

Match Officials and Youth Soccer Coaches and Parents – Respect for the Game

First and foremost in your role as coach or parent you should recognize that you are teaching your players about every aspect of the game. To be effective in either role you should model your behavior towards game officials as one of sincere respect for the great sport you are playing and teaching others to play. You love soccer right? Imagine it WITHOUT officials and I hope you will realize that we all need to work to appreciate their efforts.

Referees are trained in the classroom and on the field and never stop developing their skills as arbiters of what is fair and safe. There has yet to be a game of soccer in which a match official does not make a mistake and in fact much of the learning experience is based upon looking back at decisions and stepping through the thought process to evaluate how things might have been done differently. The approach is applied to the novice and the expert – MLS referees are assessed and mentored on every game and even under the extremely demanding conditions they work in are able to self-assess throughout a game.

Referees are also trained to approach the game from a player's and spectator's perspective and seek to intervene to the least degree possible. Based upon the level of play and the attitude of the participants experienced officials may well vary the degree to which foul play is tolerated and, with the exception of fouls that are clearly tactical or made without regard for the safety of an opponent, the referee may opt to not call fouls considered to be 'trifling' or to opt to allow play to continue if they see the fouled team able to keep the advantage in play. These approaches may seem like inconsistency to the spectator and lead to a sense of frustration - 'the ref last week called that every time' is a common remark, but it is key that coaches, players and spectators grasp that match officials are allowed complete discretion in the decisions they take.

As a coach or parent, if you model irresponsible behavior towards game officials, however unwittingly, your players will follow. The consequences of such behavior for you are limited to embarrassment and perhaps expulsion from games if the match officials decide you are behaving irresponsibly, but for your players they are much more far-reaching.

In the context of their day-to-day soccer experience players will lose focus on their game as they start to follow your questioning of the referee's calls. Slowly but surely they will become demoralized as the idea that officials unfairly influence the outcomes of games becomes ever more firmly seated in their minds. As they become young adults they will start to verbally question official's calls and this will lead to cautions for dissent and then send-offs for foul and abusive language. The fun of playing becomes secondary.

In the context of influencing the athlete's outlook towards authority, and their basic understanding of dealing with conflict, irresponsible behavior towards match officials lays the groundwork for a lifetime of frustration. Players see you question officials and they question their teachers, they see you bullying officials and they figure they'll carry some of that behavior into recess.

In the context of the USSF Referees Program and in our case, its local body, the Seattle Soccer Referees Association (SSRA), such behavior completely undermines their efforts to grow a body of experienced and knowledgeable match officials. To reach the top levels of officiating is very hard to do and requires that we start educating and mentoring referees from an early age. A frighteningly large percentage of referees (of all ages, but particularly younger referees) quit after a couple of seasons because of the abuse they suffer. This damage to the greater goal is rarely appreciated by participants in youth soccer until they show up for a really important game and there is only one official instead of three.

I thank you in advance for your collaboration

Seattle Youth Soccer Association Liaison to SSRA – June 2012