

Sports

It ain't easy

ACC referees make the best of a difficult task

By KATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

The men in the striped uniforms — they're tough, they're experienced and they don't fool around. They've had years of training for their job and only the best get to the top. The best of the basketball referees, that is.

Taunts and jeers from angry fans don't discourage refs from doing their job. In fact, they seem not to notice the insults hurled their way from loud and obnoxious people.

"Man, you're a Cyclops and you're blind in one eye," yells one irate basketball fan. The insult rolls off the ACC basketball referee like water off a duck's back.

Two Atlantic Coast Conference referees reflected on the flak from fans that seems to come with the courts.

"Negative comments don't bother me. I don't take things personally," says ACC referee Rusty Herring, who refereed most recently in the UNLV-Indiana NCAA tournament game. "It doesn't matter who's in the striped jersey."

The pressure from fans doesn't get to ACC official Joe Forte, either. Forte says he feels no outside pressure when refereeing a game, even a national championship.

"It's something within, so far as wanting to be as good as I possibly can," Forte says. "I know exactly what my limitations and capabilities are and I am extremely disappointed if I don't live up to them. For us not to work as hard as the coaches and players, coming up short isn't right."

It's a privilege to be an ACC referee. With only 33 referees from Syracuse to Miami, according to Herring, ACC refereeing is a goal for many high school and small college league refs.

Herring, an insurance salesman who lives in Durham, played three sports in high school, but always harbored a love for basketball. When he was first married, Herring refereed basketball on the side for a little extra money.

Herring progressed through high school officiating to the freshman program at UNC, which gives young refs exposure at summer camps. There, referees are recruited by the ACC almost as frequently as the high school star athletes they officiate.

"It's a matter of experience, getting the right people to see you and to trust your ability," says Herring, a nine-year ACC veteran.

Forte, who manages a frozen food department for a company that sells to military commissaries, agreed with Herring's assessment that being an ACC official is something of an honor.

Forte has refereed six ACC tournaments, four Final Four games and two national championships — including this year's Syracuse-Indiana game. Forte calls being picked to officiate a championship game "a tremendous honor."

Forte says he enjoys being part of an athletic challenge and performing on the high level to which the basketball players aspire.

"I just really enjoy the game of basketball," Forte says. "It's very challenging, being able to go into a facility and be a part of such a great league . . . and being able to perform at the level they perform. I enjoy being part of the challenge."

Staying in shape is part of staying in the game of refereeing. A referee must be in good physical condition to keep up with superior college athletes.

Herring goes to pre-season referee camps to keep in shape, while Forte runs, jumps rope and swims for his pre-season shape-up. He also watches his weight all year round.

Herring says he likes the recent addition of a three-man system of officiating basketball games. Having three referees allows better court coverage and helps to keep the referees fresher. He says the system allows officials to be more into the game at the end, both mentally and physically.

ACC referees officiate about 40 games per season and they usually don't miss their regular jobs. The only disadvantage of officiating an ACC game, according to Herring, is not getting to enjoy the game as much as the spectators do, because of having to concentrate on the action.

Forte refereed while Michael Jordan performed in the ACC and called Jordan a fascinating player.

"It's fun to ref for Jordan, (Joe) Wolf, Tommy Amaker and Johnny Dawkins," he says. "It helps officials in the ACC because the players are so good — it makes you rise to the occasion or you will fall flat on your face."

Referees never stop learning or practicing their craft. Forte says that a referee must learn about officiating in order to do it better.

"You have to work at it. You have to study the tapes and be open to criticism that is helpful," Forte says. "You have to have the attitude that you want to learn from every experience."

If you're not willing to be aware of your weaknesses as an official, others will do it for you. At every game, checkers from the ACC office sit in the stands and take notes on the referee's performance. These notes are then sent to the referee or to league supervisor Fred Barakat for evaluation of the ref's performance.

Although an official's job also leaves him open to the jeering evaluation of fans bent on victory, Herring doesn't plan to let anything keep him off the court.

He says officiating will be in his future as long as he continues to enjoy it and his legs hold up.



Dean Smith and ACC referee Joe Forte (right) wait out a power failure in Carmichael Auditorium in 1982

Sarge part of Boshamer milieu, making the ballpark come alive

By LARRY NEEDLE
Special to the DTH

"Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

If a song were ever meant for someone, this baseball anthem was meant for Bob "Sarge" Keefer, public address announcer at North Carolina's home baseball games. The 71-year-old fan has a lifetime full of sports memories, but that's not enough for Keefer. He still loves going to the ball game, and doesn't care if he never gets back.

"I love sports. It's practically my whole life," Keefer said. "I like to be close to the thing, not just up in the stands. This way, you're a part of the show."

And it's quite a show he puts on for the crowd at Boshamer Stadium. During the seventh-inning stretch, Keefer really takes center stage. Since he began announcing UNC games in 1979, he has led the fans in "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," a tradition which has become known as Sing Along with Sarge.

"I couldn't believe that when seventh inning came they didn't sing it," he said. "I just don't feel it's a ball game unless you sing."

Keefer's announcing career began on a softball field in a Cleveland, Ohio, suburb almost 50 years ago. Since then, he's announced nearly every sport imaginable, while working 44 years for General Electric and serving four years in the Army.

Sporting glasses and a gray, flat-top haircut, he told of his years as P.A. announcer for the Cleveland Indians in the 1960's and 70's. "It was the opening game against Milwaukee, and Don Money hits a grand slam for them in the ninth inning," said Keefer, who worked from a fenced-in table adjacent to the visitors' dugout. "The fans are booing like mad as he's on his way back to the dugout, when all of a sudden something hits me in the temple. I look down and there's a paring knife."

Announcing from field level also had its advantages for Keefer, who

announced the 1963 All-Star Game in Cleveland. "I got to know and talk with the players a lot, and got a good rapport with them," he said.

Like all public address announcers, Keefer has had his share of bloopers over the years. "One time the umpires asked me to make an announcement and I said, 'Will the fans in the front row please remove their clothing.' What I meant was that they should take their coats off the railing, but somehow it came out wrong."

After living in Cleveland his entire life, Keefer tired of the miserable weather and moved with his wife of 44 years to Chapel Hill in 1978. Basketball, his real love (he announced Cleveland Cavaliers' games for six years), was one of the main reasons he ended up in North Carolina.

"When I was in Cleveland I didn't know anybody in Chapel Hill," he said. "But I would watch UNC basketball on TV and say, 'Boy, this team is well-coached, they're well-behaved. They just play basketball and do their thing.'"

Upon arriving in Chapel Hill, Keefer served as checker at the Ehringhaus Training Table, where he was responsible for matching names and faces. No problem. Before long, Sarge knew everybody and everybody knew Sarge.

He gained his nickname shortly after beginning his new job. The

previous checker was called "Captain," so when Keefer, an ex-Army sergeant, joined the staff, he was tagged with the moniker immediately.

Keefer and the athletes hit it off from the start. "The part I liked about that job was the kids," he said. "I used to kid them back and forth. We exchanged jokes and things. I got along with most of them. But the ones that wouldn't obey, of course they didn't like me and I didn't like them."

Two years ago, Keefer, a self-proclaimed workaholic, took on added duties as a courier for the UNC Athletic Department. Besides baseball, he also announces women's soccer, gymnastics, field hockey and volleyball games for the Tar Heels.

The quiet retiring life wouldn't be right for the grandfather of five. "I've seen people retire at 65 and not know what to do with themselves," he said. "Their health starts to fail and they just start feeling sorry for themselves."

Sarge has had his own health problems. He recently suffered a near heart attack and is a victim of chronic arthritis, but doesn't have any time to feel sorry for himself. He's too busy, announcing games, telling stories, enjoying life.

And if you're around some nice spring afternoon, buy yourself some peanuts and Cracker Jacks and go hear Sarge out at the old ball game.

Sports info looking for help

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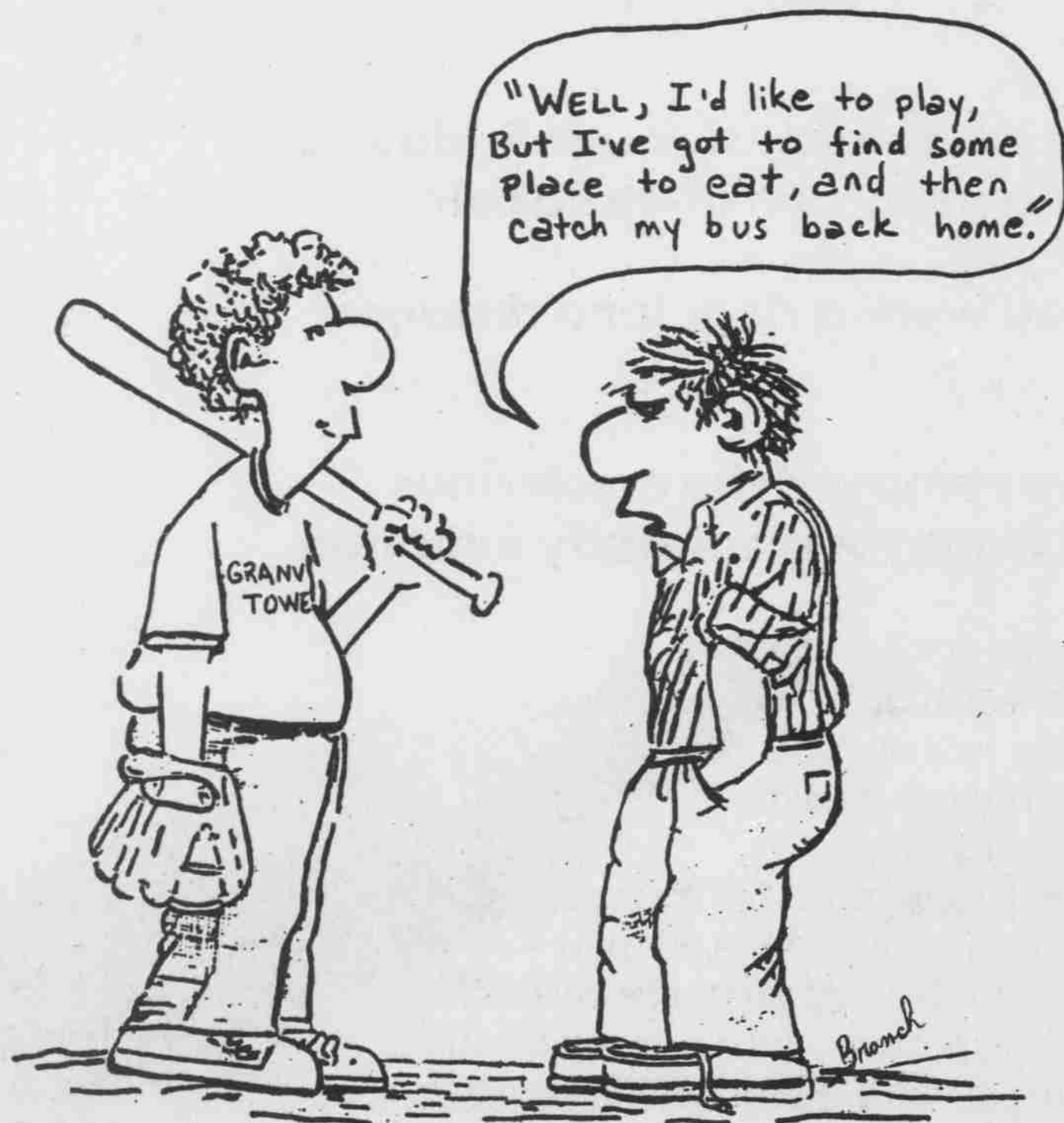
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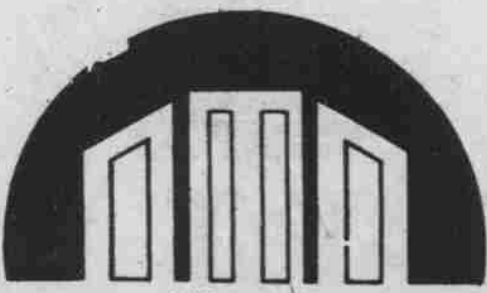
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