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HAMILTON REGION

OPINION

# Hamilton's Paul Johnson fighting COVID – and other 'official' duties

By **Scott Radley** Spectator Columnist

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The man who's become one of the faces of this city's [COVID](#) response can't wait until the day the pandemic is over, mostly for the same reasons as the rest of us.

But also because when he finally gets a few minutes of free time, Paul Johnson will be able to get back to his true passion. Namely, stepping onto a basketball court and calling a game as he's done for 32 years.

"I miss it," he says. "It's my outlet. Not having it has been hard."

The head of the city's emergency operations centre – the organization that co-ordinates the municipal response to serious situations – first grabbed a whistle the day a city recreation manager spotted him in a gym and asked if he'd like to officiate some kids' house-league games. Johnson figured he'd watched enough 1980s Los Angeles Lakers-Boston Celtics games to know what to do.

Turns out, a 15-year-old with no training who's trying to emulate NBA officials makes quite an impression. Innumerable foul calls signalled with huge, emphatic, exaggerated gestures made him rather noticeable.

"I realized ... probably in the 10-year-olds' level you need to be a little less flamboyant," he laughs.

But he was OK. And the entertained parents loved that he gave it his full effort. Encouraged, he got certified a few years later then started doing midget high school games, followed by junior, then senior. In time, he worked provincial high school championships, which is where his partner once ejected a team's mascot – no kidding – and made a difficult charging call that negated what would've been the winning basket. That led to security guards offering him a safe escort out of the gym.

It taught him how to make tough decisions. But it didn't deter him. He landed at McMaster where he called basketball and football games for CFMU radio and then doing play-by-play for the Hamilton Skyhawks.

"They tell me it's not my fault the league folded midway through the year," he quips.

By this point, it was clear his strength was in stripes. Eventually he reffed at the college and university levels before moving to England for two years where he worked the pro circuit. He then returned home and officiated in the inaugural season of the Canadian Elite Basketball League, which was a circle-of-life moment as the league's director of basketball operations, Joe Raso, was one of the coaches in Johnson's first-ever senior boys' high school game.

On top of that, he became president of the Hamilton Board of Approved Basketball Officials and took on a position as a national referee coach who teaches, trains and evaluates others through Basketball Canada.

It was during an assignment in that last role as evaluator that his life changed.

He was in a packed and raucous Burlington high school gym grading referees at the provincial high school boys' basketball championship last March when his phone rang. Slipping under the bleachers so he could hear better, he listened as medical officer of

health Dr. Elizabeth Richardson told him Hamilton had its [first confirmed case](#) of COVID.

Within hours, he was completely immersed in the pandemic response. He hasn't been to a gym since.

Even so, he's never been far from the sport.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger tossed the ceremonial first tip-off for the CEBL's first game back in the spring of 2019 and was given the ball. Recognizing Johnson's passion for hoops, he gifted it to him.

If you look closely during pretty much any city Zoom call in which Johnson is participating, you'll see that ball in a glass case just off to the side. Not far from the golden ball that local officiating legend Ron Foxcroft gave him to recognize his on-court efforts over the years.

It offers a reminder of what's waiting when this is finally over.

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