

FAIR PLAY



THE REFEREE'S ROLE IN YOUTH SOCCER

Julie Ilacqua

Recently I was asked to give a presentation on officiating youth sports at the International Youth Sports Congress in Indianapolis. There wasn't a large amount of time on the agenda to cover such an important topic so I broke the subject down into parts that I thought could be easily understood. The main points of the presentation dealt with athletic competition for youth and the referee's role in keeping it safe, fair and making it fun while being a good role model and handling the complications that officials can sometimes bring to the game. While my presentation was prepared for officiating of all types of youth sports, this article is geared to officiating youth soccer.



Keeping it Safe

Safety of the players is number one on the list of a referee's responsibilities. Safety should never be sacrificed for the flow of the game, advantage or any other reason.

Waiting for something to happen before taking action is not always best and there are ways in which a referee can use preventative measures to help insure the safety of the players. Some of these measures are not covered in the Laws of the Game such as your voice, body language, hand signals, using your whistle to communicate and positioning – being where you are supposed to be. While injuries can't be

controlled, a word, look or gesture at the right moment can keep players from continuing on a dangerous course even though technically, no foul has been committed.

What are some preventative methods a referee can use with children? You can talk to them. Often times a simple, "settle down" or "easy" is enough for a player to realize they are playing a little out of control. It also lets the player know that you see what's going on and you intend to keep your eye on their play. Body language is another method for communicating with players. Even though they are not part of the "official" signals used in refereeing, there are readily understood signals that can help keep a game under control. What body language can you use to say, "settle down," "stop", "that's enough" or "no more?" You can use your arms and hands in ways that say all of these things without saying a word. These signals should never be used in place of

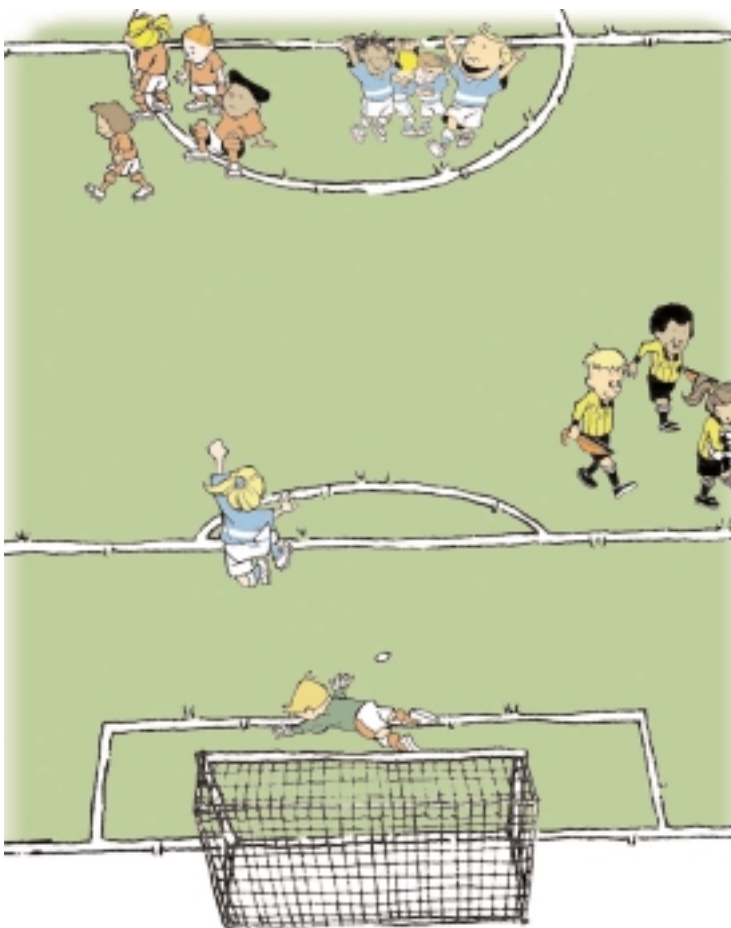
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calling a foul that should be called. These signals should also not be used after the damage is done and somebody is hurt when, as a referee, you didn't blow



the whistle for a foul that injured a player. Learning to use body language effectively can sometimes keep players from getting hurt themselves and hurting others.

Does your whistle talk to the players during a game? It should. From your whistle the players should be able to tell which fouls you think are just a little bit over the line from the ones that are really over the line. Serious fouls that are dangerous to the well being of players deserve a harsh, loud whistle that says you will not allow that kind of play on the field. One good thing about the whistle is that everybody can hear it and if it is used effectively; everyone knows what you think

about what just happened. Using the whistle effectively can help a referee stop certain types of action before having to use a yellow or red card to control play and a good referee learns to vary the tone, length and loudness of their whistle to talk to the players.

Another way of preventing problems before they happen is by being where you are supposed to be. This means being fit and working hard. Sometimes referees don't realize how important positioning is to keeping players safe. Proper positioning allows you to see what happens on the field, talk to players to keep rough play from escalating, and to hear verbal exchanges going on between players on the field so you are better able to control a situation that could end up in retaliation. Many referees do several games a week during the busiest time of the year, sometimes several a day, especially in tournaments. Being fit is an important part of giving your best to every game, but being fit isn't enough. You also have to work hard during the game. Each game is important to the players so your work rate should be at a high level no matter what age group you are officiating.

Sometimes, despite all of your efforts, a player gets injured. So what do you do to protect the player who has been hurt? If the play was very rough and a player is on the ground not moving, is bleeding, or has a possible head injury, play should be stopped immediately and the player attended to by trainers or team personnel. It is important to note that you should not touch a player in this position. If the player is moving around and you think that they may not be really injured, you can wait a few seconds to see how the player's behavior changes. You can run by the player and inquire as to how they are feeling. Do they want to leave the field? The player's response will help you know what to do next. As a referee you should also adjust your response to the age of the players. Very young children may need reassurance that they are okay. Sometimes the reassurance from the referee will be enough, but other times (especially with the youngest players) it may need to come from the coach or a parent so you

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should anticipate that in advance and be able to accommodate it without it taking up too much time. Most coaches and parents will help you move things along and will appreciate your understanding that the very little children may need a little extra care when they have been even slightly injured. You remember what it was like - scraped knees can really hurt when you are little!

After a game has been stopped for an injury and you have made sure the player is taken care of, think about how you are going to restart the game. Did you blow the whistle for a foul or did you blow the whistle because of the injury? If you blew the whistle for a foul, is the restart a direct or indirect kick? Where did the foul happen? If you blew the whistle because of the injury where was the ball at the time? If an injured player comes back in the game, just a quick "how are you doing - feeling ok?" means a lot. It also tells the players you know who was injured and that you want to keep an eye on them to make sure they will continue to be able to play.

All referees should know the proper procedure for reporting a player injury in the league in which they are working. Do you write it on the game report? Do you have to go into any detail about what happened? Fill out the paperwork in the way that the league requires.

Remember first and foremost that you are dealing with children. Sometimes children may not understand a call or all the rules. Sometimes children cry.



Sometimes they laugh when they shouldn't. Mostly children will sympathize with the player who is injured. How the referee handles these situations can be a learning experience for both the players and the referee.

Keeping it Fair

The most important aspect of keeping a game fair is knowing the rules. It's not just important, it's a referee's responsibility. It's okay to be wrong ... sometimes. Admitting you made a mistake goes a long way in player and game management as long as you aren't always apologizing for mistakes. If you are always saying, "my bad," you will soon be branded as incompetent, but an occasional admission is a humanizing thing to which everyone can relate. When you make mistakes on the field, learn from them. Don't keep making the same mistakes over and over again. This only shows that you don't care enough to learn to do something the right way.

It is critical that you enforce the rules evenly. The referee is the one charged with keeping a game fair and making sure the rules are applied to every player in a consistent manner. Players have a right to expect this from referees every day, in every game and at every age.

Does the rule book bend? Sometimes it does. In soccer, referees have some flexibility when it comes to calling trifling or petty fouls. What does the game call for? Can you let it go and let the kids keep playing? Or, by letting it go, does the play just get rougher and more physical? Ultimately whether or not the rulebook bends will depend on the situation and the game, however the rulebook never bends when it comes to safety of the players.

What do you do as a referee when the unexpected happens and you're not sure that there is a rule that covers it? There probably is a rule that covers the unexpected and unusual, you just need a few seconds to think how

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to best handle a situation that you have never faced before. First, you can't go wrong by doing what's fair for the players and best for the game. Second, don't hesitate to let players and coaches know what you are doing and why you are doing it in these unusual situations.

When you are asking yourself as a referee what the game calls for, you can look at it from a couple of different directions. Does the game require words or action? Does it require a soft touch or a strong decisive action? The game will often tell you what is needed in specific situations if you are in tune with the nuances of the game. For example, when play is really getting rough, words may not be enough. A soft touch won't clean it up, so you would use strong decisive action. On the other hand, when you have young children on the field and they are all going aggressively after the ball, some will get over anxious and use a little arm action to clear people out of their way. Often a little talk and maybe a whistle with an explanation will help everyone to understand what is appropriate and to play by the rules.

As a referee you have probably already learned one

important fact of the trade - there are times when you cannot make everyone happy. We should expect that not everyone is always going to like what we do or the calls we make, so we should expect there will be some unhappy people now and then. If, however, you are receiving the same criticisms over and over again from coaches and players, you should take a look at how you are handling particular situations. There are times, where if we listen to players and coaches and take an objective look at what we're doing as referees, we can learn to do some things in ways that will help us to be a better referee the next time we take the field.

When it comes to keeping the game fair in youth soccer we should remember some things about children. Children are fair by nature. Children like it when things are fair and they know when it's not fair. Children will tell you something was not fair even if their team benefited. Children will probably learn that things are not always fair as they get older, but it shouldn't be a referee who teaches them that lesson.

[Part 2 of this article will be found in the next issue of Fair Play.]

POINT OF EMPHASIS: CROSSING THE LINE

There are some occasions on which the player may leave the field of play without the referee's permission during the course of play without fear of punishment. Referees and players will be able to think of others, we are sure.

1. To play the ball if there is an obstacle (any players or officials) that prevents normal play.
2. To retrieve the ball and/or put it back into play at a stoppage—goal kick, corner kick, throw-in, free kick.
3. A player overruns the ball and temporarily leaves the field to get a better angle for kicking the ball.
4. A player steps over the line after playing the ball.
5. A player slips or slides on a wet playing surface.
6. A player steps off the field to stop the ball from going out of play.
7. A player steps off the field to show non-involvement in offside.

The point of emphasis is that referees should not unnecessarily restrict players. The lines on the field are to indicate where the ball is in play and where most play should occur. Players are allowed to show their creativity and resiliency both within and without the boundaries. It is when they cross the boundaries for illegal purposes—something other than to play the ball—that the referee should become concerned.

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A COACH'S CRITICAL LOOK AT REFEREES

Len Oliver

How often has a coach stood on the sideline, arms crossed, questioning a referee's decision, most of the time silently, occasionally vocally? In all my years in the game, I have never witnessed a coach, player or spectator who has been able to get a referee to change their decision. Asking them to change judgment calls—we shouldn't even try. At times, with law interpretations, perhaps we can help to educate the younger referee if we do it with a polite "we're in this game together" attitude.



I thrived in the era of urban ethnic soccer in the 1940's and 1950's. Referees at that time had all played the game, knew us personally and understood our styles of play, our moods and our complaints. Referees didn't have cards at that time. They simply "booked" you by

jotting your name and number on a small pad. Two "bookings," a rare occurrence, and you were gone, like a red card today but much more subtle and rarely used. Mostly the refs of the day talked to the players, telling you to, "Cool it, Lenny," or "Calm down, number 4." Paul Tamberino, four-time MLS Referee of the Year, admits to constantly talking to players. Communication between referees and players and coaches is a must. Off the field, referees were our friends. Hall of Fame referee Jim Walder lived in my Kensington neighborhood, we shared magazines, he inquired about my career, and we shared stories about the sport we loved. We're all a part of this great game, we're all necessary, and few coaches and referees would consciously act in a manner that brings the game into disrepute. When coaches or players (and at rare times, referees) do act in an obnoxious manner, however, we all suffer, the game suffers. So, speaking as a long time player and youth coach, here are my concerns about our referees.

Referees Who Try to Be Coaches—I warm up my players, the referee or assistant referee checks cleats and jewelry, and has the players pound on their pads. The ref should not then lecture my players for 10 minutes on direct and indirect free kicks, offside, tackles from behind, and direct foot passes to the goalie. This is all part of the coach's responsibility. Teaching the Laws and referee signals to my players is my responsibility, a referee's is to officiate the match. If a player doesn't understand a Law, that is the coach's problem. I would like to see an end to pre-game lectures.

Referees Who Do Not Know the Laws or "The Spirit of the Laws"—When a referee allows a goal after a penalty kick comes off the post and is again played by the kicker, or randomly gives cards to control the game, or punishes a clean slide tackle for "playing the ball off

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the ground, “ or calls a player for a “high kick,” or refuses to see the advantage, the referee has made a mockery of the Laws of the game. That’s why we test and certify referees annually—to be certain they know the Laws and the subtle and not-so-subtle interpretations. Admittedly, FIFA has “cleaned up” the Laws, but every referee should be familiar with the annual “Memorandums” and “Advice to Referees” distributed by the US Soccer Federation (ussoccer.com/referees/advice).

Referees Who Are Overly Technical—Inexperienced referees, referees who have never played, referees with high ego needs, and at times older, more crotchety referees tend to blow for “trifling” fouls, when they should just let play go on. I have had players called for “excessive use of elbows” when the player was simply moving his arms, goalies called for a hand ball when their momentum on a punt carried them out of the box, foul throws for a foot one inch off the ground, and “off-side” where there was no obvious attempt to interfere with play, gain an advantage, or be in the “active area.” Making too many calls like this betrays a referee’s level of experience and feel for the game.

Referees Who Do Not Allow Me to Coach—If I want to substitute for a player in the last minutes of a close game who happens to be on the other side of the field, or if I call for a right back to go kick a corner on the left side in the dying minutes, the referee has to allow it. Sure, add on the time if you think I or one of my

players is delaying the game, give him a caution, but you must let me coach. Exercise your judgment in the context of the flow of the game. After all, you control the time.

Referees Who Fail to Spot a Dive—Referees can give a yellow card to any player who engages in “simulated actions to deceive the referee”—in other words, a dive. Diving and feigning injury, at all levels of play, is endemic and threatens to make a mockery of our sport. What is a dive? It’s cheating. I can’t beat you with finesse or speed, so I go down at the slightest touch. And it works more often than not to draw a foul, a penalty kick, and a card for the opponent. It’s almost an art form, sometimes referred to as “gamesmanship” in some international leagues. We all know it takes an awful hard knock to get a soccer player off his feet. Good coaches don’t teach their players to dive, good refs ignore it or give a card to the diver for deceptive behavior. FIFA has mandated yellow cards for obvious dives at all levels of play.

Referees Afraid of Affecting the Outcome of a Game—When a referee fails to blow a whistle for an obvious penalty kick late in a tight game, or refuses to expel a defender for a dangerous tackle from behind because in his mind he didn’t want to affect the outcome, he just has affected the game’s outcome. Call them as you see them, use your best judgment, and let the chips fall where they may. Coaches will understand.

Referees Who Talk Too Little, Referees Who Talk Too Much—Referees can build players’ trust by talking to them during the play. Not idle chit-chat, or praise for a play, but advising them when they are about to cross the line and break a Law. Sure, referees can talk too much, such as a constant “play on” or a running commentary on the game which can distract a player’s focus, making the referee the center of attention, an “actor” and not an “arbiter.” But referees who are hesitant to talk at all during play risk being

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seen by players as detached from the run of play.

Referees Who Use Excessive Cards to Control Player Behavior.—I heard one FIFA referee instructor who told the class “to give a card early and that gets their attention.” What it does is change the game for that player and his team. We did fine when there were no cards. Our game was hard-nosed, in-your-face-soccer, yet few players were ever thrown out. When a modern referee consistently reaches for his cards, in my mind, he has lost the trust of the players and possibly lost game control. There are specific situations for issuing a card, despite what we hear from the TV announcers, and they should not be used for game control.

Referees Who Permit Time-Wasting Behavior—Some referees allow keepers whose teams are ahead late in a close game to engage in time-wasting

- on goal kicks
- players taking throw-ins to give it to another player
- players debating who will take a free kick
- allowing players to feign injury
- allowing coaches to sub late in the game for the farthest player on the field

. . . all without adding time as the Laws require, or without giving a yellow card where called for. Players will seek every tactical advantage, but knowing a referee will add time can help eliminate this behavior from the game.

Referees, Not the Attackers, Insisting on 10 Yards for a Free Kick—Referees don’t call for opponents to retreat 10 yards on free kicks, attacking players call it: “10 yards, Ref!” Referees who make this call take away our coaching tactic for the quick restart when they jump right in and insist on players retreating 10 yards. If opponents don’t retreat and interfere with the restart, card them. But don’t impose yourself into our tactics.

Referees Who Are Not Fit—Referees unable to cover the full field, to keep up with play, or who can’t go 90 minutes and suffer loss of concentration are a nemesis to the game. If you are not fit and unable to keep up with an end-to-end, fast-paced soccer game with rapid and constant transitions, you shouldn’t be in the game. You have to be in position to make the close calls in the corners, on the sidelines, or offside. Players are expected to run for the entire match, sprinting all the time. So should the referee. Being out of shape does a disservice to the referees’ profession and to the game, and can result in loss of control.

Referees Who Don’t Look Professional—We ask players to tuck in their shirts and pull up their socks, but a young ref can go out there with no socks, shirt out, outdated patch, and baggy sweat pants and we accept them as part of the game. If you recertified, wear the current patch. Wear the correct uniform for the game, don’t clash with the players’ colors, and always have your watch, flags, a good whistle, and cards as part of your attire.

Referees Who Are Inconsistent—Players have their distinct styles, so should referees. We’re all individuals. But players have a right to know what to expect from a referee. They play differently and adjust for different styles of officiating. I know referees who start out strong with early and powerful whistles “to make a

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statement” or “to get a player’s attention,” then taper off. Others take it more slowly and then start whistling later in the game. Be consistent in your calls for both teams.

Referees Who Forget Law 5, IBD 8—IBD 8 is no longer in the official FIFA “Laws of the Game,” but nevertheless remains part of the “spirit of the game” in the U.S. Soccer Federation’s “Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game” (5.5):

“The Laws of the Game are intended to provide that games should be played with as little interference as possible, and ... it is the duty of the referee to penalize only deliberate breaches of the Law. Constant whistling for trifling and doubtful breaches produces bad feeling and loss of temper on the part of the players and spoils the pleasure of spectators.”

By adhering to this decision, you’ll enable players to enjoy being able to play and demonstrate skills, you’ll get coaches off your back, and you’ll be doing the game

Len Oliver is Director of Coaching, DC Stoddert Soccer League, Member of the Virginia Youth Soccer Association State Coaching Staff, holds the USSF ‘A’ License, and is a FIFA-Certified Referee. He was inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame (1996) and the Virginia-DC Soccer Hall of Fame (2001), and received



NSCAA’s Long-Term Youth Achievement Award (2001).

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TOO MANY PLAYERS ON THE FIELD? WHAT’S TO BE DONE?

A new edition of the Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game will be published shortly. One area of the advice that has been changed is Advice 3.3, which deals with too many players.

3.3 MORE THAN THE ALLOWED NUMBER OF PLAYERS

The rules of competition specify the maximum number of players a team is allowed to have on the field at any given time. The Laws of the Game set this number at eleven for most matches but a smaller number may be set by the competition authority for younger players. However, at any given time, the actual number of players allowed on the field may be smaller than the maximum if one or more players has been sent off for misconduct, has requested and received permission from the referee to be temporarily off the field (e. g., to have an injury tended to), or has been ordered from the field to repair equipment or to correct a problem with bleeding or blood on the uniform. Except for players sent off (with the result that their team is required to play with a lower maxi-

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mum number), all other players temporarily off the field with the referee's permission or by the referee's order may return to the field only with the express permission of the referee.

If, while the game is in progress, the referee finds that a team has more than the allowed number of persons on the field, play must be stopped and the extra person identified.

If the extra person is neither a player nor a substitute (as determined usually by the team's roster), that person is considered an "outside agent" and must be removed but has not committed misconduct and so cannot have any card displayed. In the special case of a player who has already been sent off and shown the red card but who returns to the field, no further action can be taken following removal other than to include full details in the match report. Play is restarted with a dropped ball where the ball was when play was stopped (subject to the special circumstances of Law 8).

If the extra person is a named substitute who has entered the field without the permission of the referee (whether as part of a substitution or not), the substitute must be removed and cautioned. If the illegal entry of the substitute was part of a substitution in which a player left the field, the player who left must return to the field. Play is restarted with a dropped ball where the ball was when play was stopped (subject to the special circumstances of Law 8).

If the extra person is a player who was off the field temporarily under circumstances which required the permission of the referee in order to return, the player must be cautioned and play is restarted with an indirect free kick where the ball was when play was stopped.

Note: This restart differs from the usual requirement that free kicks are taken where the offense was committed and is a special exception set forth in Law 3.

A player who returns to the field illegally is nevertheless still a player and can be charged with committing a foul. For example, if a player has been ordered from the field to correct equipment but re-enters the field without the permission of the referee and then violently strikes an opponent during play, the restart would be a direct free kick for the striking foul (or a penalty kick if committed inside the player's own penalty area). The player is, of course, also sent off and shown the red card for the misconduct.

In all competitions, especially those that allow multiple substitutions, the officials must be extremely vigilant in counting the number of players who leave and substitutes who enter to prevent problems of this nature. Similarly, players off the field temporarily who require the permission of the referee to re-enter must be monitored to ensure that they do not participate in play until this requirement and any others (e. g., inspection to confirm the correction of the equipment or bleeding problem) are met.

