

# Local Officials Join #AztecStrong Movement

By Tom Conroy

A key element of officiating is to call a fair game and remain unbiased, regardless of what external factors might be at play in the situation. Officials normally refrain from expressing their emotions or opinions while they are on the court. However, a recent tragedy prompted members of the New Mexico Activities Association (NMAA) to stand in solidarity with the Aztec, N.M., community.



Sporting special whistles are (from left) Stacy Ross, Leonard Neil, Craig Coutlee, Michael Dan, Gary Cottom and David Valdez.

On Dec. 17, a gunman opened fire in the hallway of Aztec High School, killing students Casey Jordan Marquez and Francisco Fernandez. The tragedy devastated the entire Aztec community, particularly the school's athletic department, as Marquez was a cheerleader and Fernandez was a member of the football team.

"It was a horrific, devastating event to happen in this area, especially in lieu of recent shootings across the country," said Craig Coutlee, a 31-year basketball official in the area. "Everyone was left wondering how something like this could have happened."

Soon after, students at Aztec and

other schools in the area began using the hashtag #AztecStrong on social media. The orange and black colors of Aztec High School were on display throughout the region. Coutlee noticed how quickly the movement spread.

"People were going to Walmart to buy orange and black ribbons and they were already sold out," said Coutlee, who was conferring with his fellow officials on how they could show their support. "We wanted to show the community that we're here for them, too."

Coutlee reached out to Ron and Dave Foxcroft of Fox 40 International, who donated black and orange whistles to the officials in the NMAA. It was a gesture the Foxcrofts were more than happy to make, especially after the outpouring of emotion.

"We have received a thank you email from almost every single basketball referee in their association," said Fox 40 CEO Ron Foxcroft. "Generous, charitable emotions have no boundaries with referees when it comes to helping people."

The NMAA gave the officials permission to don the whistles, a decision that NMAA Officials Commissioner Dana Pappas wholeheartedly approved.

"We thank our local association for their support of Aztec High School during their time of crisis," Pappas said. "It was obviously a no-brainer from our state's standpoint to allow the officials to do what they did for the Aztec community."

Coutlee sees the #AztecStrong movement not just as a way to honor those lost in the tragedy, but also to serve as a reminder to people so that similar events can be avoided in the future.

"We want people to remember that this is an issue that we face every day in this country and recognize how to address those problems," Coutlee said. "We hope that our actions create more awareness."

Tom Conroy is Referee's assistant editor. □

## Colorado Officials Lead Statewide 'Officials vs. Cancer' Campaign

This past January, the Colorado Springs Basketball Officials Association (CSBOA) wore pink-striped shirts and pink whistles as part of a statewide "Officials vs. Cancer" campaign, which aimed to raise a five-figure donation for cancer research. The campaign was especially personal for CSBOA rules interpreter Gary Montel, who lost his wife to cancer more than a decade ago.

"That changed my life. This disease spares nobody. We can do something so maybe someday others won't have to suffer. No donation is too small," Montel said. "All we want is nickels, dimes and quarters, and we want it to come from the heart. Every bit makes a difference."

For Tom Carricato, an official from Colorado Springs, the week meant a lot to him after losing a parent to cancer.

"I think this week, it's fair to say they will cross our minds a little more, and maybe we'll put in a little extra effort this week working hard for them knowing they're looking over us."

SOURCE: GAZETTE.COM

## Idaho Referee Saved by Fans at Basketball Game

Brian Underwood, 77, was officiating a basketball game at Highland High School in Pocatello, Idaho, when he suddenly collapsed during play. Jake Liday, an off-duty firefighter watching in the stands, jumped into action and performed CPR on Underwood. Keith Forkin, the athletic trainer at Highland, assisted by using an AED on the 30-year official, who had no pulse. They were able to revive him and get him to the hospital. While he is unsure if he will return to officiating, Underwood is thankful for the two men who saved his life.

"Can't say I remember anything, but it's really great that there were people there that were trained and ready to step in and do something," Underwood said.

SOURCE: KPVI.COM

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