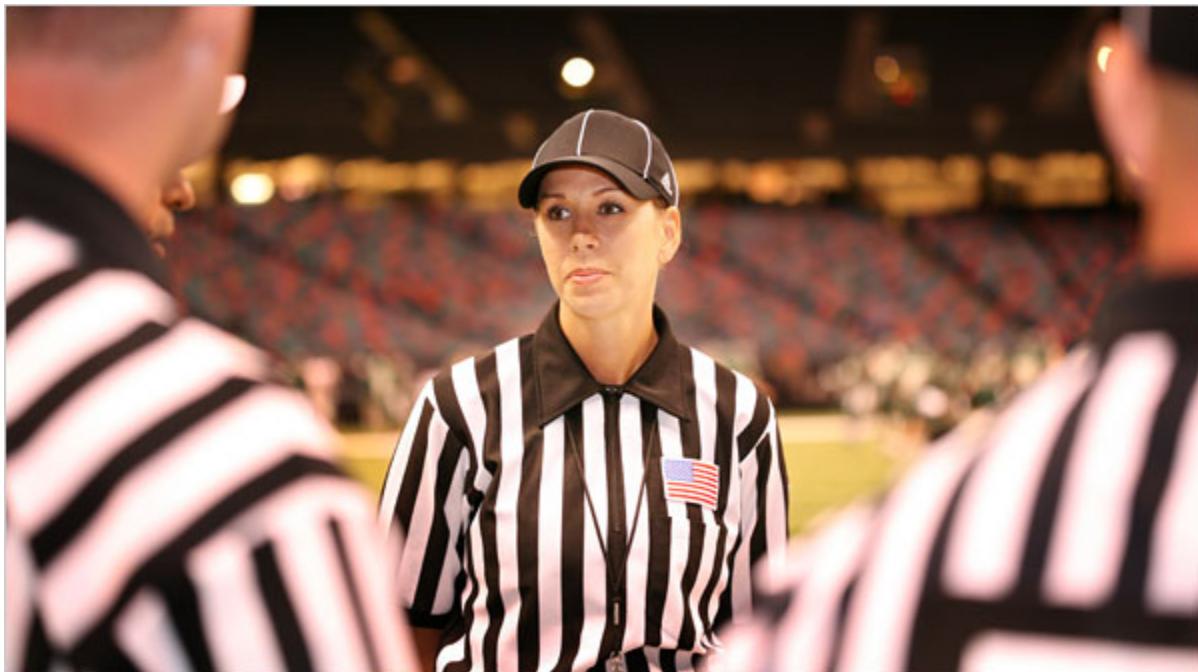


Earning Her Stripes in College Football



Theresa Cassagne for The New York Times

Sarah Thomas and her fellow officials say that her sex has never been an issue.

By [JOE DRAPE](#)

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NEW ORLEANS — Mike Henry could not get comfortable in his stance. He knew the line judge was watching him. This was only a scrimmage, but Henry, a 6-foot-5, 289-pound freshman lineman, was trying to move up the depth chart for the Tulane Green Wave. The whistle blew and a blur of black and white stripes came running his way.

“You need to get down, and stay down,” the official said in a voice that swiveled Henry’s head and widened his eyes. It was not the tone but the timbre of Sarah Thomas’s voice.

It was soft and lilting and grounded in the rhythms of her native Mississippi. Because Thomas’s long blond hair was tucked beneath a black hat swirled in stripes, Henry had had no idea the official was a woman.

Thomas, 35, is major college football’s only female referee. She has grown accustomed to startling players and coaches on Saturdays but said it did not occur as often as one might think.

“Most of the time they are so focused on what they are doing, they don’t notice me,” Thomas said. “And that is what every other official strives for. Our best games are the ones that no one knows we’re there.”

Neither Thomas nor those who work with and supervise her say it is odd that she has found her avocation amid big games and marching bands. She always loved sports and was the first athlete at Pascagoula High School to earn a letter five times in a sport, softball. She received a basketball scholarship to the University of Mobile, helped the team make the [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics](#) tournament and earned academic all-American honors.

So it felt right when she accompanied her older brother, Lea Bailey, to a meeting of the Gulf Coast Football Officials Association in 1996. Thomas was immediately intrigued by the team aspect of an officiating crew and how much she did not know about the rules of football.

She started as many others did, officiating for youth leagues and studying for tests as she worked her way through middle school and junior varsity games. She reached the high school level in 1999, and worked the game clock while pregnant with her sons, Bridley, now 8, and Brady, 5.

“The spouses of my crew made me a maternity referee shirt,” Sarah Thomas said, blushing. “Standing out there, big and in stripes has been the only time I’ve ever felt out of place.”

In 2006, Thomas decided to leave the football field. Her career in pharmaceutical sales was taking off, and her sons were beginning to participate in sports and other activities. But before Thomas hung up her whistle, she came to the attention of Gerald Austin, an [N.F.L.](#) official for more than 25 years who is now the coordinator of football officials for Conference USA.

An officiating scout, another former N.F.L. official, had been impressed by Thomas’s work in a high-pressure playoff game, and called Austin to tell him so. Austin invited Thomas to an officials’ camp in Reno, Nev.

“She made one tough call after another and nailed every one of them,” Austin said. “There was no reason not to hire her.”

Thomas’s husband, Brian, who sells medical equipment and coaches a travel baseball team, told her that she had plenty of football seasons left.

“I wasn’t going to stand in her way,” he said. “We’ve figured out a way to make our schedule work for the kids. I’m hustling in the fall, and she is in the spring and summer.”

[After two years of easing her into the rotation](#), Austin scheduled Thomas for a full schedule of games this season. She and her fellow officials say her gender has never been an issue. At Tulane, Thomas scrutinized the line of scrimmage and ran the field in concert with the six other officials. Coach Bob Toledo and his staff shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with her as they did all the crew members.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie among officials because for a couple of hours at least you’re not on the same page as the rest of world,” said Wayne Winkler, a line judge who is a retired Louisiana state trooper. “The teams and the fans are in the heat of battle, and it is a pressurized setting. So we have to take care of each other on and off the field. Sarah makes that easy because she is an excellent official who has a nice way, but also is there for her crew as well.”

Thomas says she blends easily into the sideline and is hardly noticed by coaches or players.

“As a former athlete, I understand that they are focused and intent on what they’re doing,” she said.

She understands intensity can give way to some salty language.

“What is funny is on those rare times they notice that I’m a woman, they get very embarrassed, and my kids could stand there without hearing anything inappropriate,” Thomas said.

She has apparently inspired other women to reach for their whistles. This weekend, the Southwestern Athletic Conference’s first female football official will work a game. The Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference has three women on its officiating crews.

Thomas has also worked the New Orleans Saints’ training camps, and her name comes up as the most likely contender when the N.F.L. decides to add a female official.

“They have got to look at her,” Austin said. “She’s too good.”

Thomas said she was in no hurry to break that barrier. On Saturday night, she will be in Fort Worth, where Texas Christian will host Texas State. And she said she would be a better official on Sunday than she was the day before.

“I am learning something every week,” Thomas said. “I just can’t imagine not being on a football field in the fall.”