

Knowing the Laws vs Being a Referee

By Clark R. Caplan, Tewksbury Youth Soccer Referee Director

As anyone who has ever attended a referee certification class knows, in the class we are taught the Laws of the Game. However we are also told that this alone does not make us a referee. New referees also need to learn how to apply the Laws in game situations along with the other aspects of controlling a game before truly becoming a referee.

Typically this additional training is done on a "Trial by Fire" basis. Hopefully, the new referees are not assigned any games too far over their head, things work out and they grow in ability to handle more challenging matches.

However several things (usually bad) may happen when they can't control the game. Complaints from the teams (usually the losing one) to the league or others are the first indicator that something is wrong. Along with that the referee begins to lose confidence, and may wonder whether it is worth it to continue. The referee may then either seek some outside help (if we're lucky), ask not to be given games of that nature (age, league, division, etc), or just up and quit refereeing altogether.

Here in Tewksbury, where I am the referee coordinator and assignor, we have come up with an interesting way to help bridge the gap between the classroom and the field. In keeping with our town program's philosophy of promoting the game of soccer and teaching all participants about the game, we hold on-field referee practices, which are open to all.

Referees, coaches, parents and others who are interested in knowing the laws of the game and how they are applied on the field during games may participate. While we will sometimes work a specific situation like throw-ins, offside, or penalty kicks, typically we divide into teams and hold an actual scrimmage. One or more of the participants acts as the referee. Periodically we will stop to discuss elements such as the referee's positioning, signals, decision made, or other referee mechanics, and to switch referees. If a team is practicing on an adjacent field, we will (with the coach's permission) take advantage and practice our refereeing during the scrimmages they typically run at the end of their sessions.

We have found these referee practices to be beneficial in a number of ways. They reinforce what has been said in the classroom about the laws of the game. They also provide a non-threatening place for the newer referees to learn the mechanics and field knowledge of being a referee. As the league assignor, it gives me a chance to see what level of game each referee is capable of doing along with getting to know them better as individuals. Finally, it provides an unexpected bonus as a useful tool to recruit new referees, since many of the participants have brought their friends to these sessions who went on to become referees themselves.