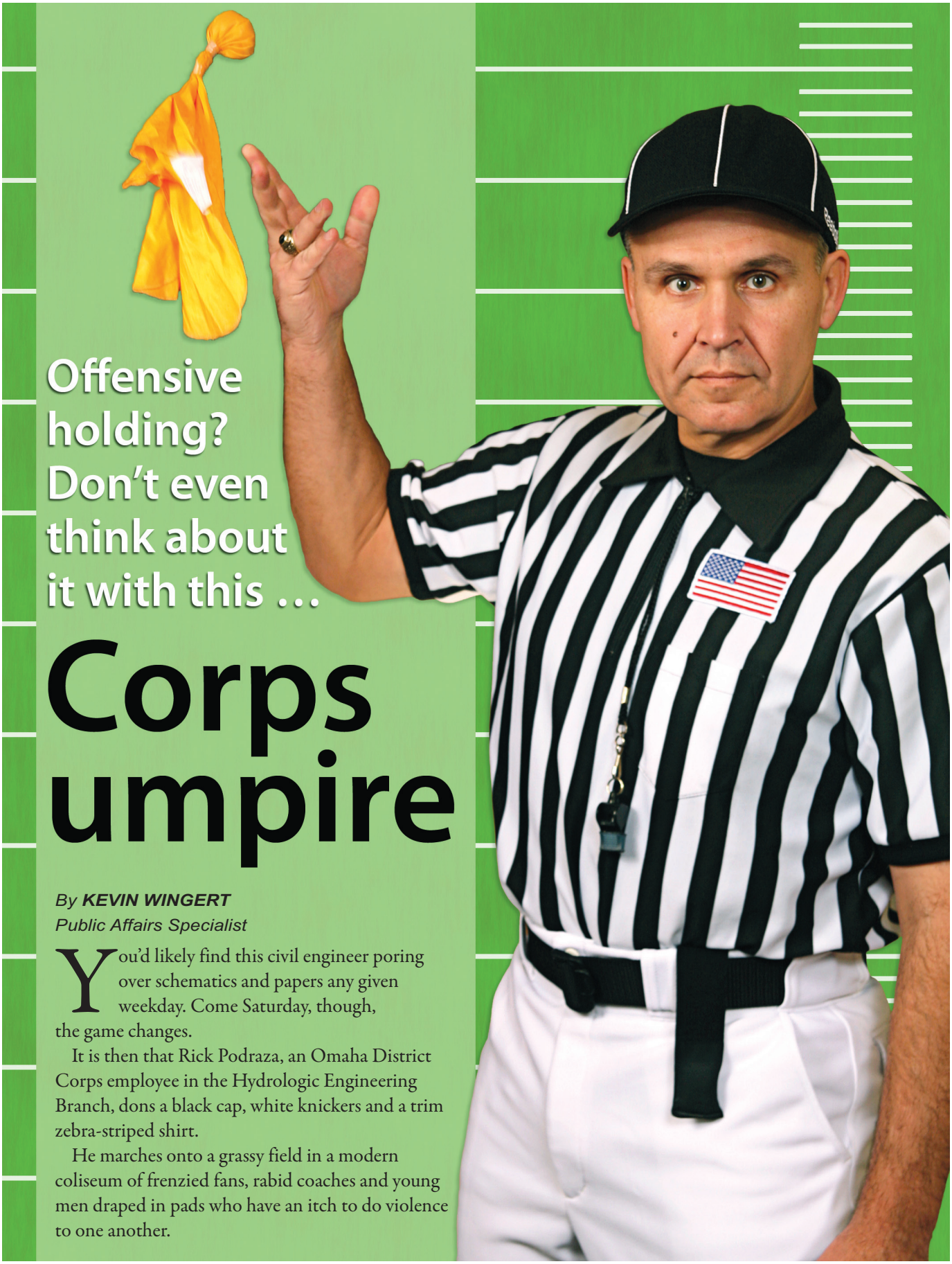

Offensive holding? Don't even think about it with this …

Corps umpire

By **KEVIN WINGERT**
Public Affairs Specialist

You'd likely find this civil engineer poring over schematics and papers any given weekday. Come Saturday, though, the game changes.

It is then that Rick Podraza, an Omaha District Corps employee in the Hydrologic Engineering Branch, dons a black cap, white knickers and a trim zebra-striped shirt.

He marches onto a grassy field in a modern coliseum of frenzied fans, rabid coaches and young men draped in pads who have an itch to do violence to one another.

Photo illustration by Harry Weddington, Kevin Wingert NWO

College football umpire Rick Podraza signals a change in possession during a college football game. Podraza's position requires an even temper in an often emotional game. (Courtesy of NCAA)

Rick Podraza, a member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, spends many of his fall weekends working as a college football umpire in the Big 12 Conference. (Courtesy of NCAA)

"I love it," he says of standing six to seven yards behind the defensive line. "You feel like you're in the middle of everything."

For Podraza the engineer is also Podraza the college football umpire – one of a seven-man team of officials who maintain order amid an otherwise chaotic sport. He regularly appears on national television officiating games for the Big 12 Conference – his latest being the Kraft Fight the Hunger Bowl at AT&T Park in San Francisco on Jan. 9.

As tenuous as it might appear to draw a correlation between an engineer and a football official, the two unique worlds of Podraza are inextricably intertwined with each helping to inform and enrich the other.

"Rick's employment by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and involvement in college football officiating is unique," says fellow football official Kelly Deterding. Deterding has 14 years experience at the Big 12 level and has officiated 10 post season games. "However, it is not all that uncommon for an official's professional career to come from a 'walk of life' that is totally unrelated to the game of football. Officials have careers that cover a wide spectrum of professional employment."

The seeds for officiating were planted in the fall of 1986, when Podraza worked as an intern with the Federal Highway Administration. Stuck in the middle of nowhere in northern California working as a highway construction inspector with few options to do on the weekends, the young man found himself in a funk. He took refuge in watching college football. One particular fall day, he watched a fateful Notre Dame game and stared transfixed by a whirling dervish named Tim Brown, who dodged tackles and split down the sideline to return a kickoff for six points. As Brown crossed the plane of the goal, a college referee appeared on the bottom of the television screen with arms outstretched in the familiar touchdown signal.

"You know, I could do that," Podraza told himself.

In June of 1989, Podraza began his career with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Omaha. On the weekends, he started officiating for Pee Wee football, an organization that is always looking for referees. He also worked sub-varsity football games for local high schools in the Omaha Metro area during the weekdays. Usually, those games started early enough in the afternoon that Podraza would slip into a work bathroom to change. He received a few strange stares each time he walked through the office in full officiating gear.

To continue this journey as a football official and move on to bigger challenges, Podraza signed up for sub-varsity clinics and any other training he could find.

Within the football world, officiating crews at the high school level and higher are most often hired as teams – not individuals. So Podraza would join several like-minded officials to form a crew and then market themselves to area and regional high schools. By 1993, he was officiating Nebraska's Class D-1 8-man State Championship Game and then again in 2001 for the Class B State Championship game.

New opportunities to advance would open as more established officials moved on or retired. Podraza landed officiating duties for NCAA Division 3 in 1998, then Division 2 in 2005 and on to Division 1-AA in 2007. In 2008, he began a full-time gig with the Big 12 conference.

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Daniel E. Cimarosti

Commander's Award for Civilian Service

Through Cimarosti's technical skill and collaborative ability, he ensured consistent administration of the Corps Regulatory Program in North Dakota even in the midst of controversial issues from October 2009 to October 2010. This State Regulatory Program Manager for North Dakota served as Omaha District's sole member on the Devils Lake Task Force Initiative, representing the district at high level meetings. He also excelled at articulating field conditions and issues, including flood-related matters, to all levels of management. He also has regularly assisted with numerous command visits and tours, demonstrating polished etiquette skills and handling visitors with grace and tact for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Corps cancels March pulse due to high waters

OMAHA, NEB. – The scheduled pulse of water into the Missouri River for this month to benefit the endangered pallid sturgeon has been cancelled. A natural pulse from the eastern South Dakota tributaries is occurring instead. The melt of the extensive plains snowpack in eastern South Dakota has raised river levels well above the flow limits, eliminating the need for a two-day pulse. Tributary streams in eastern South Dakota are well above flood stage and are forecast to continue climbing. The magnitude of the March pulse was to be 5,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) minus the flow on the James River at just above its confluence with the Missouri River upstream of Sioux City.

Zorinsky Lake clean-up set for May 7

OMAHA, NEB. – The public is invited to participate in a spring clean-up event at Zorinsky Lake May 7. The Zorinsky Lake Community Spring Clean-Up will enable the greater Omaha community to assist in clearing debris and trash from around the lake. The event will begin at 8 a.m. Volunteers will meet at the boat ramp at 156th and F Streets. Informational booths on zebra mussels will be on display and representatives of the various agencies participating will be available. The actual cleanup will run from 9 to 11 a.m. and all necessary cleanup equipment will be provided.

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In the off season, he works as an official for Arena Football League as well. Could the regular NFL be in his future?

"It's a numbers game," Podraza says. "If my number is called, I won't say 'no.' However, I am very happy and grateful to be where I am at right now."

His first real challenge on the college level occurred in 2007 as this lifelong Nebraskan took the field in a Division 1 game where Nebraska faced Nevada at home to begin its season. Surrounded by 85,000 screaming fans in red, Podraza knew he needed to separate himself from his feelings.

"You have to shut it out," Podraza says. "It becomes maroon versus black or red shirt versus white shirt. You have to look at the game with blinders on."

That became easier because of his engineering background. As a football umpire, he had to focus on a particular set of fouls depending upon the play – a process he compared to working on a series of "if-then" statements.

If the play is a pass, then he watches the guard and center along with 1-2 defensive tackles to call potential holding fouls. If the play is a run, then he keys in on the guards and watches for potential chop blocks.

"You've got to go with the flow but have 'situational awareness,'" Podraza says of the repetitive nature of the game. "You have to be somewhat robotic and very consistent and maintain your concentration over a span of three hours – and my job as an engineer really helps."

The head of Hydrologic Engineering, John Remus, first witnessed Podraza on the football field a decade ago at Westside High School, where Remus' children attended.

"I saw Rick being Rick: Taking charge, all business – yep, taking care of business," Remus says. "Rick really enjoys it. It's something he's passionate about and it gives him a very constructive stress outlet for work."

Deterding adds that control of the game on the field often falls on Podraza's shoulders because of his position. To accomplish this, he must rely on his knowledge of the rules, his athleticism, professionalism and communication abilities.

Podraza, himself, has seen his communication as an engineer improve as a result of college officiating. This self-described introvert has learned to maintain his composure in front of a crowd of 100,000. Similarly, at a town hall meeting addressing a contentious situation, he keeps an even keel and focuses on the task at hand.

"Football has taught me to become a better listener and communicator," Podraza says. "You learn to say the right thing at the right time and be an effective communicator, whether you talking to an emotional player or coach or empathizing with someone worried about a levee breaching."