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How refs can deal with spectator abuse

By Randy Vogt, SoccerAmerica.com

Abuse from the sideline is a very sad component of some youth soccer games. Many soccer refs quit during their first two years of officiating with verbal abuse from the touchline being the No. 1 reason for quitting.

If all of us understood that referees are human beings who make mistakes and have feelings like everybody else, plus that coaches and spectators are role models for their own children, so many of the discipline problems associated with youth soccer would go away. And your league's Arbitration Committee would be about as busy as the Maytag repairman.

My [Soccer America column in August 2010](#) was on how referees control the coaches who need to be controlled. Coaches only have the ability, per the Laws of the Game, to give tactical instruction from the technical area and that is it. It goes on to state that coaches "must behave in a responsible manner." Certainly, for a ref to allow a coach to give a running criticism of the officiating hurts game control. Allowing constant criticism from a coach (or anybody else) contributes to an environment in which the players stop playing soccer and begin to focus on what the ref is whistling, which leads to more robust challenges and more vocal dissent.

I have also learned that referees who control problem coaches have a much easier time with that same coach should their paths ever cross again as the coach knows that he or she will not be allowed to dissent much at all.

Coaches are part of the equation of touchline abuse but what about abuse from the spectators? Many spectators have absolutely no idea what the rules say, especially in youth soccer, and the only soccer games that they have ever seen are their son's or daughter's. The great majority of problems with parents are avoided by officials who hustle, smile, are approachable, get calls correct plus briefly explain decisions that need to be explained.

Over the course of an officiating career, a referee will come across that rare human being who has very little experience with the game yet thinks he or she is an authority on the rules and does not respect the ref's decisions or whatever brief explanation the ref may give. Just smile and move on.

But what if that spectator continues to yell? Once the ref figures out which team the spectator is rooting for, he or she could seek that coach's help to control the spectator. Many youth leagues now require that the coach control unruly spectators. When a coach has been instructed by the referee to quiet the team's parents, the coach can send over an assistant to deliver the message or be forced to deal with the parents while the game is stopped.

The referee should not confront the spectator as this will only add fuel to the fire. Thankfully, spectator behavior rarely gets to that level. I can only recall abandoning one of my games because of poor spectator behavior.

Yes, some people take youth soccer way too seriously and one unfortunate consequence of this verbal abuse leads to the referees remaining often being overworked on weekends. I started refereeing when I was 16 years old and obviously stuck with it. But it struck me as odd when some adults 2-3 times my age at that time showed less maturity at a soccer game than the players a few years younger than me. I still see this lack of maturity in some of the adults today.

As Jim Tunney, who officiated in the NFL for 31 years, once stated, "My definition of a spectator is a person who yells at me for missing a subtle hold in the interior line and, after the game, cannot find his car in the parking lot."

(Randy Vogt has officiated over 8,000 games during the past three decades, from professional matches in front of thousands to 6-year-olds being cheered on by very enthusiastic parents. In Preventive Officiating, he shares his wisdom gleaned from thousands of games and hundreds of clinics to help referees not only survive but thrive on the soccer field. You can visit the book's website at www.preventiveofficiating.com/)