

**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE
HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS**



NEWS RELEASE

Pennsylvania Softball Team and Umpire Selected as National Recipients of NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 1, 2011) — The **New Kensington (Pennsylvania) Valley High School softball team** and **umpire Bill Dithrich** have been selected the 2011 national recipients of the “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

The “National High School Spirit of Sport Award” was created by the NFHS to recognize those individuals who exemplify the ideals of the spirit of sport that represent the core mission of education-based athletics.

In a highly improbable twist, the time-honored tenets of good sportsmanship, ethics and integrity were displayed in exemplary fashion by individuals involved with a high school softball playoff game.

Sporting an unblemished 22-0 win-loss record, the Valley High School softball team was playing 19-3 Wilmington (Pennsylvania) High School June 10, 2010 in a Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association Class AA quarterfinal game.

The game was hotly contested and had gone into extra innings. With the score tied, 4-4, with one out in the bottom of the ninth inning and Wilmington at bat with

runners on second and third, Valley High School catcher Casey Bonk stepped out of the catcher's box before pitcher Caitlyn Nessler delivered the ball on an intentional walk.

As a result, plate umpire Bill Dithrich correctly called "illegal pitch," which enabled Wilmington's Ashley Gardner to trot home from third and score the winning run.

So, in that split-second, Wilmington won the game, 5-4, and Valley's perfect season and shot at the state title were both summarily dashed.

The stunning call and loss left the Valley players distraught, shocked and in tears as they boarded the school bus for their somber drive home.

However, that was just the beginning of the story.

Shortly thereafter, the Valley High School booster club sought a keynote speaker for its June 29th year-end softball banquet. Eric Felack, an umpire and a Valley High School team booster, came up with what many might have considered to be a very improbable choice - none other than Dithrich himself.

Felack said the idea came to him after discussing "The Call" with other umpires. He said he didn't think he could make such a call, which led a colleague to ask him what other rules he would not enforce.

Felack said that comment resonated with him and decided that inviting Dithrich to speak would be a teachable moment about sports, ethics and life.

And so it was that Dithrich came to be the keynote speaker at a function honoring a softball team whose season ended following his call.

During his speech, Dithrich told the 75 attendees - including 13 Valley High School softball players seated in front of him - that he was faced with three choices at that fateful moment: ignore the infraction, call time and warn Bonk, or enforce the rule.

He said that the only real choice was the right one.

“We cannot choose which rules we like and which rules we don’t like,” Dithrich said. “Did I want to make the call? Absolutely not. I would rather see the game end with a batter ripping a single into the outfield or a walk-off home run or a fielder making a diving catch.”

He thanked the team for inviting him to the dinner and praised the Vikings for their great display of sportsmanship.

Bonk, who was in tears throughout Dithrich’s speech, said that she appreciated him being at their banquet, adding that “it showed a lot of pride on his part.”

Following the dinner, she shook Dithrich’s hand, they spoke briefly and then shared an emotional hug before posing for a photo.

Dithrich and Bonk – and everyone else present – were overwhelmed by the amazing evening in which life lessons were learned by all.

In addition to the selection of the Valley High School softball team and Dithrich as the national award recipients, the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee chose seven other individuals for section awards. Following are the 2011 National High School Spirit of Sport section winners:

Section 1 – Juliann Tefft, student-athlete, West Greenwich (Rhode Island)
Exeter/West Greenwich Senior High School

Section 2 – New Kensington (Pennsylvania) Valley High School softball team and
umpire Bill Dithrich

Section 3 – Dylan Rebeor, student-athlete, Columbia, Tennessee, and Columbia
(Tennessee) Central High School football team

Section 4 – Maynard Newhouse, student-athlete, Decorah (Iowa) High School

Section 5 – Anita Boeck, coach, and Chloe Gross, volleyball team manager,
Arlington (South Dakota) High School

Section 6 – Nathan Potts, coach, Shepherd (Texas) High School

Section 7 – Jim Tracy, coach, and the San Francisco (California) University High School girls cross country team

Section 8 – Lucas Lish, student–athlete, Arimo (Idaho) Marsh Valley High School

Nominations for this award were generated through NFHS member state associations and reviewed by the NFHS National High School Spirit of Sport Award Selection Committee composed of state association staff members. While the national winner will be recognized June 29 at the NFHS Summer Meeting in Philadelphia, the section winners will be recognized within their respective states and will receive awards before the end of the current school year.

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About the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and fine arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education–based interscholastic sports and fine arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and Rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 17 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,000 high schools and 11 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.6 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; produces publications for high school coaches, officials and athletic directors; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, spirit coaches, speech and debate coaches and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS Web site at www.nfhs.org.

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