

By JOE SAGER

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Jake Hornbeck wore many different uniforms during his athletic career.

Now, you can catch him at local basketball gyms wearing white and black stripes.

Hornbeck, a 2023 Oil City High School graduate, has quickly moved up the District 10 basketball officiating ranks. It's a position he never imagined he'd be in while leading the Oilers to back-to-back D-10 hardwood title games his junior and senior years.

He never thought he'd be a trailblazer, either. But, that's exactly what happened as he and classmate Maddy Marczak became the first two D-10 products of the PIAA Junior Officials program.

Established by the PIAA to boost a dwindling officiating pool, the program is designed for 16-and 17-year-olds to experience officiating contests in all sports at the ninth-grade level and below. It offers financial assistance for those interested in going through the program to gain their required background clearances and uniforms.

"I would 100 percent recommend it," Hornbeck said. "It's been a great opportunity. I've met some great people through it, too. It's been awesome."

Longtime Oil City teacher and athletic director Tim LaVan, who has since retired from those roles, introduced the program to the two Oilers when they were seniors. LaVan remains active in a long career as a D-10 basketball official and rules interpreter.

“He thought I’d be good at it and it was a chance to make some extra cash and be around basketball,” Hornbeck said. “I didn’t know what to expect.”

Once all the required paperwork is turned in and applicants pass a test, Junior Officials can get right to work, where they are paired up with veteran officials.

“When I was a senior in high school, after basketball practice or sometimes before, I’d referee elementary games or a ninth grade game just here and there,” Hornbeck said.

“I’d get a lot of help and tips from the older guys and I was able to build on that so early.

“I refereed with Scott Walters when I was a senior in high school. Last year, I refereed with Jim Come a lot. Both helped me a lot,” Hornbeck continued. “The most important thing is just to be comfortable. Jim makes me very comfortable and has been a great mentor for me. He’s given me a lot of tips and tricks. He’s been around the game a long time.”

In addition to PIAA games, the young referees gain key experience working elementary basketball games throughout the year or in other summer leagues which Jeff Polley runs locally.

“It’s super nice. It gives younger players a chance to ref and get some practice,” Hornbeck said. “It’s nice to keep going with it (after the school season). The more I do it, the more comfortable I find myself. It just gets easier and easier.”

Marczak (Gannon) and Hornbeck (Slippery Rock) both attend college within D-10 boundaries, which makes it feasible for them to continue refereeing during their academic semesters, too.

“The majority of games I get are during winter break from college, which works well with the high school schedule,” Hornbeck said. “Otherwise, I still come back to Venango County and ref once or twice a week while being in college.”

The adjustment from player to official was easy for Hornbeck, who wants to have a career in education.

“I always knew I wanted to be a teacher,” he said. “So, when I was a senior in high school, it was super easy for me to ref, especially fourth, fifth and sixth graders. I was mentoring them along the way, too, in games. I love it. I don’t regret it.

“Dealing with parents or people in the crowd is the hardest part,” he continued. “But, from playing all my life, it’s easier to zone people out and just focus on the game and what I’m doing. So, my basketball playing experience really helps me block out any distractions. I don’t think of it as a job for money. I think of it as a nice hobby and I want to grow with it and learn to handle different situations better.”

The OC product became a regular official his freshman year at SRU and could work games at any level.

“My freshman year, I got my first varsity basketball game assignment. Varsity is a three-man refereeing crew, which is a little different than a two-man crew,” Hornbeck said. “I got to ref close to 10 varsity games that year.”

Hornbeck refereed at a Gannon camp last summer and intends to do the same this year as well.

This winter, he got even more varsity assignments, including his first D-10 playoff game when Greenville and Cambridge Springs battled at Farrell High School.

“This past season, varsity games were the majority of the ones I refereed. I had close to 25 varsity games,” he said. “I got a varsity playoff game this year, too. I was a little nervous going into it, especially when the national anthem was going and during player introductions. It was similar to the same nervousness I’d get when I was playing. Once the game started, it was easy to zone in.”

Both Marczak and Hornbeck continue to excel as basketball officials.

“Jake and Maddy are the poster children for the Junior Officials program,” LaVan said. “They are really, really good kids. They are excited about officiating and it helps others seeing their success.”

Two of Hornbeck’s former teammates, rising OC senior basketball players Steven Heise and Spence Singleton, signed up to be Junior Officials in the winter. Hornbeck requested to officiate with them in order to give back.

“It was fun to ref games with them,” Hornbeck said. “I got to ref with them for some of their first games so I was glad to help out.”

Once in the program, officials find close bonds can be formed quickly with others wearing the stripes.

“I didn’t know what to expect when I first started out. But, making money is the last thing on my mind. It’s basketball. I love being around the game. But, it’s more than just refereeing, and that’s how other people feel, too,” Hornbeck said. “I would 100 percent recommend it. It’s been a great opportunity.

“Sometimes, I ride to the games with my referee crew. We have some good times. Sometimes, we’ll go out to dinner after games. It’s just a lot of fun. I definitely hope to continue officiating once I graduate. It’s just a blast. I want to get better and I have a really good time doing it.”

While Hornbeck has focused on officiating basketball, the Junior Officials program is open to all sports.

“(The PIAA) used to try to focus on getting kids interested in officiating when they graduated because that’s when they could. We were never successful with it and I didn’t know why. I think maybe because they are graduating high school and starting a new chapter of their lives and officiating doesn’t seem to fit,” LaVan said. “But, if we can get them started when they are already in high school, now we have that interest sparked.

“The Junior Officials program has been absolutely phenomenal. It has improved the numbers in our basketball chapter greatly. We have some excellent young officials. It’s fantastic,” he continued. “The average age of officials in D-10 is like 58. There are a lot of officials closer to retiring than the beginning of their careers. I am just trying to get good, young officials to replace me and all the rest of us when we are ready to go.”

Those interested in joining the Junior Officials program may reach out to LaVan, any current official or high school athletic director. The process of becoming a Junior Official can be completed in less than a week.

“It is 100 percent based on the motivation of the kids and how quickly they want to do it,” LaVan said. “Recently, we had Blake Marchinke from Cranberry reach out to become a Junior Official. It’s really beneficial for the kids to see the game from another side, too. They understand the game better when they become an official.”