

Much of what football officials accomplish is unseen by general public

For any Friday night high school football game, whether at home or on the road, most fans want to arrive within 30 minutes of the scheduled kickoff. Such an entrance is usually enough to ensure a good seat with time for a pre-game snack.

What most fans don't realize, if they get to a game that early, is that the officiating crew (referee, umpire, head line, line judge and back judge) will have been on-site for at least an hour preparing for the contest. Before most fans get within sight of the stadium, the officials have already spent 30 minutes not only getting dressed, but discussing new rules and what might be expected.

High on the list of priorities is the new emphasis on safety — preventing the “oh wow” plays on defenseless players, including blindside crackback blocks and keeping a detailed eye on actions that could lead to concussions.

With the stands half empty, the men dressed in black-and-white stripes have been on the field. It's a time to confer with coaches and check equipment. It's a time for honesty, as coaches will be asked about trick plays or unusual formations. While many of the officials have spent time reviewing video of the teams, this is the final opportunity to ensure they are not surprised during the game.

In fact, much of the work the men in stripes do goes unnoticed, which is the goal. The greatest compliment the five-person crew can receive is when they leave the game without being noticed.

Of course, they get attention whenever a yellow flag is pitched into the air, soliciting catcalls from the offending side of the field. It's a result of studying rules and applying them correctly, notifying coaches of the infraction and the number of the offender. A hidden fact is that officials study nearly as much video as opposing coaches in an effort to be prepared for the choreography each play requires.

No crew ever wants to be out of position, therefore each has knowledge of where the others are. That's the benefit of experience.

And the officials didn't just show up from their day jobs. Eight times a season, in associations, they attend classes where videos are shown, often displaying refs out of position or rules being correctly or incorrectly applied. That's after studying new rules and procedures during the summer.

Through the years, fans become familiar with the faces of the “zebras,” as officials are referred to by fans attempting to display their knowledge of (or lack of) the game from the stands. Many of the officials are veterans, having worked high school games for years. It's not for financial reward (refs

get paid \$75 per game, the others \$68) but, in many cases, a way to stay connected with a game they love and to give back to the sport.

This year, 15 new faces were added to its roster that numbers about 125 officials. The rookies are usually assigned to freshmen or junior varsity games to gain the needed experience, working with veterans to get their mechanics in good order and the rosters of the various units are no longer dominated by educators, as they once were, another sign of ex-players wishing to remain with the sport that had given them so much.

Like many veteran officials, they keep a constant line of communication with players, often complimenting a player on a good play/block and offering an insight on techniques. It's not a display of favoritism, rather an opportunity to improve the skill.

It's a love of the game. It's a passion those in the stands just don't seem to comprehend.