

WHERE ARE ALL THE REFS?

THE PROBLEM

Whether you are new to youth soccer or a seasoned veteran of many travel seasons there is one unmistakable observation most make. There just are not many certified referees to go around.

If your player is playing in the younger recreation program ranks chances are you may never have a certified referee all season long. If your player is playing for older recreation teams or younger competitive teams you will be lucky to have only a center referee.

If your team is lucky enough to have a referee for a game the chances are very good that this referee will be very young, sometimes not much older than your players, or very inexperienced.

SO WHAT IS GOING ON?

One reason for this is the explosion of youth soccer. Referee associations throughout our state and even nationally are finding it difficult to recruit and train enough referees to keep pace with the demand.

However, the biggest challenge is referee retention. It seems that the referee pool is dwindling despite their ability to recruit and train good numbers of adults and youth into entry level positions.

Most new referees only last 1-2 seasons if that long. Many more experienced referees are hanging up their cleats for a less stressful hobby. This leaves us with a pool of many inexperienced entry level refs and a few very experienced refs with an absence of the competent yet developing mid-grade referees that are needed to provide much of our weekend game coverage.

The problem is frankly adult conduct. More specifically the problem is overzealous or hypercompetitive adults many of whom do not know the laws of the game and exhibit poor sideline behavior. Much of this can be found at the younger age groups where players and adults are just learning the game. Expectations are high, experience is low and an emphasis to win takes priority over accepting some of the mistakes made as a natural part of player skills development.

Moans and complaints from the sideline directed at referees are the norm. There was a recent incident where an eighteen year old, second year referee, having 12 years of playing experience was mercilessly ridiculed by a coach and sideline for a "bad call" at a U10 game. It turns out the referee's call was correct. To make matters worse the entire band of complaining adults were all unaware of the applicable law of the game. The result after a few more similar weekends of similar treatment was this promising young referee quit.

This story is replayed over and over every season as aspiring referees decide the constant abuse, ridicule or complaints are more than they need to hear.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

Youth soccer clubs and associations are taking a harder stance with regard to sideline and on-field behavior. Coaches, referees and adults are encouraged to report over-the-top behavior that is inappropriate yet outside the bounds of on-field Laws.

An information campaign such as this is distributed at season startup to remind everyone of their responsibilities.

Penalties such as cautions (yellow cards) and send offs (red cards) are now tracked in a central database and monitored by clubs. Individual players or coaches receiving penalties in the categories of “unsporting behavior”, “dangerous play” or “dissent” (i.e. disrespectful disagreement with the ref) are being additionally warned by the club. Club sanctions are being instituted for repeat offenders.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Know the Laws of the Game. Find and review them online.
2. Get certified as a referee and help out, or be available for your team if a referee does not show up. Contact your club for more info.
3. Educate yourself more about how the game is played. Talk to your coach and players about rules you don't understand.
4. Play the game. Whether on an adult indoor/outdoor team or in your backyard with your player. Understand how challenging of a game this is to play.
5. Model outstanding sideline behavior. Stay positive at all times. Cheer for both teams. Do not overtly question the referee's decisions (they make mistakes too).
6. Teach your player to play through the “bad” calls and unsporting acts. Players have to learn not to be affected by unsporting play by their opponents, referee calls that don't seem to go their way, loud, boisterous or negative sidelines etc.
7. Courteously remind uninitiated parents on your sideline that positive sideline behavior is expected on your team.
8. Remind yourself that players, referees and coaches are all LEARNING. Mistakes will be made and need to be made in order for them to get better.
9. Have fun and enjoy the ride. This ain't the World Cup!

Good sportsmanship is expected from all. Understanding the game more, expecting sporting behavior and positive sidelines, keeping youth sports in perspective and getting involved with your team and club will all go a long way to providing a great environment for our layers and referees to develop.