisch said, "from the beginning until the very end."

So what makes a good official?

"The officials had to have wrestled, preferably in college," said McCormick. "They need a basic fundamental understanding of wrestling, which translates into good judgment. They need a lot of confidence and must quickly make good decisions. They need to make sure there is a fair match and protect the athletes."

To become an NCAA tournament official, you have to work a qualifying tournament (a conference meet or regional). Coaches from conferences and regional qualifiers select their own officials and then rank them after their events.

Officials are required to attend a rules meeting each September to become certified.

"I love wrestling and officiating allows me to still contribute to the sport," said Yagla, a two-time NCAA champion for Iowa. "It is very gratifying to be able to do this. You can't beat the atmosphere and the excitement of the NCAA tournament."

The 20 officials at nationals are ranked one through 20 by a group of 10 evaluators for their performance in the first five sessions. The top 10 are lead officials in the 10 finals bouts. The other 10 are assistants.

The rankings also determine who comes back to the NCAA meet the following year. The NCAA Wrestling Committee can change as many referees as they think necessary, but typically turn over the bottom four ranked referees each year.

McCormick presents a pool of candidates to the committee before they select the new officials. The pool includes officials who have worked past championships and also factored in are rankings of officials from qualifying tournaments.

Shiels, 45, from Apple Valley, Minnesota, is working his sixth NCAA Division I meet.

"You have to work the best tournament you can and not worry about the rankings," Shiels said. "You can't let that become the priority or the goal. It's a tough process, but it is an equitable system."

Yagla, 50, from Waterloo, Iowa, is working his ninth NCAA meet.

"With the rankings, it is really competitive and makes it a little awkward sometimes," Yagla said. "Everybody wants to do a finals match."

Ramirez, 52, from Arkansas City, Kansas, has written a book entitled, "The Art of Officiating Collegiate Wrestling." He is working his 11th NCAA meet.

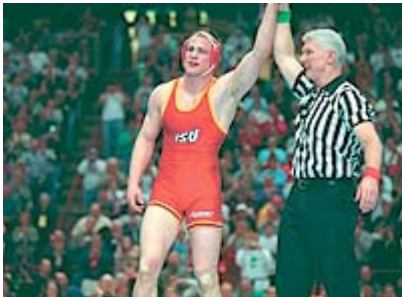
"My book is a reference guide for officials," Ramirez said. "It takes you beyond the rule book and goes through different scenarios on how to handle different things. A lot of it is how to handle negativity of fans, coaches and wrestlers in a professional and tactful manner. The worst deficiency you can showcase as an official is arrogance."

Ramirez said stalling calls are the ones that draw the most scrutiny.

"The biggest heartburn any coach has with any referee is how stalling is called," Ramirez said. "That is where a lot of inconsistency happens."

Ramirez said an early stalling call he made was followed by one of the best NCAA matches he officiated. It came in the 1996 finals bout in Minneapolis when Iowa's Joe Williams edged Illinois' Ernest Benion 9-8 at 158.

"Nobody was opening up and I issued a double stalling warning," Ramirez said. "It was the Fourth of July after that. The fireworks really started and there was great action. It was exciting, a fun match to officiate. The wrestlers did all the scoring and kept me out of it."



David Frisch is working his 20th NCAA Championship. (Joe Connell/NCAA Photos)

The officials have compiled their share of memories from the NCAA championships.

Frisch, 50, from Colorado Springs, Colorado, is working his 20th NCAA meet this year.

Frisch was the official for the 197 final two years ago in Albany, New York, raising the hand of Iowa State's Cael Sanderson after he won his 159th match to become the first collegian to finish a four-year career unbeaten.

"There wasn't much saliva in my mouth and trying to blow the whistle in that match was tough because of nerves," Frisch said. "I was happy that the match didn't come down to a judgment call. It was an amazing moment."

Frisch also officiated the 1995 finals match in Iowa City between Iowa's Lincoln McClravy and Illinois' Steve Marianetti at 150 pounds. McClravy, a junior who was on pace to win four NCAA titles, suffered a stunning upset loss.

"I saw Lincoln at a movie theater a year ago in Colorado Springs," Frisch said. "I mentioned I had done that match, but he didn't remember me doing it. For him to not know it was me was a great feeling."

McCormick experienced a not-so-great feeling during an NCAA tournament at Iowa State in 1974.

The 126-pound consolation semifinal match between Iowa State's Bob Antonacci and Penn State's John Fritz was tied after overtime. The match came down to a vote of the referee and two referees who served as mat judges.

The referee voted for Antonacci. McCormick, a mat judge, voted for Fritz. The other mat judge, Bill Cramp, circled Antonacci's name on his ballot. Antonacci's hand was then raised and the Hilton Coliseum crowd erupted.

McCormick then asked Cramp why he voted for Antonacci. Cramp said he thought he voted for Fritz.

"Bill is color blind," McCormick said. "He circled the wrong color on his ballot."

McCormick and Cramp immediately went to the tournament committee, who corrected the outcome. The wrestlers were recalled to the mat 15 minutes later, with Fritz's hand raised.

"As you can imagine," McCormick said, "the Iowa State fans were not very happy."

Iowa State finished fourth in a tight team race. If Antonacci's win had stood, the Cyclones could have finished second.

McCormick also worked another memorable NCAA bout in Ames.

Iowa's Lou Banach outlasted Iowa State's Wayne Cole in the heavyweight match for third place in 1982.

"They exchanged throws the whole match," McCormick said. "The crowd gave them a standing ovation that seemed to last forever. I found myself uncharacteristically clapping."

Shiels said his first trip to nationals, at Cleveland in 1998, included a few anxious moments.

"I was so intense and focused on doing a good job," said Shiels, who wrestled in college Minnesota-Morris. "A veteran official came up to me and said, 'Hey kid, you are so intense you look like you are going to explode. You better relax, you have three days to go.'"

Yagla also had an interesting learning experience in his first NCAA meet in 1996.

"I had a semifinal match at heavyweight between Tolly Thompson of Nebraska, the defending national champion, and Justin Harty from North Carolina," Yagla said. "It was really difficult to officiate because it was so physical. Both guys wrestled real aggressively and were head-butting each other. In hindsight, it probably got out of hand a little bit."

Even though the NCAA officials hail from different parts of the country, a bond exists.

"It's a great fraternity," said Frisch, who wrestled for St. Cloud State. "We have great respect for each other."

"We are real close-knit," said Ramirez, who wrestled at South Dakota State. "We encourage each other."

Officials also can't lose their composure when situations turn ugly as coaches and fans become irate.

"It's nothing personal," Shiels said. "We have all been chewed out. You just can't get into those confrontations."

But even coaches admit these officials get it right most of the time at nationals.

"Being graded for their performance puts a lot of pressure on them," Cornell coach Rob Koll said. "But in general, I think the officiating at the NCAA tournament is great."

McCormick said officials don't step on the mats until just before each session starts.

"We don't want them fraternizing with the coaches," McCormick said. "We want them to be ready to work."

And ready for every match.

"You put yourself on the line every time you go out there," McCormick said. "You are only as good as your last match."

Evaluators A Part Of The Officiating Process

It is the place where every college wrestler dreams about being for their final match of the season.

On the elevated mat in the center of a sold-out arena on Saturday afternoon at the NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships.

It also is the place the best officials in the country aspire to be. And like the wrestlers, the officials have to earn that trip for the season's most important matches.

While the wrestlers battle through four grueling rounds to land a spot in the championship matches, the 20 officials who work the NCAA Division I meet are evaluated by a group of 10 people during the first five sessions.

The officials are ranked one through 20 by the evaluators, with the top 10 being selected as lead officials for the 10 championship matches. The other 10 work as assistants during the finals. The officials do not learn their rankings until after Saturday's consolation finals.

"I have seen a guy blow a call in the quarterfinals and it knocks him out of the top 10 even though he is a top official," said Lynn Dyche, coordinator of evaluators for the Division I championships. "The competition is so close that a missed call can really cost you."

The evaluators' ranking system also determines who returns for the following season's NCAA meet.

The NCAA Wrestling Committee can change as many referees as they think necessary, but typically turn over the bottom four ranked referees each year.

"The top 15 is tough to break into," Dyche said. "It is important to bring in new guys because some guys are getting older. Plus there are very good officials out there who deserve an opportunity."

The 10 evaluators are a group of five former officials, who have worked the NCAA tournament, and five former college coaches.

Five evaluators will be assigned to watch 10 officials in a session with the other five evaluators watching the other 10 officials. The evaluators then switch and watch the other 10 officials in the next session.

The evaluators continue to flip-flop through the first five sessions.

Each evaluator likely will see each official work anywhere from five to seven matches over the first five sessions.

Officials are evaluated on mechanics and how they give signals, positioning, overall consistency, knowledge of the rules, recognition of stalling, acceptance of criticism, ability to make tough calls, decisiveness, hustle, their appearance, how well they protect the student-athletes and how they deal with coaches.

"In our evaluations, we give positive feedback," Dyche said. "We provide encouragement and try to help the officials."

The 10 evaluators are paid \$150 for the weekend, plus their hotel room is taken care of.

"The evaluations are critical," said Pat McCormick, the NCAA's supervisor of officials. "We want the best officials working the biggest matches. You want guys up on the platform for the finals that you trust and guys who are not going to get in trouble."

2004 Officials Evaluators

Joe Cesari, Ashland, Pa.
Lynn Dyche, San Jose, Calif.
Ed Kelly, Cantonsville, Md.
Ray Mainville, South Meriden, Conn.
Ralph Manning, Tahlequah, Okla.
Jim Phillips, Lebanon, Ore.
Mark Piven, Savannah, Ga.
Ed Steers, Charleston, S.C.
Bob Triano, Columbus, Ohio
Eldon Zimbleman, St. Francis, Kan.

