

IT supervisor earns stripes on football field

— by Michele Coffill

During the work week, Bob Holcomb is accustomed to receiving an occasional irate phone call from a professor or administrator, complaining about a glitch in their computer or asking him to magically retrieve their lost documents.

That part of Holcomb's duties as supervisor in the Information Technology department likely prepares him well for his fall weekend job as a college football referee — and the abuse from fans, players and coaches that sometimes goes with the zebra stripes.

For more than two decades, Holcomb has donned a uniform, tucked flags in his pocket and grabbed a whistle to run up and down the sidelines as an official at all levels of football, from elementary to high school to college. For the past five years, he has worked as an umpire for the Mid-American Conference, a Division I league that includes Central Michigan, Western Michigan, Eastern Michigan and Bowling Green State among its members.

"I just love football, and wanted to stay involved," said Holcomb, a former lineman for North Muskegon High School. He coached youth football in Muskegon, and then got involved in officiating to earn a little extra money. There were extended weeks that the games seemed to blend together.

"There used to be weekends that we would do four games: freshmen and junior varsity on Thursday, varsity on Friday, then college on Saturday," he said.

For collegiate games, an

officiating crew consists of seven people: referee, head linesman, line judge, field judge, back judge, side judge and umpire. Most high schools have crews of five. Holcomb has always been an umpire, which means he stays close to the line of scrimmage to watch the center and guards, and the opposing team's defensive line. It's usually the umpire who calls false starts. "It's really the best position; I love it. You're always in the game," he said.

After years of working area high school games, Holcomb said he wanted new challenges and attended several collegiate officiating clinics to (literally) earn his stripes. He started with the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association, a Division III conference with Hope, Calvin, Adrian and Alma colleges among its members. Holcomb proved his mettle through many seasons and earned a spot on the officiating crews for two NCAA Division III championship games, in 2002 and 2005. No area teams played either year. "It was Mount Union both times. They are always a powerhouse; the Grand Valley of Division III," he said.

Actually, the College Football Officials Association discouraged Holcomb from officiating Division II games because he works for Grand Valley and people might consider that a conflict of interest.

"I'm always striving to move up and I wanted to do Division I games," he said. He started as a floater for the MAC, but now typically works each weekend of the season with the same crew of officials,

while occasionally picking up some MIAA games.

To help him learn the ropes and who's who of Division I football, Holcomb has received great advice from a number of area former NFL and Big Ten officials like Carl Paganelli, Jim Augustyn and Tom Hoffman. He said their leadership and mentorship has led a number of aspiring officials to bigger and better things, including Paganelli's three sons who call games for the NFL.

Holcomb's routine on football weekends begins on Friday afternoons with a drive or flight to one of the MAC's Midwest campuses. He'll meet the other officials for a group dinner then — much like the competing teams — the crew watches game tape. "It's a DVD sent by the league of good calls or bad calls from previous games," he said.

After breakfast on Saturday,

the crew suits up in ties and sport coats to head to the stadium. They meet with coaches and athletic trainers from each team about two hours before kickoff. Then it's a light lunch before preparing themselves for the game.

Holcomb said the athleticism of elite college players took him by surprise during his first MAC game. "My first game was CMU and Western Kentucky. Those first two plays at the line of scrimmage, I really backed up, and quickly," he said. "It was 'flight or fight' for a few minutes.

"The speed and the skills those kids have are unreal," he said.

To keep up, Holcomb exercises four or five days a week. "We're on the field the entire time. The offense and defense get to rest on the bench," he said.

Holcomb said he has grown



photo courtesy of Jeff Harwell, Zips Sports Photography

Bob Holcomb watches the line of scrimmage during a game in October at the University of Akron.

to really dislike televised games due to the seemingly endless timeouts. "I always tell them, 'We're selling Ford trucks here boys, take your time,'" he said.

His love for the sport spills over to the living room and has caused some family strife. "It must drive my wife crazy. I'll watch games at home from the Big Ten Network, or ESPN Classic that are weeks old just to watch the refs. I watch football differently than most fans," he said. Bob's wife, Mary Ann Holcomb, is an administrative assistant for Grand Valley's Facilities Planning department.

He said the best officials are those who fans, coaches and players don't notice. While flags could be thrown at nearly every play, Holcomb said the best strategy follows that of a good poker player: know when to throw them, know when to hold 'em. "You don't want to get caught up in the enthusiasm of the game. You can't be as emotionally involved as the players or coaches," he said.

When the game is over, the crew files league reports and then watches a pared-down tape of the game they just called. Holcomb said, "You discuss the good calls and the bad calls, hoping you won't be highlighted on the 'bad call' tape distributed to other officials." For a game that kicks off at 1 p.m., Holcomb and the other officials will finally leave the stadium around 9 p.m.

"You have to have a passion to do this. My family has put up with me being gone almost every weekend during football season. I've missed a lot of things," he said. Holcomb's son attends Central Michigan,

and his daughter is a doctoral candidate at Wayne State.

Along with passion, officials apparently need a high pain tolerance. Holcomb once took a football in the face hard enough to make ESPN's "Not Top 10 Plays of the Week" and suffered a knee injury during a high school game.

What he enjoys most is the camaraderie among the officials. "These are seven guys who, on any given day, are doing the best job they can do. We count on each other continuously throughout the game.

"I can't say enough about the friends you make along the way. These people are as passionate as I am about football officiating. It's like a brotherhood," he said. There are several women college football officials. Holcomb said the MAC has one but he has not worked with her.

Holcomb has worked at Grand Valley for 16 years. He had been a systems engineer for IBM until he was laid off. At his office in Manitou Hall, Holcomb supervises 22 students who repair and install computers and printers all over campus. Grand Valley's growth is evident when Holcomb recalled the number of students on his crew when he started working for the university. It was nine.

The demand to keep up with the latest computer technology keeps Holcomb busy. As does staying current with his student workers, which is somewhat similar to keeping up with the athletes on the field. "The kids keep me young and on my toes," he said.



photo by Amanda Pitts

Bob Holcomb, a supervisor in the Information Technology department, stands on the bleachers at Lubbers Stadium. Although he has never officiated a Grand Valley game, Holcomb has been a football referee for more than 20 years.

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