

Campus Connection



How did you get your start in officiating? Many young men and women first develop their skills on college campuses by officiating intramural sports. Flag football is a popular intramural sport on a lot of campuses and a variety of talented officials control the fields during games.

By David Peters

When All-American selections for top college athletes come out each year, talented young athletes receive recognition nationwide. But there is another group of collegiate All-Americans that may interest you: All-American flag football officials.

Flag football is one of the cornerstones of intramural sports programs at universities and colleges across the country. The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) counts 645 collegiate recreational programs as member institutions. Of those, the vast majority have an intramural

sports program, characterized by offering a variety of sports leagues and tournaments that involve only students from the school.

College football powerhouses such as the University of Texas and the University of Florida see as many as 400 flag football teams competing on their campuses each fall. Even smaller schools such as Lycoming College (1,500 students) in Williamsport, Pa., will have at least a dozen intramural flag football teams. In all, an estimated 500,000 college students participate on one of more than 50,000 flag football teams in campus leagues annually.

And where there are games, there must be officials.

Unlike local rec leagues, which can recruit officials from throughout the community, most recreational sports programs hire only from among the student body of their institutions. Ohio State University hires around 250 students annually to officiate flag football and its other sports. At the University of Southern Mississippi the student officiating staff is comprised of 105 members. Collectively, the number of college students working as intramural officials nationwide is estimated at close to 35,000.



While not every intramural game is packed with star athletes, the competitive level remains high in most contests and, with player-managed teams, so too do the emotions. Student officials work intramural games with student participants. That peer pressure requires a unique set of game management skills in order to ensure a successful experience.

Student officials who can master the myriad skills take to the road to display their abilities. Intramural sports become extramural when the top teams travel to battle teams from other schools at regional events. In flag football, those teams and the top officials converge at one of approximately 20 regional tournaments each fall. As teams vie for the tournament championship,

officials work to earn a bid to one of two national tournaments: the American Collegiate Intramural Sports (ACIS) National Flag Football Championships, which celebrated its 30th year at the University of New Orleans last year, or the NIRSA National Flag Football Championships, in its third year and hosted by the University of South Florida in 2008.

Thousands of intramural flag football officials are narrowed down to a group of fewer than 100 who officiate games in the national tournaments each December. The tournaments provide officials not only competitive games to work but a wealth of officiating knowledge and experience to draw upon.

Tournament staff members represent institutions from across

the country. Officials' evaluators are former NFL officials, current college and high school officials, current recreational sports directors and former All-Americans, each with a unique perspective on the game of flag football.

"The (flag football) national tournament may be the only event in the nation at any level where the officials receive as much intensive training and are critiqued as much as we do in just three days," said Bruce Maurer, a former NFL official and the current director of rules at the ACIS tournament. Maurer also serves as editor for the *NIRSA Flag and Touch Football Rules Book*, which is used by intramural programs across the country. He has been helping train officials at the ACIS tournament for 28 years.

The student officials take advantage of the training experience.

“Most of the officials come not only ready to work, but ready to learn,” said Mark Williams, director of recreational sports at Seattle University and the director of the NIRSA national tournament in Tampa. “The national tournament offers student officials the opportunity to interact with recreation professionals, ask questions and receive advice from a talented group of former officials and evaluators.”

To aspire to be an All-American presents the toughest challenges an intramural official can undertake. Like officiating the high school state tournament final, being named an All-American is a top honor. Thirty-one students received the award last season. Some will use the award to vault them into other officiating pursuits. Others will hang it on the wall as a reminder of a college achievement as they move on to pursue other endeavors.

Meet six student officials from across the nation who earned the privilege of working a national tournament and being selected an All-American flag football official last year.

Ohio University

Greg Allensworth

Earning All-American honors in flag football required a bit more running for Ohio University senior Greg Allensworth than his regular officiating passion. A lot more. Allensworth got his start in officiating during his senior year of high school as a tennis umpire. The mid-court chair is a little more comfortable than a football sideline. But he admits the skills required to do a good job are similar.

“Tennis is similar to other sports. You need rules knowledge and conflict resolution skills,” said Allensworth. “If you have two players that hate each other, you’re going to be fighting with them all the time.”

Communication is one of the key skills Allensworth has picked up as an official across many sports. From



Allensworth

intramural flag football and softball to high school basketball and college tennis, he’s had to put that skill to use in a variety of situations.

On campus at Ohio University, he serves as the student director of officials for the intramural sports program. His national tournament experience will be invaluable as he assists with officials training sessions on campus this year.

“At the national tournament, I try to learn something new to bring back to campus and educate the younger officials,” he said.

East Carolina University

Josh VanNamee

Syracuse, N.Y., native Josh VanNamee has been in the officiating business for nearly a decade. As a college student, that means an early start. VanNamee began working as an official for youth soccer leagues in upstate New York when he was just 12. His passion for the job continued with his move south to Greenville, N.C., for college.

“What better way for me to be in



VanNamee

the action than to officiate?” admitted VanNamee. And he’s been part of the action in intramural sports at East Carolina since his freshman year. He’s worked flag football, basketball, softball and kickball on campus along with youth flag football and high school football and lacrosse.

But it hasn’t always been easy. VanNamee admits that big games and big crowds can be nerve-racking for any young official.

“I used to be intimidated by a big game,” he said. “Now after the past four years, I can handle that. That has brought me to a point in officiating that I can be assertive and stand my ground. I think that’s going to help me overall in life.”

His inspiration at ECU comes from the program’s focus on student development and officials’ training. The school has produced more than its fair share of talented officials over the years. VanNamee wanted to be the school’s next award winner.

“We have a Wall of Fame in the intramural office,” said VanNamee. “My goal was to be an All-American before I left school.”

In 2008, he reached that accomplishment. But VanNamee’s aspirations don’t end there.

“I enjoy officiating and I hope one day I can move up,” he said. “I watch *NFL Review* every week and that’s where I aspire to be one day.”

Georgia Southern University

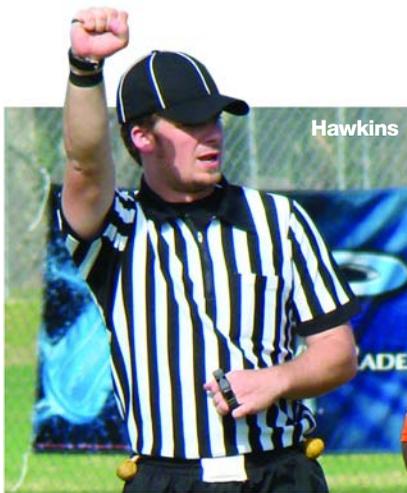
Kevin Hawkins

For Georgia Southern University junior Kevin Hawkins, officiating is in his blood. His father worked high school basketball around his hometown of Snellville, which is northeast of Atlanta.

“I went to high school games with him and watched him work as I grew up,” said Hawkins. “I did some church league basketball with him, but I really did not have great training.”

His experience in intramural sports at Georgia Southern filled in that void.

“It was a whole lot better to come down here and train with people who



Hawkins

work high school and college games," said Hawkins. "The intramural staff is committed to training young officials."

That training led to top games on campus and at regional events. In 2008, he worked his first national tournament, earning All-American honors. He also started high school football and basketball officiating.

As a broadcasting major, Hawkins is a co-host for a weekly sports radio show at the university. As an official, he brings a unique perspective that many sports talk shows are lacking.

"A lot of people bash referees on the calls they've made," admitted Hawkins. "That's where I can come in. I actually know the rules and I can explain to them what happened."

Ohio State University

Kevin Balogh

There are those who fall into officiating simply because they need a job. Count Ohio State University's Kevin Balogh in that group.

He did, however, have some experience to fall back on. Balogh had been a youth league umpire as a teenager around his hometown of Bedford, Ohio.

"The local commissioners always needed umpires," said Balogh. "When they asked if I'd be interested in umping, I said, 'Sure, I'll take the 15 bucks a game.'"

In just two years of intramural officiating at Ohio State, he's become one of the top officials on the campus of more than 50,000 students. Balogh now works basketball and softball in addition to his flag football work. His next step is to add high school football and basketball to his officiating résumé. He hopes to accomplish that during his senior year as he completes his studies in special education.

Through officiating, Balogh can work on his communication skills, something that will prove valuable both on the field and in the classroom. Talking to players and coaches is a talent he continues to master.



Balogh

"When it comes down to it," said Balogh, "there's not much difference between an upset 19-year-old intramural athlete who disagrees with a flag guarding call and a 40-year-old manager who is upset that you called a low strike on his kid."

University of Central Florida

Leisha Cavallaro

Leisha Cavallaro was a hockey player in Florida. Roller hockey, that is. That's where she got her start in officiating, first as a scorekeeper, then an official. As a psychology major at Central Florida in Orlando, she's now an official on the field and the court.

Cavallaro has been on the fast

Ask a College or Professional Official

There are several college and professional officials who got their start in officiating working intramurals, including MLB umpire Tim McClelland, NFL referee Carl Cheffers and NBA referee Dan Crawford. While not all of the All-American flag football officials profiled aspire to reach the highest levels, through *Referee's* assistance, a few of them were able to get a question answered from their college or pro counterparts.

Kevin Hawkins: How do you adjust to the faster speed of the game as you progress?

NFL back judge Richard Reels: It comes with gaining experience and working the different levels. There are no short cuts; it comes with putting in the time and working at it.

Leisha Cavallaro: What is the most important quality an official needs to reach your level?

Big Ten football umpire Jim Krogstad: The most important quality an official needs at any level is integrity. Handle players, coaches and parents with respect. Know the rules and how to apply them. Give your best effort every game. Make tough decisions without bias and stick to them. Admit a mistake and correct it if possible, or explain why it can't be corrected. Communicate and listen to both teams. Understand that integrity is a 24/7 quality.

Josh VanNamee: What steps do you take to rebound if you make an error during a game?

NFL field judge Gary Cavalletto: We all make mistakes. It's part of officiating at any level. The trouble is that we have to finish the game. How can we move on? First, we have to recognize and acknowledge our mistake to ourselves. Then we have to keep our emotions in check, clear our mind and officiate the rest of the game.

Some will tell you to forget about it and move on. That's easy to say and not productive.

I quickly remember the situation and get a snapshot in my mind of the play, what I did on it and the result. It might

allow me to see what I did wrong (I was out of position due to poor mechanics), so I can correct it. If I cannot fix it now, I file the information away. After the game I look back, study why I made the error and correct it. That makes me accept responsibility and put the situation out of my mind for the rest of the game.

The process of recognizing and filing away that situation in an emotional way will give me a better chance to clear my mind. I don't want to keep thinking about the error and have it affect my performance.

Once I have filed it away, I want to make a commitment, a kick-myself-in-the-pants-effort to work the remainder of the game as the best official in the world.

track in officiating. After her roller hockey experience at home in Royal Palm Beach, she picked up intramural officiating as a freshman. In her second year as a flag football official, she earned a bid to the national tournament. Her desire to improve led her to accept the assignment.

"My whole goal in going to the tournament was to learn about officiating in general. You learn so much because you have evaluators who really pay attention to what you are doing and give great advice. They want to make you better," she said. "The award is nice, but I wasn't expecting it."

During her first years in college, Cavallaro added not only intramural officiating to her résumé but also refereeing high school flag football and local basketball leagues. In May, she became the youngest person to work the Florida High School Athletic Association flag football state championship game. She plans to work tackle football when her schedule allows it.

"I would really like to progress in officiating, perhaps to the college level," Cavallaro said. "But as a career, I'd like to stay in intramurals."

That career path will allow her to continue to help develop young officials by day while showcasing her officiating talents at night.

University of Nebraska

Travis Tangeman

In the classroom, Papillion, Neb., native Travis Tangeman is focused on the numbers. His major — actuarial science, which balances probability, statistics, economics and finance —



Cavallaro

makes his part-time officiating job look easy. But staring at a computer screen all day isn't exactly social. That's where officiating comes in.

"I've become more outgoing," said Tangeman. "Meeting a lot of people through intramurals has been a great experience."

In intramurals, he works flag football, basketball and softball. In the community, he is a high school football and basketball official.



Tangeman

His future aspirations include working upper class high school basketball games and state tournament action, even possibly some college games.

Officiating isn't just a social outlet for Tangeman. He is always looking to improve. For him, that means seeking advice on campus and off.

"On campus, you're often getting the same opinions every day," he said. "At tournaments, you get new evaluators that can see other things and give you a different opinion."

Tangeman returned to New Orleans for his second national tournament in 2008. With its experienced lineup of officials' evaluators, the tournament is almost like an officiating camp.

"Sometimes it's little things that you have never thought of before," said Tangeman. "(The evaluators) see things that no one else has and have something for you from every game that you can improve upon."

In the end, intramural sports programs across the country are in the officials' development business. That work is part of a balanced approach that is also focused on developing students as leaders and contributors to society.

"Intramural officiating is a true student development experience for every student involved on campus, at regionals and at nationals," said Maurer. "It is unique in the university setting."

David Peters is currently the director of intramural sports and sport clubs at Florida State University and was named an All-American flag football official in 2000. □

Behind the Flag Football Stripes

The flag football officials from both 2008 national tournaments took part in a survey. The results from 76 respondents are presented.

Officiating Experience

- 47%** are also high school football officials.
- 45%** are also high school basketball officials.
- 6%** have worked a sport at the college level.

Qualities Learned or Improved Upon Through Officiating

- 50%** Communication
- 34%** Confidence
- 28%** Leadership
- 20%** Conflict Resolution
- 11%** Patience

Future Aspirations

- 79%** plan to begin or continue working high school sports.
- 66%** plan to pursue officiating at the college level.
- 13%** hope to work in professional sports.
- 28%** will continue to officiate as a hobby.