



50,000 ASSIGNMENTS

Can you imagine keeping track of that many assignments in a year? It's a reality for two groups in Colorado.

BY TIM SLOAN

How long does it take to schedule and assign all the officials for a 396-game basketball tournament? Days, right? Maybe a week or two? Don't even try, you might suggest.

The answer doesn't use algebra, it uses ArbiterSports, and Micah Pauldino says it takes him about 45 minutes.

Pauldino handles assigning for the Gold Crown Foundation in the Denver area and would be regarded by most as a "super user" of the assigning tool that is becoming a staple across the nation.

In the past year, he has covered some 28,000 games, using about 51,000 assignments.

"ArbiterSports has turned a 40-hour week into an eight-hour week for me," Pauldino says. He uses the rest of his time to evaluate officials and deliver training and development programs for them.

Jerry Letofsky heads up Aurora Sports Officials, Inc. (ASO), another Denver area group. ASO assigns a different level than Pauldino — high school games — but the massive number of assignments is on a similar scale.

So how do those mega-assigners operate and have success? It starts with having the games to assign.

In some parts of Colorado, there are no middle school sports. That is true in Jefferson County, in the western part of greater Denver. The Gold Crown Foundation is a non-profit that was organized about 25 years ago to provide competition for that pre-high school demographic.

Today, Gold Crown has a 400-team winter basketball league and also arranges camps and tournaments throughout the year. It covers volleyball, golf and lacrosse,

among other activities, too. So, when Pauldino is asked to assign officials to a 396-game tourney, how does he do it and keep all his marbles?

"I couldn't do it without self-assign," Pauldino says. Self-assignment is a feature that allows officials to electronically sign up for available assignments on a first-come basis. That isn't like dumping a bucket of corn in the henhouse and then standing back, though; what a lot of people don't understand is that the process is well controlled to produce quality assignments.

Pauldino has a stable of about 500 officials, which he rates as 100-, 200- or 300-level in terms of increasing levels of ability, based on his own evaluations and input from others. He then looks at the level of the competition and decides whether his two-person crews can meet the challenge with relatively green 300-level officials or some mix-and-match of his best 100-level and up-and-coming 200-level people.

He can assign the required level of referee and umpire to each game and then instructs the self-assign function to only allow officials of the required level (or better) to be connected with a game. So, if a 200-level official decides she wants to work some games in the tournament, she'll log on to ArbiterSports and see only the games for which she's qualified; then she can accept the assignments that are available ... within limits.

We all know of the "Charlies" who would rather work many Saturday games at \$20 each than a varsity game because they can make more and get free pizza for lunch. Pauldino can prevent that because the self-assign tool can limit the number of games an official can take in a day, at a location, in an event or other options.

He allows his officials no more than five a day, usually.

The ArbiterSports engine then engages the requirements of the assigner with the attributes of the officials and Pauldino uses its email

function to notify officials that games are available. Then they have at it.

His tournament can be filled up with people who are up to the job, in no time.

"If games aren't filled up, then we get on the phone," says Pauldino. The 10 full-time staffers at Gold Crown help him, as necessary, with the workload; he's not in it by himself.

Officials familiar with the click-click process of using online assigning will be excused if they're wondering how long it must take to

on approach to who gets what games.

"You do have to use the self-assign feature to just physically get everything done because of the volume," Letofsky says. "At the higher levels though, you have to hand pick the officials in order that collectively we're spreading the games out; we're not having the officials seeing the same place too many times or the same partner, staying close to home."

He estimates that about 25 percent of his assignments are manually assigned, referring to the



"program" 396 games, but Pauldino says it's simple. He composes a spreadsheet with all the games on it, formatted in a way the software understands and, with strategic cut, copy, paste and fill down, has his requirements laid out quickly. The matrix is uploaded and he's away to the races: 45 minutes.

Virtually all of his assignments are self-assigned and it works well in his environment where the primary function is getting younger kids into games and making sure those games are covered with suitable officials.

Pauldino's officials don't have to be state-certified to work at that level, but he makes a point of making sure they're developed — for everyone's good, but more on that later.

Letofsky has a different challenge; he assigns a lot of high school officials in 13 different sports, so there's greater need for a hands-

more familiar method of the assigner pondering each assignment, selecting assignees from a list of available officials based on all the traditional blocks, and offering the assignment to the ones selected. It's more work but he and his wife maintain the business and use a team of two full-time assigners, working out of a storefront, complemented by about 30 part-time assigners to manage the workload.

Letofsky was a computer science major in college. Officiating was in the family and he and a friend saw an opportunity to get into assigning, using some of the new tools he'd been exposed to in school. He began with the telephone, branched into using Lotus (a one-time rival of Excel), then databases and fax to distribute assignments. He even had a pager system at one point. All of those tools were exploited to let

him make assignments, keep clients abreast of his activities and manage payments — the whole nine yards. His friend died some years ago but word of mouth, based on his ability to make sure games were adequately covered, led to him having around 100 clients requiring his services to cover their assignments. Even with the leg up he possessed through his own technical expertise and experience, it was becoming a losing battle, keeping up with the workload as the business grew.

assignments still produces the odd blank. At the end of the day, it all gets done and requires about 400 man-hours per week.

ASO doesn't charge officials an assigning fee and Letofsky says he makes various assignments to about 4,000 of the state's 10,000 registered officials. A subset of that 4,000 also work for Pauldino.

Letofsky is an entrepreneur who runs a business software company and has worked in real estate. Pauldino has his assigning

it can be a challenge scaring up nine qualified people to work a gymnastics meet. Letofsky's solution is to actively cross-train officials from one sport to another and he fervently believes that if a person has the knack for officiating, he or she can be taught the rules to another sport.

That's one of the things Robinson likes about the mega-assigners — Letofsky and Pauldino contribute to growing the ranks of officials CHSAA needs.

Since Letofsky assigns high school officials who are members of officials associations, he doesn't put a great deal of effort into training. Pauldino, meanwhile, sees training and development as Gold Crown's lifeblood.

Pauldino believes his commitment to making better officials of his stable goes hand-in-hand with the foundation's mission of fostering personal development by providing sports to kids. He gets out to watch as many of his officials work as he can and the advantage is, through tournaments, that's often a fish-in-a-barrel kind of enterprise. He has inroads with other organizations, like the Denver Nuggets, who help cover the cost of running officiating camps, supplying the venues and providing compelling, knowledgeable trainers.

Pauldino's vision is to eventually develop a formal certification for officials below the high school level that mirrors CHSAA.

Robinson says he has no problem with that notion because it would be in good hands and the synergy would help build his enterprise.

"If you have standards at a lower level of officiating," says Robinson, "that's a pathway for those officials to later join us."

Pauldino says he makes a point of working with officials who are intimidated and/or baffled by getting their assignments online and Letofsky says ASO actually does the pointing and clicking for a small group of individuals who will get to Tech next Thursday night no other way.

"ArbiterSports has turned a 40-hour week into an eight-hour week for me. I couldn't do it without self-assigning."

– Micah Pauldino



That is when Tom Robinson came to the rescue. Robinson is the assistant commissioner in charge of officials for the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA). In the past decade, CHSAA started using ArbiterSports to assign its playoff assignments. Robinson, who has a good relationship with both men, was aware of the gridlock facing Letofsky and suggested he switch to using ArbiterSports. It didn't take Letofsky long to recognize a prize racehorse when he saw one, and ASO went cold turkey to ArbiterSports a few years ago.

On a busy day, ASO will have 200-300 assignments to cover and Letofsky's full-timers manage the inevitable intrigue that comes with the same things that don't bother the postman: rain, sleet, snow and dead of night. His assigning area is geographically much bigger than Pauldino's, too, and his strategy is to distribute assignments first to areas that are tougher to cover, like the mountain areas. Then he horse trades liberally as his best combination of manual- and self-

business as his primary concern and used to work in commercial auto insurance. He's in his early 30s and has seen postseason action as a NCAA Division II basketball official. Letofsky works high school football and baseball, so they're way more than just computer experts, running a favorite toy. They know officiating.

Letofsky says that, at one time, he viewed assigning as an opportunity to be a broker of sorts but he got considerable pushback from the schools and realized that the only way he was going to grow was organically; by forming good relationships with his clients and continually demonstrating that he's there to help.

Letofsky's big challenge is in attracting and maintaining an able stable of officials across all his sports.

Obviously, one way of doing that is to make sure he always has assignments available, but there's more to it than that.

The bigger sports have no shortage of willing bodies, while the smaller ones are more problematic;

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Both the ASO and Gold Crown ArbiterSports sites are elaborately developed, with various helpings of training, videos, announcements and so forth. The loop is closed for both of them with the use of RefPay (soon to be ArbiterPay), the module that arranges for direct paying of officials, without the need of all the handling and vetting associated with cutting checks.

One wonders about the potential for monopolization of assignments; the possibility that one or two nefarious assigners could effectively lock in a group of officials to their sphere of influence. Fat chance, really: Officials will inevitably go where they can work the best games and that won't be affected by a mega-assigner. For that matter, Letofsky muses that, in the near future, someone bigger than him will buy him out.

"Over the next five to 10 years, I expect to be gobbled up by somebody bigger," says Letofsky. "Maybe there's a corporation that goes around and buys up companies and consolidates even more."

Letofsky's point is there is no trade secret or patent at the root of his business. Like so many acquisitions companies make these days, what he really offers is a client list, some expertise and knowledge of the local market. Now that he's demonstrated online assigning will work at a 50,000-assignment level, he's positioned for someone else to make him a piece of a larger puzzle.

It happened to Pauldino. Until last year, he was the proprietor of Mile High Officials, performing the same service he now does, in partnership with his wife. One of his biggest clients was the Gold Crown Foundation and they made an offer he couldn't refuse. Small world ...

Let's face it, there are "amateur" officials today who make their avocation a very lucrative full-time job. They criss-cross the country, working a schedule that, less than a generation ago, would have been beyond the possibility of arranging. There would have been too many assigners, serving too large a domain to put together a meaningful

schedule within the relatively short assigning window, using the tools available.

Now, with an enterprise like ArbiterSports, it's a snap and the practical limit becomes endurance and the number of pairs of clean knickers someone can stuff in their suitcase. The opportunity trickles down to high school sports and even the people at Pauldino's level.

"At the higher levels though, you have to hand pick the officials in order that collectively we're spreading the games out; we're not having the officials seeing the same place too many times or the same partner, staying close to home."

- Jerry Letofsky

Pauldino and Letofsky's experience is that assigning becomes self limiting, based on their ability to find qualified officials and develop a network of evaluators to help them maintain their brands. There's money in large scale assigning or else they wouldn't be doing it. Growth comes at the challenge of being able to roll up their sleeves and develop the human relationships that underlie officiating and sport, in general.

Yes, 50,000-plus assignments in a year are possible. It's still the heart, soul and love of officiating that makes it happen.

Tim Sloan, Davenport, Iowa is a high school football, basketball and volleyball official, and former college football and soccer official. □