**Road to the NFL was Paved with Mentors**

When NFL Official Jim Mello, spoke before the ANEFO members on August 29, 2016, one could hear a pin drop. Mello, a former high school and college official, stated to a big applause, “This is my roots – I spent many nights in this hall!” As Jim shared his story of how he rose to ranks of one of the nation’s top NFL officials, we learned the importance of his mentors.

When he started as a 22 year old ANEFO official, it was a young Don January (former ANEFO official and currently Massachusetts Commissioner of Pop Warner) who encouraged Jim and took him under his wing. Don encouraged Jim to officiate high school football games; this helped this young man from Lynn build the foundation that afforded him an opportunity to rise to the NFL.

After several years as a high school official, Jim began to officiate college football games. He had the best of both worlds. Jim would work a high school game on Friday and a college game on Saturday. He learned the art of tailgating after the college games with his crew. It was working college games that Jim also met his second officiating mentor, John Salmon, who advised him to apply to the NFL. Jim was thrilled when he was asked to official NFL European arena football. He had no idea of the time commitment this would take. When he returned from that assignment, Jim rose in the college officiating ranks where he would meet his next mentors.

Bill Ward, a college assigner entered his life, as well as John Salmon. Working A-10 division games and eventually Big East games, Jim was exposed to a more serious evaluation process. The crew was required to look at tapes of each play after their games. Analysis and accountability was taken to a new level. What Jim learned was that they not only were looking for knowledge and skills, but character – how one works well with other people! How one gets along with players, crew members, coaches, and supervisors. Finally, how one reacts to constructive feedback.

Unexpectedly, Jim Mello got the call to be an NFL candidate. But, first there were the interviews. An intense background check; Jim joked that he is now glad they didn’t have today’s social media when the NFL reviewed his youthful days in Lynn! Later, there were the psychological interviews; was Jim mentally prepared to work in the scrutinized and stressful NFL? And finally there was the interview with the large group of ten NFL supervisors and coaches. One Southern coach from Alabama joked that he could not understand Jim’s Boston accent during the interview. Jim passed the interviews, joined the ranks of NFL Officials, traveled all over the country 40 weeks a year, and worked a Super Bowl game. Jim shared that he will always remember his first NFL game: New York Giants vs. Philadelphia Eagles in Philly. Jim recalled that it took him three years to feel comfortable and to hone his craft as an NFL official. Like any good official, he is still learning; this is his 13th year as an NFL official.

Jim concluded his speech and inspired the ANEFO officials in the audience by sharing three of his personal goals: “1) Get hired back – you are only as good as your last call. 2) Learn something new from each game you officiate; keep trying to be a better official. 3) Remember to have fun – we are all part of the great greatest game in the world – football!” A special thank you to Jim Mello for sharing his story and visiting his old stomping grounds!