



Football Ref Goes Out On Top

By Bill Gosse

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Every time I write a column, the Press-Gazette kindly includes a short, personal footnote. One of the items is about to change.

No, my wife isn't pregnant. I am about to become a former WIAA football official.

As we go through life we encounter different chapters, and my officiating chapter is about to close. When Green Bay NEW Lutheran unveils its first varsity football team in 2009, my two oldest sons will be players. I'll be there cheering – as a parent.

Why retire now when a whole season lies ahead in 2008? Our officiating crew has been selected to work at state this year and going out on top is pretty special. Finishing almost 20 years of officiating at Camp Randall Stadium will be quite a thrill.

Players dream of finishing their high school careers at state – coaches do too. Athletes envision scoring the winning touchdown, making the winning free throw or striking out the final batter to win it all. As a player I made it to sectionals, but never to state. I have had the pleasure as an official of being at state before and will again for the last time.

Many memories abound, with the fond far outweighing the bad.

For my first game, I remember buying a pair of cheap white shoes and spray-painting them black. I didn't want to buy an expensive pair of shoes because I was just going to try officiating and see how I liked it.

Every couple of games I would have to re-paint them because the paint would chip off. Every couple of games I liked officiating better.

One Friday night I was working behind the defense as an umpire and on one particular play I found myself frozen with future NFL defensive lineman Jim Flanigan barreling right at me. All I could do was hold my hand on my chest and point to the right hoping that he saw my signal. Whew!

It is pretty cool thinking of the future Wisconsin Badgers and/or NFL players for whom I was privileged to officiate: Stecker, Greisen, Rabach, Buenning, DeBauche, and Johnson to name a handful. Sounds like a law firm, doesn't it? Officiating for great players like these entices you to come back week after week.

There are moments though, that cause you to ponder early retirement.

A coach accused us of purposely throwing a game. As the crew chief, I had to answer to the WIAA to prove our innocence. To this day, those kids from that losing team probably feel the officials cost them that game, instead of their coach being man enough to admit defeat and convince his players they had a great one-loss season.

Does wearing a striped shirt and toting a whistle automatically make you evil? Some people think that.

As I leave, there are huge needs for quality officials in all sports. Unfortunately, many quality prospects will never don the zebra suit because of the grief they fear they may have to bear. Joining an association and learning from seasoned officials helped me get through that and it can help others. Officiating is a great avocation.

I didn't officiate for the money. I officiated so I could be with kids – big and little, fast and slow, from big schools and small schools – playing their Super Bowl every Friday night.

I also officiated to be with Korny, Gutter, Stieds, Johnny Van, and Big Tim. That's not a law firm. Those are my crew members - my friends, and I will miss them.