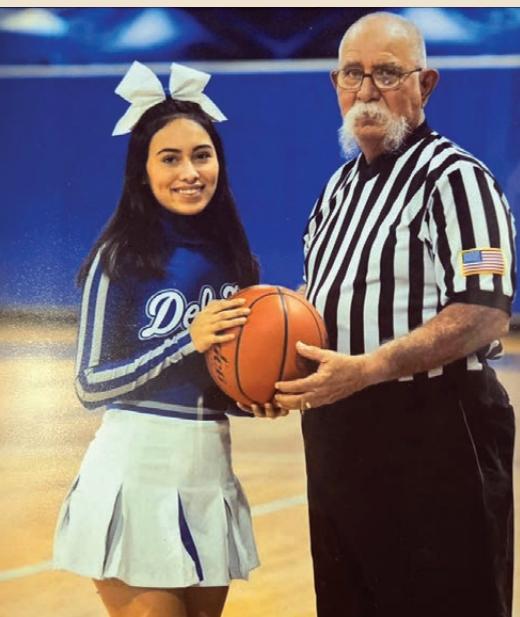


# 'HEY, REF!'

**I**n 1975, when Lino Hernandez, a now-retired Del Rio, TX, letter carrier, was approached by his brother asking if he wanted to try sports officiating for slow pitch softball, he said, "I'd give it a try." The Branch 2511 member hadn't grown up playing sports but was in the Air Force at the time and had played several intramural sports while in the service. Since that first try officiating softball, he has joined several sports officiating chapters, which enabled him to become certified via state exams to officiate baseball, football, volleyball and basketball.

He works mainly for high school, military and amateur adult leagues—sometimes officiating travel playoff games as far as six hours away by car. Hernandez serves as both referee at basketball and football games and volleyball matches, and umpire at baseball and softball games. He can work in playoff games

**Lino Hernandez receives the game ball from his granddaughter Mia, the captain of her high school cheerleading squad.**



contingent on how well he and the other officials do on their state exams.

Depending on the game and level in the playoffs they are in, Hernandez said there are from two to four referees or umpires per game. They tend to stand in different areas of the game, basing calls off who was closest to the play when it occurred.

Hernandez became a letter carrier in 1983, carrying mail on the same route in Del Rio for 38 of his 40 years with the Postal Service. Always staying active, one of the things he enjoyed the most about it was that he "did a lot of walking." But his favorite thing about delivering the mail was "just the people" on his route, he said.

Throughout his postal career, he normally officiated three to four times a week—balancing his letter carrier duties with sports officiating gigs. For most of his career, he was able to work out his schedule with management, and it was simple to get off work for games. However, in his last few years of carrying the mail there was new management, who made it more difficult, causing him to significantly reduce the number of games he was able to work. When he retired in 2024, he was happy he would be able to work as many games as he liked.

Hernandez's favorite sport to officiate is basketball. In his daily life he seldom goes out for jogs, but still says "basketball is my passion," not despite, but rather, because he does "a lot more running in basketball than I do in other sports." Players run up to 3 miles during a game, and Hernandez is right there with them. He likes to "move with the ball or with the players ... to get better angles and see if there's a violation," he said.

"People tell me I'm too old to do [basketball] now because I'm 73," he said,

but added, "As long as my legs allow me to do it, I'll keep doing it."

There are 500 to 600 people combined in the sports officiating chapters to which Hernandez belongs. Despite the large number, he often ends up officiating with the same people, which gives him a community. Even the officials he doesn't know he has heard of from others in the chapters.

Sports officiating has provided him the chance to "meet different people, and it's always nice to work with different people, because you learn from them, and, I guess, sometimes they learn from you," he says. This especially applies for playoff games, when he meets sports officials from all around Texas.

Officiating each sport presents its own challenges. One of the main differences is whether players make physical contact with one another as part of the sport. This changes the types of violations that are called, like having mainly fouls versus mainly technical violations.

While football and basketball players make physical contact with each other as part of the game, when tensions are high, Hernandez makes sure to "kind of mellow it down" by being assertive and clear with expectations, he said. "If we let you play, then we're going to let you play, but if you start being rough... we can make you play in a safer way or take the game away from you," he said.

Hernandez says that during games, conflicts between players rarely escalate, especially in high school, and conflicts that do occur have never gotten to a serious level. He partially attributes this to the coaches, saying, "They're pretty good about the high school level. The coaches try to keep their kids in line."



Lino Hernandez

He added, “If I see somebody pushing ... I get in the middle and say, ‘Hey, it stops here or we sit you down.’”

Safety is the main change he has seen in sports officiating over his more than five decades of experience when it comes to rules and regulations.

“For example, in softball, now they’re required to wear the helmets,” Hernandez said, “and a lot of them are required to use face masks ... to prevent injury to the face or to the head.”

It hasn’t only been serious, sometimes it is all fun and games. For the past few years, he has refereed an annual teacher versus varsity student basketball game in Del Rio.

“Those are always fun games,” he said.

Several years ago, he had the opportunity to referee a basketball improv comedy team similar to the Harlem Globetrotters, which he described as being “so much fun.”

Although refs wear uniforms, he has also become known for his defining feature, his prominent horseshoe mustache.

“Coaches recognize me for that,” he said. “A lot of players will come up to me and say, ‘Hey, ref, that’s an awesome mustache.’”

Keeping it fun, Hernandez never wanted sports officiating to be what he relies on to survive.

“To me, it’s a hobby, it’s not a job,” Hernandez said. He worries that if it becomes his job, he may lose his enjoyment of it. “If I get to the point where it’s not fun anymore, it’s time to give it up,” he said.

What he says he appreciates the most about it is “watching some of the kids grow up to become better ball players.” He enjoys working with youngsters and even coached Little League for 20 years.

This year he completed 51 years as an official and shared a special

moment with his granddaughter, Mia Hernandez. She is a high school senior and the captain of her varsity squad who was awarded an All-American cheerleading award at a National Cheerleaders Association camp. As a special moment, at the start of a basketball game Hernandez was refereeing, Mia handed him the game ball.

Although he has officiated many state playoff games since 1975, he still has goals he wants to accomplish in his officiating career. He wants to referee more playoff basketball games and what he says has “always been one of my dreams to hopefully someday be able to get there” is being an umpire at the NCAA Women’s College World Series in Oklahoma City, OK.

After a half-century, Hernandez has this advice for anyone interested in being a ref or umpire: “If you don’t enjoy it, you have no business doing it, and that’s always been my philosophy.” **PR**