

Low pay, abuse from fans, it's a dream job for these officials

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LAKELAND

It's crunch time at the Class 7A boys' basketball semifinals and the game is close.

Too close.

There's a state-championship trophy waiting for Saturday's winner — but first, their favorite sons must make it past Friday. The fans on both sides fear the worst, and they already know who to blame.

"Hey, watch that three seconds!"

"He's holding on every play. Get his hands off of him!"

"That ref is looking right at it, and he's not calling anything!"

Somewhere between Dr. Naismith and David Stern, the greatest basketball minds have apparently failed to identify the ideal location for the three people who officiate a high school game. It's the seventh row of the bleachers at The Lakeland Center.

Willie Dixon, Glen Harter and Anthony Whitfield try to stay apace as 10 teen-agers from Oviedo and Orlando Oak Ridge do the job of one personal trainer. They deftly remain in the background throughout Oak Ridge's thrilling 62-61 victory, but their periodic

whistles always cue the courtside critics.

"There's two teams out there, ref!"

"Do your job!"

"You're horrible!"

Believe it or not, this is an honor for our three pinstriped piñatas.

North Port's girls, along with boys' teams from Riverview, Palmetto and Sarasota Christian, fell one game shy of reaching this season's FHSAA Florida Finals. But a dozen area basketball officials from the Gulf Coast (Sarasota-Bradenton) — including Dixon, Harter and Whitfield — and Coral Coast (Charlotte County) associations were chosen to represent the area during the past two weeks.

"That's why you start back in June, going to different camps and clinics to get better," Dixon said. "Every year, I want to be in Lakeland, because that's the ultimate reward for an official."

Tricia Carroll, Charlie Boyle and Rich Simpson know the feeling, with 21 selections between them. They took another turn two nights earlier in Fort Lauderdale Pine Crest's 64-51 victory against Tampa Berkeley Prep, a Class 4A semifinal that abruptly veered after Berkeley had built a 41-24 lead. The Buccaneers were whistled for 20 fouls in the second half.

"C'mon, you're a joke!"

"You're missing a good game!"

"How could you make that call? You're behind the play!"

These partisans, of course, don't know or care that Boyle's grown son, Tanner, is amongst them.

"I'm 61 years old. Every time I ref any game, it might be my last," Charlie Boyle said after calling his sixth Finals game. "I've had two knee operations in the past 14 months. My wheels could fall off at any time. To get back up here this year was super special, probably the last time I'll see Lakeland. And my son came to watch me tonight. That was neat."

Carroll, only 28 but already working in Lakeland for the eighth time, was the only female crew chief chosen for the boys' tournament. Julie Seglem headed the Coral Coast crew at the girls' tourney a week earlier, giving Charlotte two of the four female crew chiefs and 12 women chosen among 144 officials (48 games).

"To me it was another game. It's great to be here, but it was another day in the office," Carroll said.

Dixon's crew, coming off a 77-76 game in the regional finals, got another potential buzzer-beater.

Oviedo missed a last-second shot, but Dixon noticed Ed Kershner — the state's all-time winningest coach — signaling for a timeout as time expired. Dixon quelled Oak Ridge's celebration and put six-tenths of a second back on the clock. Oviedo missed again.

"I don't know if we're nervous (in last-second situations), but you're definitely focused more," Whitfield said. "If you make that last call, you want to make sure it's the right call, because it could determine the outcome. You really want to make sure you don't miss anything."

All for \$65, plus a per-diem meal allowance and some gas money.

"Do the math," Boyle said. "I could go to the rec center on a Saturday morning and do six games and make a hundred bucks. Here, I left

work at 1:30 and by the time we're done, we'll have 65 bucks for 11 hours.

"It ain't about the money."

Shannell Young, the FHSAA's director of athletics, agrees. It's her responsibility to coordinate the playoff assignments after each local group nominates an "A" and "B" crew.

"When you're working here, you're the cream of the crop," she said. "You can say, 'I was chosen out of 3,000 officials in the state of Florida.' But we want you to officiate this game just as you would officiate any Friday night basketball game."

Carroll admits she worries more about "getting the pre-game things right. The state wants you to do so many things, stuff like uniforms. I think we worry about that more."

Her crew was instructed to tell Berkeley sophomore star Justin Gray to adjust his compressor shorts. On a previous Lakeland visit, Carroll was questioned on the configuration of her pre-game captains' huddle.

"The game itself is the easy part," Young said.

But Carroll, Boyle and Simpson all are crew chiefs during the regular season, so they assemble as a team for only a few games before the playoffs begin. Then the real fun begins for Carroll. She gets to watch.

"Rich and Charlie are always nagging at each other like an old married couple," she said. "It's so funny to watch those two, but no one ever takes it personal."

Added Boyle: "No one here gets mad. We've been through this enough to know that we're all pulling for each other."

"This is the worst game ever!"

"It's not fair to do this to these boys!"

"It's eight against five!"

So you thought it had stopped?

"You'll always hear, 'Call it both ways,' no matter what," Harter said. "You'll always hear stuff like, 'You missed that.'"

"But a lot of people who come to basketball games don't know basketball. They know that the ball's supposed to go in the hoop, but there are a lot of things happening internally in the game that people don't understand."

So the officials focus instead on those who sent them to Lakeland. For 65 bucks.

"First of all, you've got to be selected by your peers," Dixon said. "Our peers wanted us to represent them. Then we got selected by the state."

"For me, there's no greater thrill."