

Busy Ref

In a job that's best done by blending in and going unnoticed, Randy Bruns still manages to stand out.

It's a job that not only encourages snap decisions, but demands them.

Bruns, who lives in Ankeny, is a referee and umpire. He officiates Iowa Conference football and basketball and high school basketball and umpires NCAA Division I baseball, primarily in the Big 12.

Think about all those times you've turned on the TV to watch a college basketball game and seen Ed Hightower working, well, Bruns is even busier. And last month, he completed the "triple crown" in officiating when he headed up an all-Iowa crew as the referee at the Division III football championship game in Salem, Va. -- the third sport in which he worked a national collegiate championship event.

"It's not like I'm going to pat myself on the back because I had the opportunity to do that," Bruns said. "I just felt really fortunate because it's something I enjoy. To be able to do that type of event in more than one (sport) is really awesome."

That's also what separates Bruns from the pack.

"It's not uncommon for people to work multiple college sports," said Matt Moore, who's associate editor at Referee magazine and umpires baseball. "But it's definitely unique to reach the national championship level in multiple sports."

So Bruns, 56, does get noticed -- in the right way.

"If you get selected for any championship event, it means you're doing a very good job," said Damani Leech, the NCAA's director for football and baseball.

Bruns now has worked five different college championship events, starting with the 1987 Division III baseball World Series in Marietta, Ohio. He also umpired at the NAIA World Series in Des Moines in 1992, worked a game at the Division III basketball Final Four at Buffalo in 1993 and umpired at the College World Series in Omaha in 1999, 2003 and 2006.

He was one of the two crew chiefs at the '06 CWS and worked the best-of-three championship series.

"I don't know of anybody off the top of my head who's done that," said Bernie Saggau, retired executive director of the Iowa High School Athletic Association and a former college football and basketball official.

"Just to work one (sport) is an honor. You don't get too many of those chances. To be good in all three is really unusual."

That's not the extent of Bruns' championship work, either.

If you've ever been to the boys state basketball tournament or watched the football playoffs, chances are you've seen Bruns toting his whistle. He's officiated at 23 state basketball tournaments and worked the football playoffs 15 times. That includes five football championship games and six title games in basketball.

"I love doing those kind of events," said Bruns, who does high school football now only on a fill-in basis. "But you also realize you don't get those solely on your own. You get there partly because of your own dedication and your own efforts and your own skill. But you also get there because of the people you work with."

Officials get to the final round only after a winnowing out process.

In baseball, for instance, 96 umpires out of all those who work regular-season games are chosen for the Division I regionals, based on rankings from the various conferences and evaluations of the NCAA's three regional advisers and national coordinator of umpires.

From that group, 32 are picked for the super regionals and eight move on to the CWS.

"The more you get picked for these things, it's very gratifying because you do appreciate the fact that someone thinks you're doing a good job," Bruns said. "That keeps me humble just because I do appreciate that a great deal.

Bruns knows all too well that such reassurance is rare because usually, refs and umpers hear only from those who think they've done a bad job.

"If you've got a thin skin or if you only judge the value of your work by someone else telling you that you did a good job, then officiating is not the hobby or job you want," Bruns said. "You really have to know within yourself whether you did a good job."

But the hardest part of officiating for Bruns isn't the ornery coaches or whining athletes or obnoxious fans. It's the travel, whether it's navigating a snowy two-lane road in the middle of winter to get to Storm Lake or Decorah or rushing to catch a plane after working a weekend Big 12 baseball series so he can show up at work on time Monday.

"Try to get back on a Sunday night from Lubbock, Texas," he said with a smile. "It's not easy."

One night after working a game in Marshalltown, he and his partner found the road and surrounding countryside shrouded in thick fog.

"I had my head out the window of the car one way and my partner had his head out the window the other way," Bruns said. "We kept thinking we were going to drive out of it. We never did."

But he puts up with those hassles out of love for his craft and respect for the game and those who play it.

"You do it because you like it," he said.

Bruns, who works for Principal as its regional director for development, grew up in Denver in northeast Iowa has been officiating since he was a teenager, when he umpired recreational softball for \$5 a game. He did junior high basketball when he was in high school and refereed his first varsity high school basketball game as an 18-year-old freshman at Luther College.

"I was about the same age as the kids who were playing," he said.

Bruns moved into high school baseball that summer and began working prep football the following fall. When his friends were thinking about going to a movie or a party on Friday night, Bruns was heading out to some small town to work a game.

He continued officiating all three high school sports through college, making numerous contacts and earning some walking-around money along the way.

"It helped a lot for gas money and whatever college kids usually spend money on," he said. "I'm sure I told my parents it was books."

Bruns has been at it ever since, including eight years as a minor league baseball umpire. He made it all the way to the Triple-A American Association before being released in 1985, though he did get the proverbial cup of coffee in the major leagues when he worked Opening Day in Cincinnati in 1991 as a replacement ump.

¶ It hurt at the time to have his big league dream quashed, but he emerged from the experience with his personal life intact, no small accomplishment for someone who was spending six months of the year away from home and his wife, Jana.

¶ ``One of the things I'm proudest of, and a lot of it is because of my wife, is that I was married when I got in and I was married when I got out _ to the same person,' ' he said. ``Because that's pretty rare.' '

¶ He also feels he came out of it a better official and umpire.

¶ ``You had to learn how to deal with personalities, deal with people that get a little excited,' ' Bruns said. ``You learn how to stay calm when everyone else is a little excitable.' '

¶ Chuck Brittain of Waverly saw that every time he worked with Bruns. They officiated high school football and basketball together for 21 years and worked 20 state basketball tournaments as partners.

¶ ``He probably communicates as well as anyone and of course, he's just unflappable,' ' said Brittain, who assigns basketball officials for the Iowa Conference and six high school leagues. ``It takes a lot to get him riled up. And Randy continues to try to make his game better. He's not resting on his laurels.' '

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