

Co-op Employees &

“I see a lot of kids who I refereed at first, now their kids are starting to play.”

by Brenda Kleinjan

WHEN ATHLETES IN WESTERN SOUTH DAKOTA hit the gridiron and volleyball courts this fall, it will be without two familiar co-op employees.

After more than two decades refereeing football games in western South Dakota, West River Electric Association manager of finance and administrative services Dick Johnson will not be returning to the field.

“I’m going to miss it – I know that. But the time and the travel was making it hard,” said Johnson, who lives and works in Wall.

In his final year of refereeing, Johnson averaged 400 miles a night round trip to referee games from Buffalo, S.D., to Gettysburg, S.D., and down into the Martin, Mission and Philip, S.D., areas.

“It was a stress relief – you focus completely on the game and everything from work gets

cleared from your brain,” said Johnson.

Johnson had also refereed boys and girls basketball for nearly a decade, but stopped refereeing high school games in 2000. He continues to referee local junior high basketball games in Wall.

“When I gave up basketball, it was an average of 200 miles a night two to three nights a week,” Johnson said.

His refereeing career also included a couple of state football playoff games at the DakotaDome in Vermillion, S.D.

Johnson said he enjoyed getting to know fans and kids around the state.

“I see a lot of kids who I refereed at first, now their kids are starting to play,” Johnson said.

Johnson won’t be completely absent from the high school athletics arena. He’ll continue to run the clock for football and basketball games at Wall High School.

To the north in Timber Lake, Moreau-Grand Electric Cooperative finance officer Linda Dahlgren has hung up her whistle after seven seasons coaching the Timber Lake Panthers volleyball team.

“My daughter was in high school when they started the volleyball program here. They were without a coach – the superintendent sat on my desk until I said ‘yes,’” Dahlgren said of her start as a coach.

Dahlgren attended Mary College (now the University of Mary) in Bismarck, N.D., where she was part of the basketball team. As the college started its volleyball team, she and others were recruited to learn that sport as well.

“I learned to play there,” Dahlgren said.

Dahlgren said her coaching career hung right at the .500 mark. When the program first started, the school had 18 girls out for the sport in grades 7 through 12 – barely enough to scrimmage and practice, she notes ruefully. Now, the program has doubled to 36.

“It makes practices a lot more competitive,” said Dahlgren.

Dahlgren’s assistant coach will be taking over the reins.



Kids



“She started playing for me in school and is now back teaching first grade,” said Dahlgren.

Dahlgren and Johnson both noted that understanding employers were essential for making their refereeing and coaching jobs possible.

“Balancing work with leaving early for games and practices was one of the hardest things,” said Dahlgren.

Johnson also notes that a supportive family is helpful.

“You have to have a very understanding spouse,” Johnson said, noting that when he was reffing both football and basketball, he was on the road 75 nights a year – in addition to the time he spent traveling to meetings for his work at the co-op.

While these co-op employees were paid for their work ensuring youth activities were possible in different parts of the states, other co-op employees undertake other roles with various youth programs.

In the Warner, S.D., area, Northern Electric Cooperative’s director of communications, Tom Green, is a scout leader for a local Cub Scout Troop.

And in Custer, S.D., in the southern Black Hills of South Dakota, Black Hills Electric Cooperative manager of marketing and member services Mike Chase has been the “Voice

of the Wildcats” for the past five years. From his lofty perch in the crow’s nest, Chase is the announcer for Custer High School football games. His work has also led to stints as the announcer for the community’s Gold Discovery Days parade, part of the town’s summer celebration.

A 2001 economic study of cooperatives’ contributions to their communities found that co-op employees volunteered more than 52,000 hours to various community activities – many of which focus on kids. These hours were valued at more than \$1 million in the study. The study also noted that the average electric cooperative employee volunteers 55 hours a year – more than three times the number of

hours recognized as “the national standard for employee volunteer program excellence” by VeraWorks.

For many of the employees, the fact that they live in those communities is due to their employment with the electric cooperative. The inherent characteristics of being local businesses committed to local communities is something that electric cooperatives pride themselves in.

