

AO-K

Group finds recruiting success with Associate Officials program

BY DOUG DAVENPORT



For the past 18 years, the Eastern Massachusetts Lacrosse Officials Association (EMLOA) has been developing and supporting a comprehensive training program for boys' youth lacrosse officials.

Those efforts — called the Associate Officials (AO) program — have been paying off.

In 2023, there were 15 different classes covering Eastern Massachusetts, with more than 300 participants.

The EMLOA took over the endeavor from the Massachusetts Bay Lacrosse League and has refined the training program into a combination of in-person classes, online testing and mentoring to prepare high school-age players to officiate local youth leagues, often with fully certified high school officials working side by side.

The program has been developed by the EMLOA's president, Darrell Benson, with regional assistance from Jon Izzo, Randy Wong and Rick Catalano.

"We started with a full day of training in a classroom setting and have since refined it into our current itinerary of a pre-test, a two-hour classroom session and a final rules test," Benson said. "From there, the first game on the field is with a high school official, which includes an initial evaluation, and we fine-tune from there."

The AOs need to be sponsored by the towns that have availed themselves of the program. There is a nominal fee for the training, which includes the class, online information, a rules handout and testing. Participants must purchase a striped shirt, hat, flags and a whistle, with some towns picking up the tab for these items.

Each town has a coordinator who works with the EMLOA assigner to schedule the AOs for games. Senior AOs, who are generally high school seniors with a year or two of experience, can officiate the youngest levels alone; otherwise the AO works games alongside a fully certified high school official.



The AO is generally placed on the side of the field opposite the benches to provide a little protection from the coaches.

The certified official may have to cover a little more ground than usual, but generally everyone is aware of the situation and perspective is maintained. It's an opportunity for certified officials to mentor the AO, giving them on-the-job training.

Massachusetts Bay Lacrosse Director Bob Thompson has been a huge advocate for the 12 years he has been involved.

"We are teaching the kids about the complexities of officiating and the importance of it," Thompson said. He got his two sons involved as AOs. "They have gained a new perspective, as both players and now officials."

Thompson is keenly aware of the need for more officials. "We hope the AO experience will be positive and that they continue on to be full officials in the future," Thompson said.

Bill Wallace, president of the Old Colony Lacrosse League, also praised the program.

"The AO program has been extremely successful in teaching the high school players how to referee and interact with the youth programs," Wallace said. "The adult referees are always extremely helpful in teaching the rules of the game and how to promote sportsmanship."

Benson said there are multiple benefits of the AO program.

"It saves the youth leagues money, as the AOs earn half the pay rate of the certified officials," he said. "We are able to educate the AOs on the rules and finer points of officiating, which they often take back to their high school teammates,

which benefits everyone. It has laid the groundwork for many to eventually become fully certified officials during and post college."

In one case, the program brought in an adult. An AO's father decided to officiate with his son, rather than just driving him to his games. The father, a local high school head football coach, got fully certified as an official and now works a full high school schedule yearly.

The program drew Jacob Banks into officiating. He's currently a junior playing lacrosse at UMass-Boston. He started as an AO for EMLOA and is now an Apprentice Official, eligible to officiate all subvarsity high school and youth games as a certified official.

"I got into officiating during high school and started off in my youth town lacrosse program," Banks said. "Playing lacrosse all my life, I have seen both sides of the lacrosse field as a player and now as an official."

Banks said he now has a greater appreciation for officials.

"As I play, I watch their technique and how they carry themselves throughout games," he said. "Officiating has created

Below, Darrell Benson, president of the Eastern Massachusetts Lacrosse Officials Association, leads a class for trainees in the Associate Officials (AO) program. At left, Mansfield (Mass.) High School sophomore and AO program participant Andrew Degorolamo oversees a faceoff.



a different kind of passion for me and how I look at the game of lacrosse. I look forward to continuing my officiating career after college and helping to continue to grow the sport of lacrosse."

Not every AO continues officiating while in college, but there's hope some will resume after graduation.

The AOs often introduce themselves to the officiating crews of their high school games, creating a unique camaraderie that helps break down any "us versus them" attitude between players and officials.

"It has given me a completely different perspective of the officials," said Mason Thompson, a freshman at King Philip High School in Wrentham, Mass. He is in his second year as an AO. He said he has been able to educate some of his teammates about the rules of lacrosse.

"I am learning more about refereeing all the time," Thompson said.

The AO program has helped support the development of many new officials, but it's an ongoing process to train and mentor the next generation in stripes.

"The task is never-ending," Benson said.

Doug Davenport, Medfield, Mass., is vice president of EMLOA for compliance and recruiting. He officiates high school basketball, football and lacrosse. □

