

Whistle Blowers in Cuba

In his first 29 years of officiating high school football, Nathan Weiss of San Diego never once worked in front of Fidel Castro. Well, that's obvious you'd say. It's not as if Castro has a habit of spending Friday nights in California watching prep football.

At the start of his 30th year, Weiss had still not worked in front of the Cuban leader, but he and his crew came as close as any American football officials have in nearly 50 years. Weiss

line judge Chris Wiggins, linesman Danny Short and alternate Ed Zapolski, the 31-22 Bonita Vista victory was just another game. But the weeks prior were anything but typical.

The odyssey to Cuba began months before Sept. 5. Bonita Vista's football coach, Carl Parrick, son of a Naval officer, lived in Cuba as a boy. In 1959, he was forced to leave with his family. Dan Hodges, Bonita Vista assistant coach, made his return possible by working to get a high school game in Cuba.

"In one word, it was 'awesome,'" said Weiss, selected with his crew because the game required SDCFOA officials. And, of course, because there are no certified U.S. football refs in Cuba.

"The teams and the people of Cuba had a great time, as did we," Weiss said. "We *had* to go a week early because of the special licenses we received to go to Cuba."

First, they stayed in Varadero, a resort town. In between jet skiing, catamaran rides and eating lobster, the referees "no doubt" polished up on the rulebook and held pregame talks.

By mid-week, the group returned to Havana. A highlight there was a wreath-laying ceremony led by Hodges, who served in the Air Force, at the memorial to the 265 crewmen of the U.S.S. Maine who died when the battleship exploded in the harbor in 1898. "The players were all in uniform as were the referees," said Weiss. "It was something very special."

Just as special, according to Weiss, was seeing the flags of both Cuba and the U.S. flying inside the stadium Sept. 5, and the sounds of both national anthems played prior to kickoff.

"None of us will ever forget the experience," beamed Weiss. "Certainly nothing in my career will be as memorable."

Written by Rich Winograd, a freelance writer and high school basketball official from Thousand Oaks, Calif. □



Football officials (from left) David Sibbet, Ed Zapolski, Danny Short, John Freeman, Nathan Weiss and Chris Wiggins gather in front of the U.S.S. Maine memorial in Havana.

and five officials from the San Diego County Football Officials Association (SDCFOA) worked a high school game in Havana, the first American football game held in Cuba since 1958. On Sept. 5, Weiss and crew donned stripes inside Havana's Pan American Games Stadium for a game between two San Diego teams — Bonita Vista and La Jolla.

Rumor had it that Castro might attend. Political agendas as they are, he didn't. But the Cubans who attended seemed as moved by the event as the visitors. For Weiss, the umpire, and referee John Freeman, back judge David Sibbet,



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