

CREW COMMITTEE FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

Football officiating chapters (at least in Texas) have struggled for decades to come up with equitable ways to assign individuals to games. Many different methodologies have been tried, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Over years of self-evaluation, many chapters have determined that working individual officials in established crews can help in providing a better service to schools and coaches by improving the overall quality of the officiating “product” on the field. Since crew systems have been adopted, varying ways of assembling individuals into crew units have been tried, and once again each methodology is found to have its own strengths and weaknesses. Overall, it is hoped that any crew formation process would assist a Chapter in meeting its overall goals and objectives, be reflective of the values of individual Chapter members, and act to protect the integrity of the game.

From February through June 2009 the Austin Chapter Board of Directors worked to define a crew system for consideration by the Austin Chapter, and a resulting crew system “pilot” was implemented for the 2009 season. During that season a Crew Committee was subsequently formed to evaluate possibilities for implementation of a more permanent crew system going forward. In a meeting with the Board of Directors on October 19, 2009, several ideas and concerns were presented to this Committee as the Board sought to inform its members of their own findings on the topic in deliberations held throughout the previous months. The Committee found it apparent during that meeting that there were differing opinions as to the most important values to be upheld in such a process. Board Members seemed enthusiastic and generally positive about the idea of a crew system, but were unable to reach consensus on what the objectives of the system would be, the order of importance for those objectives, or possibly how best to implement them into a working scenario.

In that meeting, several objectives were expressed, as were several potential problems. These were discussed at length in early Crew Committee meetings and were narrowed to the following list (in no specific order):

Objectives

- Maintain a “standard of excellence” for our Chapter
- Provide for the ongoing development of officials at all experience levels
- Assist in retention of officials at all experience levels
- Integrate effectively with the assignments process
- Assist in providing a high level of service to our “customers”
- Be transparent and easy to understand
- Facilitate camaraderie and fellowship among fellow officials

Potential Problems

- Consistency of application in enforcing Chapter policies regarding crews (clarity of process)
- Reduced opportunities for newer officials to work with more experienced officials
- Handling changes during the season (crew substitutions for injury, illness, work, etc)
- Crew chemistry (can we all get along)

- How to handle “scratches”
- Strength of “the pool”
- Application of the crew system to the existing assignment process
- Application of the evaluation process to Crews versus “pool” officials
- Maintaining consistency of crew mechanics throughout the Chapter
- Handling UIL and/or playoff assignments

After its early meetings the Committee presented a compiled list of “core values” at a special called meeting of the Chapter held on November 16, 2009. At that meeting the Committee attempted to communicate their progress and to probe for consensus on the most important issues to be addressed in a final product. Before, during, and after this meeting many Chapter members communicated their ideas and concerns directly to the Committee, and these ideas and concerns were an integral part of the Committee’s discussions. In addition, the Committee chose to individually interview four different members of the Board of Directors to gain additional insight into prior deliberations by the Board and to achieve a better understanding of how a crew system would interact within the Chapter’s existing policies and structures.

The Committee observed that there were several common “foundational” questions that surfaced repeatedly during its deliberations which fell on the boundary of the Committee’s charge but were deemed improper as direct components of a working documented solution. In other words, some questions required answers before additional steps could be taken, but were not fitting to be directly addressed in a document the Chapter would use to manage a crew solution on an ongoing basis. They are submitted here in an attempt to share certain elements of the process by which the final proposed solution was derived. There are several recommendations from the Committee contained here, and it is hoped that these will be considered by the appropriate individuals as the Chapter moves into an implementation of the solution.

FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Who gets to be a crew chief? There were several discussions regarding the advisability of mandating that the Referee be the “chief” of a crew in every case. It is true that for any given group (or crew) of officials there are likely one or more individuals whose leadership skills give them the capacity to adequately fulfill the role of “chief”. In certain cases, this individual (or individuals) may or may not be the Referee. It is, however, evident through the current design of a football officiating crew as dictated by approved mechanics that the Referee is clearly intended to be the “on field” leader of the crew. It is also a clear expectation of coaches, players, and fans that the “white hat” is the one in charge. Given these assumptions it would appear that the ability to “lead” is inherent in the required make-up of any individual assigned

to the position of Referee. The absence of this quality may then indicate that an individual is better suited to another position on the field.

Who then “gets” to be a Referee? This question directly impacted some of the crew scenarios considered and, given that there are a limited number of individuals needed at this position regardless of whether or not a crew system is even utilized, some mechanism is required to make this determination. The Chapter has used its own methods to make this determination in the past. The Crew Committee does not recommend a specific methodology for selecting Referees as it is not critical to the final solution presented. The Committee does recommend that the Board ensure this process is well defined and clearly communicated to the Chapter.

2. How many crews are needed? Obviously every individual game during a season is worked by some sort of “crew”, whether previously formed by formal process or formed through a weekly assignments process just for the duration of that particular contest. So the Chapter needs exactly the same number of crews each week as it has games. Actually, the Committee felt that the question behind this question focused more towards the need for a qualified group of officials to be available in the “Pool”, as there are always situations during the season which necessitate substitution (illness, injury, family emergency, job requirements, etc). If every official is already in a “crew”, then there would be no way to fill this ongoing need.

The solution to this problem is dynamic, as the needs of the Chapter will change from year to year based on the number of games it has to assign. But it must be defined. Several methods were evaluated in addressing Pool strength, including a mandatory “rest” period for individual officials requiring every Chapter member to participate as a Pool official from time to time. The final consensus of the Committee found that this requirement could too heavily impair the core value of “standard of excellence”, and might also have negative impact on the retention of more experienced officials in certain situations. The answer in the final proposal is formulated based on the number of games for any given season (or a subset of those games), which builds a desired flexibility in determining the number of crews allowed. The net result is that the number of formal crews will change from year to year based on the needs of the Chapter.

One potential outcome discussed by the Committee involved a scenario in which the limitation on number of crews resulted in those crews receiving a number of regular season varsity game assignments that was not in balance with the number of assignments being worked by Pool officials. While there are proficiency factors that will certainly impact the overall balance of assignments, it is not the intent of the Committee that the proposed solution should lead to a scenario where crews work an excessive number of assignments in comparison to those officials in the Pool. It is recommended that the assignments process be monitored to prevent it from working in a manner contrary to the best interests of the Chapter as a whole.

3. How long do crews remain together? One of the recognized benefits of working in a crew system is that members develop a cohesiveness which likely equates to a better overall “product” on the field. This being the case, some consideration should be given for continuity of crews from season to season. The drawback to this allowance is that less experienced officials can get “locked out” of the crew system if too many crews are allowed to remain together for long periods of time. Also, individuals could possibly lose incentive to pursue personal improvement from year to year once they’ve settled into a crew with which they are overly familiar. Other drawbacks might include a “relaxed” approach to mechanics, a tendency to compensate for a crew member’s lack of competence in a certain area, or possibly even to cover for injury. In conclusion it is the recommendation of the Crew Committee that limitations be placed on allowances for continuity of crews. These limitations should be only restrictive enough to ensure that the Chapter’s “product” remains dynamic and improving.

4. How are position eligibilities to be determined? The assignment of any individual to a certain primary (or secondary) position involves two questions. What position(s) does the individual desire to work, and what position(s) is the individual best qualified to work. Officiating being a largely “voluntary” activity, individuals should be allowed flexibility in making their own decisions regarding which position(s) they will work on the field. Individuals, however, should realize that selecting a position for which they are not best qualified will likely reduce their ability to excel on the field, which would in turn impact the level of games to which they (or their crews) are assigned. It is recommended that individuals seek advice from their peers, from more experienced officials and from the SOO in order to determine his or her “best” position(s) on the field. The Committee recommends the final decision be left to the individual, and be otherwise required to conform to Austin Chapter General Policies.

5. How will crews or pool officials be evaluated? A healthy and effective evaluation process is critical to the ongoing success of the Chapter. Officials need and deserve to know how they stack up against other officials and what steps they can take to make personal improvements. Without a workable evaluation process, any crew system will be reduced in its effectiveness at promoting excellence within the Chapter. It is strongly recommended that the Board continue its support of the position of Supervisor of Officials, and that the Supervisor be given both the responsibility and the authority to continue to develop and refine the Chapter’s evaluation processes as needed.

In the final solution, it is anticipated that evaluation data will be utilized during the crew formation process. Thus, the fair and accurate collection and presentation of evaluation data will play a vital part in maintaining the overall integrity of the crew formation process. It is therefore recommended that this information be responsibly presented during the crew formation process. Discussion by the Committee included scenarios where steps were taken to

minimize the possibility of situations involving evaluation data that could be seen to be self serving on the part of the evaluator. Other discussions involved enhancements to include a restriction against working officials having any responsibility to evaluate other officials who work at their same primary position on the field. In the final solution presented, there are no specific directives toward the gathering or use of evaluation data as this was concluded to fall outside of the scope of the Committee's responsibilities.

6. How will assignments be made? The assignments process falls outside of the Crew Committee's charge, including playoff assignments. It is, of course, a critical element to the successful workings of the Chapter and thought was given as to how each crew scenario considered would impact the assignments process. In all cases, it was assumed that assignments would continue to be made in a process similar to the method currently in place. In any scenario, it appears vital that the Executive Secretary be given adequate flexibility in managing the ongoing dynamics present during a season. The Committee recommends the Chapter maintain a written, well-defined process by which games are generally assigned, and that the process be clearly communicated (made available) to the Chapter on a regular basis.

7. How are "scratches" handled? Individual officials who prefer not to work for a certain school or coach are currently allowed to indicate such preference. In a "crew" scenario, a crew would necessarily be prevented from working for any school and/or coach "scratched" by any one of its members. Individuals who work on crews should be aware that their personal preferences in this regard will carry forward to their crew.

Coach scratches are allowed by the Chapter when a coach requests in writing that a certain individual official not work his games (existing policy limits this to no more than three). During this most recent season's pilot, a coach who scratched an individual official also scratched any crew of which that individual was a member. The continuation of this practice is structured in the proposed solution.

An individual official who chooses to "scratch" another individual official is a separate issue that presented itself uniquely in different crew formation scenarios considered. It is an unfortunate but present fact that certain individuals who might otherwise be fully competent field officials may have irreconcilable differences with one or more fellow officials. It is hoped that individuals who are thought to be qualified adjudicators of fair play to students in school-sponsored sports would first themselves be able to implement this quality into their own lives and actively work to resolve differences for the benefit of all involved. Judgments aside, it is apparent that a workable solution must be provided for this scenario. However, care must be taken to prevent a "scratch" privilege from becoming a tool with which to influence a preferential outcome on behalf of any individual. The privilege would then necessarily need to be limited in scope.

The final solution does address this practice as it has a direct bearing on the scenario proposed. The solution does not address any limitation on individual officials who “scratch” a school or coach. This type of scratch falls more clearly into the area of game assignments, and as a result falls outside the scope of the Crew Committee. School/coach “scratches” can be a valuable tool in avoiding the placement of individual officials into situations where an appearance of impropriety might be construed. Examples of such situations are an official who has an off field relationship with a particular coach, or an official who has a child or spouse in a particular school or district. The Committee recommends the Board of Directors and/or the Executive Secretary carefully monitor the use of school/coach “scratches” to avoid their possible misuse in a way intended to simply influence the assignments process away from less “desirable” games for any individual or crew.

8. What about sub-varsity crews? Crews as they relate to sub-varsity assignments have historically been allowed at the discretion of the Assistant Secretary overseeing those assignments. It appears to some that this may have been intentionally kept to a minimum, or perhaps that the opportunity may not have been well communicated to the Chapter. In any case, it is recommended that freely-formed crews be allowed to work together during sub-varsity assignments, and that the appropriate Assistant Secretary be given either direct guidance or direct control over the scope of their use for his or her assignments. It is recommended that guidelines for the use of sub-varsity crews be made available to all Chapter members. A higher utilization of sub-varsity “crews” could lead to a reduction in scheduling and attendance issues, and could possibly be an additional tool in developing less experienced officials by placing them with more experienced “mentors” during sub-varsity contests. The Committee’s final solution only addresses crews as they relate to varsity contests.

9. Do crews from last season get a chance to stay together? Due largely to the dynamics surrounding the formation of crews last season, it is apparent that a majority of Chapter members oppose any continuity of crews from the pilot season of 2009. Given that an entirely new crew scenario is being proposed it is recommended that all Chapter members be given the opportunity to begin the new process on equal footing, and that continuity of any crew from the 2009 season be disallowed.

The solution proposed could result in some members of 2009 pilot crews being assigned together in 2010 crews. To maintain the integrity of the process, the Committee strongly recommends that no more than three individuals from a 2009 pilot season crew be assigned to the same 2010 crew.