

Abusive

Reprinted from *The Football Referee*, the official publication of the Referees Association in the United Kingdom.

by Stephen Potischman, USSF Grade 8 Referee, Mansfield, MA, USA

As referees, how many times have we heard: "Ref, you've gotta be kidding," or some variation on that theme? It doesn't seem to matter whether the game is a World Cup qualifier or an under-12 match. Players, coaches, and spectators seem to think that not only are we all deaf and blind, but that we don't know and have no clue on how to apply The Laws of the Game (LOTG.) That attitude, which is exacerbated by the passion that this sport engenders, often gets expressed in abusive language, and all too often, physical abuse to referees. In effect, abuse of referees has become part of the game.

I took the referee's course and passed the exam 5 years ago at the age of 45. I learned to play soccer as a child overseas, and then after returning to the USA, played in high school, college, and then for a couple of years on an amateur team. After my children were born, I coached my son in his youth soccer days, and then coached again for a few years after he moved up to high school soccer. Due to job constraints, I was unable to commit the time necessary to coach, so I decided to take up the whistle in order to maintain contact with the game I love. Most of my games are inter-town youth soccer matches in the Boston area, and the league in which I do most of my games is Boston Area Youth Soccer (BAYS.)

Every referee has had incidents where they've endured some form of abuse. In my case, and I would imagine for most refs, there were more incidents earlier in our careers. As we gain experience, we learn how to deal with, and thereby defuse certain situations that have the potential to turn into larger problems. We also get to know how much verbal nonsense to expect, and how much we're going to take before we respond.

I'm not a sociologist; I don't have a crystal ball, and don't have any special insight as to why people think they have the right to abuse referees. It seems to me, however, that there is a connection between behavior in the world at large, and behavior at sporting events. In my opinion, people just aren't as civil to each other as they once were. Our collective expectation is for more immediate gratification than ever before, with less tolerance for anyone or anything that gets in the way of that gratification.

The world sporting news is full of incidences where ugly behavior is the order of the day: spectators fighting with spectators, players trash-talking, spectators berating players, coaches, and referees, and lately bottles being thrown at referees at two NFL stadiums in this country. I believe that ill behavior at professional "sporting events" has trickled down through collegiate, amateur, school, and finally youth levels.

I was fortunate to find myself a mentor, although it was purely by coincidence. He happens to be a business associate, and when we learned we are both referees, we started

talking about incidences we'd faced on the field. He explained this tactic to me, which I've used three times in the last three years to my advantage. In youth soccer in the USA, the coaches are responsible for the behavior of the spectators. If a spectator (usually a parent) gets out of line, it's up to the coach to deal with him/her. When a parent becomes a problem, wait until the next stoppage in play. Call both coaches over to you, identify the problem individual, and ask the coaches "who does that person belong to?" When one of the two acknowledges it's his/her responsibility, send the other coach back to the bench, and say to the person in front of you "Please tell that spectator that unless he keeps his opinions to himself, I'm going to throw you out of the game." It has worked every time.

An incident that taught me a lot about what the breadth of coaches' can say and do was during a BU14 game I refereed early in my second year. It was a competitive, skilled game, and the home team was ahead by a goal going into what the coach thought was the final minute. (I had mentally added 4 minutes of stoppage time onto the game.) The home team had lost to the away team earlier in the season, and they were hanging on for the win. A shot came in from the away team, and a home-team field player, who was standing on the goal line, punched the shot away. I sent him off for denying a clear goal scoring opportunity, and pointed to the penalty mark. The PK was taken, and the keeper saved the shot around the post. The ensuing corner kick resulted in an away-team goal. The stoppage time expired shortly after the kick off, and I blew the whistle. As I went to collect my flag from the club linesman, the home coach ran over to me and accused me of stealing the win from his team. I told him he was out of line, and walked away. The sadder part of the story was that the coach reiterated blaming me to the players and parents. They took him at his word, which was reflected in their faces as they walked off the pitch. He did them no favors by acting as he did. The players were taught an unfortunate lesson in how to not behave. I guess I was the only one who came away with a couple of valuable lessons:

1. Stick to your guns-enforce LOTG.
2. Report this kind of behavior (I didn't at the time, and regret it.)
3. Expect all kinds of people and all kinds of behavior.

Rather than continue with another doom-and-gloom situation, I would like to relate an ugly experience that ultimately became a positive one. I had been refereeing a BU13 game, and was physically accosted on the field by a home-team parent. I abandoned the match, and was escorted to my car by the away-team coach and a couple of other adults. (The parent in question was banned for life from attending any youth soccer matches). About a month later, I was refereeing in a tournament. Much to my surprise, I found myself working a game with the same "away" team from the earlier incident. As I was standing on the touch line on the spectators' side of the field, a couple of parents came over to me and said: "We're glad to see you're still refereeing. You shouldn't let the behavior of one jerk keep you out of the game."

There is hope!

As an adult, I am better equipped to deal with the external pressures exerted on referees than are most teenagers. There are countless stories of coaches and parents intimidating young referees. It's hard enough dealing with an irate, emotional coach as an adult. But for a young person, in the vast majority of cases, it's a losing proposition. They don't need to have an adult berating them, and indeed should be protected. We need to develop young referees, as the game needs all the qualified referees we can get.

BAYS decided to implement a policy aimed at protecting referees, particularly the younger ones (the text of the policy can be found at <http://www.bays.org>.) The first iteration of the policy prohibited coaches and parents from speaking to the referee during the match, but allowed for non-confrontational questions to be asked during half-time and after the match. This was later amended to prohibit speaking to the ref at all, except to ask for substitutions, to alert the ref to an injury, etc. Criticizing the referee at any time is prohibited. In addition, the referee is allowed to show a yellow or red card to the offending coach if appropriate. While this aspect of the policy contravenes FIFA's LOTG, the intent is to keep the referee, particularly the younger ones, away from ill-behaved adults. I contacted BAYS to ask whether the implementation of the policy has increased the retention rate of younger refs, and they said that it has, although they didn't have any statistics available at the time.

So, what's to be done? I wish I had the answers. I believe that sports in general, and soccer in particular, need to have a comprehensive top-down/bottom-up strategy to cut down on referee abuse. We on the lower rungs of the sport need to be protected with strict rules to punish any abusive individuals off the field, and we need to apply LOTG vigorously to those on the field. At the higher levels, there need to be meaningful penalties for players and coaches who abuse referees. Whether players are to be fined or suspended, it has to hurt them and/or the team in the pocketbook. Token punishment simply won't do the job.

My intent is not to make this sound like a half-time speech. But I believe that if the status quo is going to change, we as refs have to be the catalysts. No one else has shown a sincere willingness to do it. No one else seems to see the long-term damage to the game. If strong measures by authorities at the local, national, and international levels aren't taken to counteract the current atmosphere of "ref bashing," the shortage of referees will continue, and probably will grow to the point that the game in its entirety will suffer.