

Even at 75, Sussman is still having a ball

SARASOTA

The wisecracker in the stands who called him "grandpa" really needed a few lessons on effective referee baiting.

On originality alone, the woman at Riverview High with the accompanying props took the gold. How could Ken Sussman not have laughed at her verbal full-court press?

"You need my glasses, you need my glasses."

On the inside, perhaps Sussman did launch a guffaw or two. Outwardly, he responded as any former ABA and NBA referee might have under similar circumstances.

Sussman snatched the woman's glasses and pocketed them. See? Eventually, she could.

"I gave them back to her after



DOUG FERNANDES
COMMENT

the game."

Ah, yes, the game. Basketball. In arenas big and small, nationally and internationally, Ken Sussman's life has revolved around the game of 10 players, two rims and one final say.

His. Still, even if the venues these days aren't quite as impressive, the talent not quite as robust. The calls remain the same, and players in the Sarasota Y's 30-and-over league know better than to debate Sussman when he makes one.

"I don't have any problems," he said. "They all know me. I don't

See FERNANDES on 3C



Ken Sussman referees a basketball game at the YMCA on Wednesday. Sussman has refereed for more than 50 years, calling games on many levels, including pro basketball. STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

Still having a ball at 75

FERNANDES from 1C
get any crap.”

Sussman doesn't have any problems — nary a sore back or bum knee. Woes one might expect from someone whose career treks up and down the court would have tripped an odometer.

So, why does this 75-year-old continue to blow the whistle on men young enough to call him dad?

How about because he still can?

“Two years ago, I did the state championships,” he said. “I figured that was some kind of (age) record.

“I told my wife, ‘Some night, if I have a game and I come to you and say I don't want to do this game, then I'll quit.’”

Good luck with that one.

“This is a very big deal for him,” said Nancy, his wife of 15 years. “He loves it.”

Ken's refereed at the Y for about 10 years. When the high-school season starts, he'll lace 'em up for those games as well.

He's been overseeing prep action since about 1980, or a few years after the end of a career he absolutely, positively never saw coming.

Sure, he officiated up in Indianapolis, first at a local community center, then graduating to college contests held prior to ABA Indiana Pacers games at the old Fairgrounds Coliseum.

But it was merely an avocation. Ken worked at the local General Motors

plant. Then the night that changed everything.

ABA officials came to scout Sussman's partner at one of these preliminary games. The guy, in Ken's words, “stunk it up.”

Sussman did not. The league hired him instead. At first, the job at GM allowed him to work only weekend games.

After several months, Ken quit to referee full-time, doing so for four years, until a former head coach with a personal vendetta became the league's supervisor of officials.

His demise was a slam-dunk. Sussman was fired.

After a brief stint in a European league with 24-hour train rides and bad food, Sussman was hired by the NBA, a gig that lasted until he tired of one-year contracts and accepted another job back in Indianapolis.

Stories? You bet. Sussman once ejected Chicago's Jerry Sloan as he sat on the Bulls' bench. During a Laker-Bulls game in Los Angeles, Chicago's Norm Van Lier waddled up a piece of gum and fired it at him.

That night, Sussman took a red-eye home, and who do you think occupied the seat next to him? Gumby and grumpy Van Lier.

A lot of basketball is about timing. So, too, Ken's career.

“I just happened to be at the right place at the right time.”

With the right officiating partner. Sussman's stinky one.