

# LAST CALL

A PERSONAL STORY BY JASON PALMER

## Good Man Gone

I was on the stand officiating a girls' high school volleyball match in Midlothian, Ill., in 2012 when I felt someone tugging at my pants leg during a timeout. A bit startled and not knowing if it was a friend or disgruntled fan, I turned quickly to face the interloper and recognized a familiar face smiling at me. It was Bill Dolehide, a fellow water polo official and one of the most down-to-earth people in our industry. He had a daughter playing on one of the teams and was playfully telling me to "call it both ways."



**Officials are trained in conflict resolution, yet we are not immune to society's troubles.**

If you knew Bill, you understood that was his typical behavior. Always one for having a good time, Bill was the type of official you wanted to work with during a match and have a beer with afterward. His kind, easygoing demeanor and spirited competitiveness contrasted with his tough, gruff exterior and serious officiating tone during a match.

I met Bill two years prior, during my first season officiating water polo. Saturday tournaments can make for long days and we were working a three-person rotation to get through the 11 matches that day. While officiating the first match of the day, I noticed out the corner of my eye,

off in the distance, a tall, salt-and-pepper-haired, middle-aged white male strip down to his Speedos and dive into the adjacent pool. During a break in play, I asked my partner, "Who in the heck is that?" He told me, "Oh, that's just Bill. He's your next partner. He does that all the time. He'll be ready for your next match." Sure enough, 30 minutes later, Bill was dressed in his full, all-white uniform, had in his orange ear plugs and asked me jokingly, "Are you finally ready, rookie?"

I had only officiated about five matches in my career and was still awkward on the pool deck. Of the 154 high school water polo officials in Illinois, less than 10 percent are African American. Suffice to say, I stood out for a variety of reasons. Bill noticed my discomfort and probably horrendous officiating and stepped in. He offered me encouraging words and tips when we worked that day's games together. He was extremely patient with me and my steep learning curve and kept the coaches off me by expanding his primary coverage area of the pool and taking the heat for my inexperience.

In the subsequent years, we had several conversations about how water polo could be used as a tool to reduce the disproportionate drowning rate in the African American community (according to the Center for Disease Control, the ratio of black youth drowning to white youth is five to one) and provide a healthy activity to keep youth engaged. I always appreciated the suggestions he would provide to present the sport to my community.

Bill did his best to help others in any way he could. Using his more than 30 years of experience in soccer and water polo, he helped dozens of athletes get college scholarships or recruited them into officiating. He was a board member for 16 years at the Crestwood Soccer Club.

It was just after officiating a water polo match and heading to the soccer club for a meeting on the evening of March 7, 2018, that Bill's fate was

tragically altered by an errant bullet that struck him in the head as he was driving through Robbins, Ill., just south of Chicago. He died two days later.

Cook County Sheriff's Police have no suspects in custody, but investigators theorize Bill was an innocent victim caught in the crossfire of two parties firing at each other. How ironic that officials are trained in conflict resolution, yet we are not immune to society's troubles when street confrontations end in violence. Knowing Bill, he would have used his skills to mediate a peaceful resolution between the two parties that evening so no one was hurt.

More than 3,000 people attended the wake for Bill. It was held at the Crestwood Recreation Center and featured a fire truck with a large American flag draped from it. Many of Bill's former soccer players, water polo teammates and fellow officials were in attendance. The line to greet and comfort his family stretched throughout the facility.

A commemorative arm band with Bill's initials B.A.D. was worn by his fellow water polo officials during matches for the remainder of the season. Three months after his death, family and friends had raised more than \$75,000 for Bill's wife Terri and their three children — Shannon, Logan and Morgan.

Bill's last call as a referee may have come during a water polo match, but the best call he ever made may have come years before when he decided to become an organ donor. After two days of no brain activity while in the hospital, his family respected his wishes and removed him from life support.

While all recipients of Bill's organs will be blessed, the person who got his heart will receive the greatest gift of all.

*Jason Palmer is a Referee associate editor and water polo official in Illinois.* □

**Do you have a personal officiating story to tell?**

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