



## **Reflections of a River Rat:**

### **Hanging up my stripes ... for now**

By Jim Holleran

The decision had been creeping up on me for months, but I ignored it like a Trump supporter facing the reality of the last election. I didn't want to admit the obvious.



I decided last week to make the practical, yet painful, decision — I clicked the SEND button on the email. I was benching myself again this season from refereeing basketball. I thought last year was just a temporary postponement, forced upon me by the Covid-19 pandemic. I hadn't received both doses of vaccine at that time so I told myself I would be prudent and make a comeback this season.

This season arrived Monday. My colleagues conducted their first Zoom meeting to discuss sportsmanship ratings, rule changes, assigning procedures and Covid protocols. Somewhere I was entered onto a list of refs who wouldn't be working games.

It's sad. Regardless of how lousy I performed in 2007, when I first started working JV games, I was committed to improving. As a former coach, I was shocked by how many rules I didn't

know. Even more stunning? You've got to be able to refer to the rulebook to bail yourself out in a split second when you encounter an obnoxious coach or your partner puts you in a tough position. I buried my nose in the rulebook.

I worked games too. I watched the veteran refs. I watched myself on film. I watched how calls look differently from a reverse angle. I met a lot of great refs who simply wanted to see games administered properly and fairly. I worked my way up to varsity status. I derived a great deal of satisfaction out of knowing I did things the right way, even though 50 percent of the gym believed I was biased against its team.

Now, my whistle and striped jersey are sitting in my gym bag. They're waiting. The crucial call has been made.

The impetus for this decision started last spring. Schools were getting ready to start an abbreviated season last February when I went for a walk with my wife, Mary. Immediately, I felt a shortness of breath. I later learned my age-onset diabetes had plugged two blood vessels near my heart. I underwent surgery to implant two stents, rehabbed and improved my diet. My numbers looked superb when I returned to the cardiologist for a follow-up exam.

"Wow, your numbers look great!" he said. "You can do anything."

"Great," I responded, "because my assigner is asking me to do 3 games over the next four days."

"Oh," his voice fell. "I don't like that."

When I shot him a perplexed look, he gave me the three-strikes-and-your-out explanation.

Strike one — There's been a lot of outbreaks around various school districts. "If you get Covid, it'll kill you."

Strike two — Think about it. Ten kids on this team touching the ball; 10 kids on the other team. Your partner. You touch the ball. The ball goes into the stands. "If you get Covid, it'll kill you."

Strike three — Do you trust middle school and high school boys and where they've been? "If you get Covid, it'll kill you."

When I replayed this for Mary, she understood the rationale by the end of strike one.

So I waited for lacrosse season. By then, I had received both doses. We ran across outdoor fields with masks on. It was a good compromise. But we were short of guys so I worked 4-5 games a week. My legs protested regularly.

Basketball would be easier, I thought. In lacrosse, you run 60-70 yards to transition from trail ref to lead position. Basketball is easier — trail to lead is only 60 feet. My Guinness Stout belly tumor can handle that. I was looking forward to the season, to a game I had been playing since fourth grade.

Then the negatives started to creep in. Mary was still quoting strike one from the cardiologist. My brother, Fran, visited from Florida and scratched his head -- "Do you need the money?" Then my barber, Rosemary, related how two of the eight vaccinated women in her choir had contracted the Delta variant. If that wasn't enough, my buddy, Dan, issued the killshot. After we had watched a Bills game together, that texted to say that he had contracted Covid despite his inoculation.

The claxtons were sounding loud and clear in my brain. The day before we were scheduled to drive 5 ½ hours to my grandson's first birthday party, Mary and I rushed to get tested. Immediately. What a shame it would be to miss this soiree. Hours before we left, the tests came back negative. Phew!

It made the email much easier to write. With vaccination rates hovering around 60 percent for 12-15 year olds in Monroe County, I could hear my doctor's words ringing through my head — "Do you trust middle school and high school boys?"

It will be a long winter.

*Jim Holleran, a Morristown native, is a retired teacher and registrar for the Rochester City School District, and former sports editor of the Democrat and Chronicle. Reach him at [jimholleran29@gmail.com](mailto:jimholleran29@gmail.com) or view past columns at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.files.wordpress.com> under Reflections of a River Rat.*