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High-school athletic director in Tukwila doubles as NFL official

By Sandy Ringer

Seattle Times staff reporter

SEATAC — The promise was apparent.

Coach Bruce Haroldson quickly saw Craig Wrolstad's potential on the basketball court as he went through drills at Pacific Lutheran University.

But it wasn't quite the impression Wrolstad had in mind.

"Have you ever thought about officiating?" Haroldson asked.

"Do you want to see my jump shot?" Wrolstad countered.

"No, but can you call a foul?" came the reply.

Neither of them realized that Wrolstad would evolve into one of the area's most respected basketball and football officials and ultimately become one of only 119 referees in the NFL.

Wrolstad had envisioned a different kind of basketball career after graduating from Renton's Lindbergh High School as a three-sport athlete in 1983, though he admits, "I was just your Joe Average athlete." He had officiated some kids' basketball and baseball games while in high school and decided to follow Haroldson's advice after transferring from PLU to the University of Washington his sophomore year.

"I put myself through college officiating football, basketball and softball," Wrolstad said. "I never had to get a job at a restaurant. I didn't have to be a cook or a waiter. I was running up and down a basketball court getting paid to officiate. It was great. I recommend it for any college student who is no longer playing. You stay close to the game and it's fun."

He became a teacher and coach and now is athletic director at Seattle Christian Schools in Tukwila. But Wrolstad's passion for officiating never paled and he proved to be anything but an Average Joe in stripes. After a quick climb into Pac-10 football, he caught the eye of NFL scouts and was accepted into the NFL Referees Association in 2003 at age 37, making him the second-



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Craig Wrolstad was accepted into the NFL Referees Association in 2003 at age 37, making him the second-youngest active NFL official at the time. Now 42, he hopes to become a head referee.

youngest active NFL official at the time.

Wrolstad continues to turn heads.

"I consider him one of the best officials we have in the league," said Tony Corrente, one of the NFL's 17 head referees and the chief of Wrolstad's crew from his rookie season until this year. "His ability and expertise are far beyond his years. It's very obvious and apparent he's an athlete. With his athleticism and quickness, he's able to be in the right place at the right time."

Wrolstad, now 42, is one of 17 field judges in the league and his responsibilities include watching any action around a receiver, most notably defensive or offensive pass interference. He stays in shape by running and lifting weights. Officials are tested on their fitness each year and have their own training camp in mid-July. They spend hours watching film, before and after games, and are critiqued on their performances each Wednesday during the season.

Chrystal Wrolstad, Craig's wife of 16 years, jokes that she and their two children have learned to anticipate his reaction on the occasional times he is marked down.

"We say, 'If Dad's in a bad mood Wednesday, you know he got a downgrade,'" Chrystal said.

Mikayla, 12, and Brock, 9, think their father's side job is cool, especially since they get to travel to two or three of his games each season and sometimes get down on the field. And Chrystal is the biggest football fan in the family, Craig said. He laughs when people ask him if she hates having him gone so many weekends. This is nothing compared to the days when he was out five or six days a week officiating junior-high, high-school and college games.

"There were years I worked over 100 football games in an eight- or nine-week season," Craig said. "I was busy, but I wanted to be good."

Wrolstad, who still officiates high-school games on Thursdays, tends to be good at most things he does. He coached Lindbergh to back-to-back state baseball titles in 1994 and '95. Before that, he was an assistant basketball coach with the Kentridge boys basketball team that won a state championship in 1992.

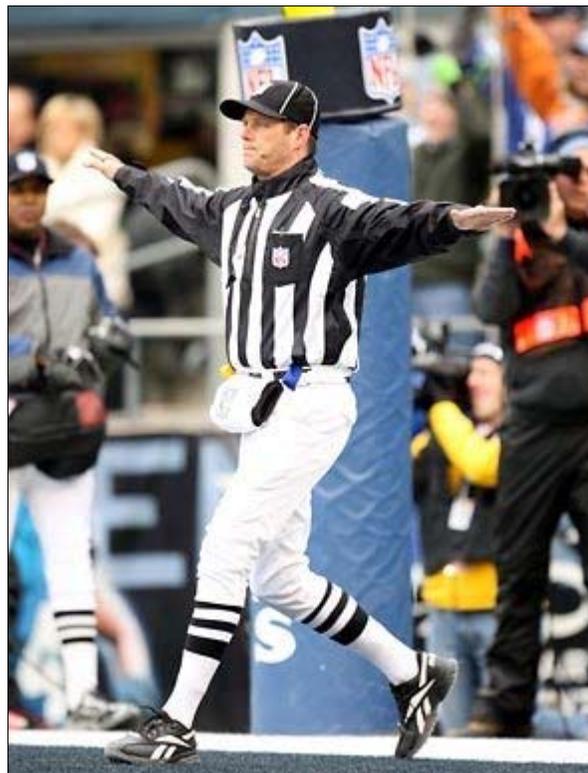
All the while, Wrolstad was moving up the ladder as an official. He started working small-college football games in 1994 and was accepted into the Pac-10 five years later. He officiated NFL Europe games in 2001 and '02 and worked the Arena Football League in 2002 and '03 before making it to the NFL. His final college-football game was the 2003 Sugar Bowl. Wrolstad went back to NFL Europe the past three summers to work as a head referee, his goal in the NFL.

"It's a more challenging position," he said. "You have to make more judgments and be the leader of the crew. It's a challenge."

Corrente, entering his 11th season in the NFL, believes Wrolstad is up to that challenge.

"There's no question in my mind," he said. "He has the ability to not only be a head official, but I believe he'll be an excellent one."

Wrolstad also has excelled in education, and Seattle Christian jumped at the chance to hire him as an athletic director



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NFL official Craig Wrolstad is one of 17 field judges in the league.

last year.

"He's absolutely exceptional," superintendent Gloria Hunter said. "First and foremost, he's a tremendous role model for young boys, and our high-school students and middle-school students look up to him with great respect. They admire him."

Word spread quickly about his side job as an official.

"It's no secret," Wrolstad said. "Kids will come up to me and say, 'I saw you on TV.' A lot of kids think it's really neat."

Wrolstad, who is one of three NFL officials in the Seattle-Tacoma area, tries to be low key about it.

"When he meets people who ask him what he does, he's an athletic director, not an NFL official," Chrystal said. "That [officiating] is his side job, and it's kind of a crazy side job."

The pay is pretty good — \$60,000 to \$125,000, depending on experience. But that's not why Wrolstad is in the business.

"I love it," he said. "What other place would you rather be on a Sunday afternoon? People pay to just watch the game. I get to watch the game, interact with the players and basically be part of the game."

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