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JOHN SLEEPER

Columnist John Sleeper's take on sports in Snohomish County and Seattle.



• Latest: Hardworking Sexson deserves fans' support

WEEK IN REVIEW

WEDNESDAY



- Animal complaints rise
• Seattle I-5 project five days ahead of schedule
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- Two Silvana men arrested in bear-hunting case
• By adopting, Whidbey couple reunite three siste...
• County rebuked for labor violations

MONDAY



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• Fiber optics almost ready in Edmonds

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- Camp offers three days of adventure for kids wi...
• Mammoth tooth found near Everett
• Compromise may end fight over sex offender rules

SATURDAY

HIGH SCHOOLS

Published: Saturday, January 15, 2005

STRIPES

To see if a better eye can be kept on play during high school basketball games, the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association is giving three-referee crews a three-year trial.

By Mike Cane / Herald Writer

A re six eyes better than four?

Thanks to an experiment that has added a third referee to the usual two-person crew, that question is bouncing around high school basketball courts throughout the state this season.

After several years of consideration, the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association this season enacted a three-year trial of the three-official system, which is standard in college and professional basketball and prevalent at the prep level in many states.

"It was the next logical step," WIAA executive director Mike Colbrese said. "We figured it was time."

One goal of the new system is to protect players. Proponents say the three-referee crews can see rough, potentially dangerous off-ball action that often goes unnoticed. In general, it helps officials make the correct call more often.

"It takes a lot of pressure off the referees," Mariner High boys basketball coach Dexter Griffen said. "It allows them to be able to focus more on their areas, more than a two-man crew could."

Griffen also said he hasn't noticed a significant increase in the total number of fouls called.

The change also creates better access to referees, Griffen said, so coaches' questions and complaints are addressed quicker.

Any change that brings the prep game closer to the college game is a positive step, said Snohomish girls basketball coach Ken Roberts. "I think it's a good thing for (players) and it's a good thing for the game," he said.

If the change is widely embraced, it could become officially adopted for the 2007-08 season.

In Whitman County, south of Spokane, leagues have been using three referees for several years, Colbrese said. This year the frequency of three-official games varies around the state, depending largely on the availability of officials. The WIAA encourages the practice but left regular-season scheduling up to each district and officiating association.

In Snohomish County, the Class 4A Western Conference has regularly had three referees on Tuesdays for boys games and on Wednesdays for girls games. All district tournament games will have three referees, as will all state-tournament games.

While many applaud the benefits of using an extra referee, there have been some growing pains. The WIAA put on several training camps last summer to prepare officials, but it still takes time to adjust to covering one-half of the court instead of one-third.

"We're thinking way too much right now," said Dan Taylor, assigner for the Snohomish County Girls Basketball Officials Association, " (but) it's gonna be great once everybody gets used to it."

A slightly low referee turnout in Snohomish County has made it difficult for officials to get consistent three-person experience. On busy nights - especially on Fridays - there usually aren't enough referees available. As a result, some referees wait up to two weeks in between three-person games. But as the postseason approaches, Taylor and Lee Otini, assigner and commissioner for the Snohomish County Boys Basketball Officials Association, are trying to juggle their rosters to offer more repetitions.

Another positive effect of the change is the decreased physical burden on referees. With less court to cover, officials exert less energy and reduce their chance of injury. In addition, referee turnout could eventually receive a boost because older officials might be able to work a few more years.

"We've got quite a few veteran officials that will probably stay around," said Donnie Johnson, a local referee. "It's a huge help to them."

Johnson, 34, from Lake Stevens, has officiated basketball for 15 years. He currently works junior-college girls games and high school boys games. Johnson said he supports the three-referee system and hopes to see it fully enacted.

But, Johnson said, at least one aspect of the three-year trial irks him. Before this season, each referee made \$48 per

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**THURSDAY**



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game but that has been cut to \$33 to accommodate a third referee. It amounts to a total of \$99 per game, up from \$96 last year, which was split two ways.

Still, Johnson said, the pay cut doesn't spoil the enjoyable aspects of refereeing: meeting people, getting plenty of exercise and being around a great game.

"I enjoy refereeing basketball. I'm out there for the kids," he said. "If you're in this type of sport for the money, than you're in the wrong business."

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