

Reps. Novak and Vruwink: Introduce bill aimed at harassment of sports officials

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State Rep. Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville) and State Rep. Don Vruwink (D-Milton) have introduced a bipartisan bill intended to protect sports officials from violent fans.

“Youth sports are the training ground for umpires and referees,” Vruwink said. “If sports officials are verbally abused or physically threatened when they are just starting out, they are likely to quit the job and never come back. As a long-time coach, referee, and umpire, I have seen a disturbing increase in unruly behavior fans. This bill is intended to send a message that there are consequences for bad behavior. A Class A misdemeanor is a harsh penalty and I hope no person’s conduct rises to that level. But this bill, if enacted, would give police an option if fan conduct does rise to that level.”

The bill defines “sports official” as a referee, umpire, linesman, timekeeper, inspector, judge, or person who performs similar functions, whether paid or unpaid, at a sporting event open to the public. The penalty is a fine of up to \$10,000 or up to nine months in prison or both.

“Our office was notified by the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, the National Association of Sports Officials, and the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference regarding this issue” said Novak. “There has been a growing number of

incidents in which referees and sports officials have been attacked by violent fans and coaches. Violence against referees is causing a growing shortage of referees – there are more referees and umpires over age 65 than under 30.”

The bill has 29 Assembly co-sponsors and nine Senate co-sponsors.

Currently, 33 states have laws that protect sports officials, including Illinois and Minnesota. Under this bill, actions that cause a sports referee harm or put them in fear of being harmed is classified as a Class A misdemeanor, as well as make it so that the offending individual, if found guilty, may have to engage in 40 hours of community service and/or receive anger management/abusive behavior counseling.