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Referees: Be Part of the Solution

By Dan Raben, Director of Player Development

Soccer in the United States has grown tremendously since we hosted the World Cup back in 1994. The level of playing ability among children is higher, and it's no surprise. Children have more access to soccer (on TV, playing video games, attending professional matches, etc.) which helps stoke the flames of their passion for the sport. Coaches are better educated – both in terms of what to teach and how to teach. Many who once played the game as kids are now back as coaches. The quality of playing surfaces has improved – far better than the fields I grew up playing on, which seemed bumpier than the surface of the moon.

Several elements of youth soccer have grown and improved dramatically in a relatively short amount of time, but a significant area has not evolved at the same rate: Referees.

There is a shortage of referees in youth soccer – not just locally in our county but nationwide. This shortage is both in quantity and quality. There are numerous reasons why: many players who transition out of the game become coaches instead of referees. There are more games being played (semi-pro, college, adult, Travel, Rec, etc.) and there are not enough certified and appropriately experienced referees available to assign. People are busy, and their availability may not match the games needing referees.

The biggest reason: we (coaches, parents, and players) chase referees away.

To err is human. Much like the children playing the game, referees will make mistakes – they'll miss calls, or apply the rules incorrectly, or be caught out of position, or may call a penalty kick in the last 10 seconds of a game against your team for a phantom foul.

Our natural inclination in those moments is to boo, argue, or shout insults. We're nearly conditioned to do so, based on how fans react to referees in professional sports (even if the referee called it correctly, we'll still yell because it's against our team). This misapplication of culturally acceptable behavior at professional sports explains why inappropriate conduct at youth games occurs.

It by no means justifies it.



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Let It Go, and Help Them Grow:

To remedy this problem, everyone – coaches, parents, players, and club directors – need to do our part to improve the environment for referees.

Lower your expectations: this is a simple step - accept the fact that referees make mistakes, and there's likely to be a "bad" call against your team. It's part of the game. Real Madrid advanced from the Champions League Quarterfinals this year off two goals that should have been whistled offside. If it happens there, it's going to happen on Saturday mornings at Farmwell Middle School.

Also: recognize that for every "bad" call that goes against your team, your team will likely benefit from a "bad" call in your favor – if not in that same game then at some time during the course of the season (and I've yet to see coaches and parents yell at the referee when that bad call benefits them!).

Accept that you're probably wrong: The Laws of the Game have changed significantly over the last few years. What was once deemed a hand ball when you played the game is no longer the case (also: it's now called handling). Referees interpret the Laws of the Game – what they deem pushing may not be interpreted the same way by another referee. Even if you're right, it's not your decision. Know your role.

Focus on what's in your control: I teach the players on my team to focus on their decisions, their actions, and their reactions, and not on variables out of their control (e.g. referees, field conditions, comments from spectators, etc.) We focus on how we respond to adversity, instead of complaining about the setback. This level of mindfulness helps instill greater focus, composure, and grit, which will serve them well as athletes but also later in life as adults. Model and encourage this behavior.

Give our referees the opportunity to grow: refereeing is difficult. There's a lot of information to process simultaneously (the ball, the player with the ball, their teammates, the opposing team, the Laws of the Game, etc.). Cognitive overload is real, and it results in mistakes, but it can improve with time.

While all referees must certify on an annual basis, the actual educational component is small compared with a Driver's Ed class, a gun safety course, or any other certification process. A referee's true training ground is in the games they officiate, and improving with each game.

Many of our referees are young, and are still learning the job. Verbal abuse toward them only contributes to the high attrition we see from young refs – we chase them from the game before they have a chance to improve.



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Even our older, more experienced referees – those who developed a thick enough skin to continue – must be treated with respect, even if we disagree with their decisions, as they will improve as well with the right environment and feedback. Don't chase them away, because the alternative (certifying even less experienced referees who will be assigned more competitive matches) won't help.

Show your appreciation: thank the referee after the game for their time. That little pleasantry can go a long way, especially given the amount of abuse they may receive in other games. It's critical that coaches and parents encourage this with their children playing, as a sign of sportsmanship and respect.

Be Part of the Solution – Become a Referee: Loudoun Soccer hosts certification courses throughout the year (most often in the Winter, but some in the Summer), and there are courses held around Northern Virginia, too – you can certify in another city and still work games in Loudoun County.

Becoming a referee and officiating matches can be rewarding:

- It keeps you active;
- It can make you a better coach, player or fan;
- It can help you bond with your child (certify together and work games together);
- You earn money;
- You give back to the community; and most importantly:
- You help grow the game.

There's a complimentary article in this magazine from one of our senior referees about his experience; it's worth the read. Please also visit our Referee page at <http://www.loudounsoccer.com/refs/>. Certification details will be updated later this summer.

There is a problem we face in youth soccer. The solution is clear. It's up to us to be part of the solution. Let's start together at your team's next game.