

Whose Game is it Anyway ?

By Bob Evans, former USSF National Director of Instruction - (*excerpts*)

A wise man (George Santayana) once said that if we do not learn from history, we are condemned to repeat it. So in my delving into history, I came across the name of Edmund Burke (1729-1797). He was notable as a great orator, whose voice thundered across England, during times of great upheaval... (during) both the American and French Revolutions.

But he was also notable to us, because he was one of the few (in the British Parliament)...to support the American colonies, in their disagreements with England and King George III. For Burke was concerned about POWER...He said in a speech in 1771, "The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse." **And that brings me to the subject of referees.**

The Laws of the Game give the referee great powers...for two hours or so...the referee is the powerful Captain of the ship, the only policeman, the judge, jury and executioner, of any party ... Therein lies the problem, for people like power, and in their affection for it, they abuse it. Burke was right.... The abuse **IS** all the more dangerous because the power **IS** so great.

Consider some examples, A referee goes to caution a player, after a foul. The player understandably upset asks the official, "What am I being cautioned for?"

The referee answers, "For being stupid enough to commit a foul like that."

THERE was an abuse of power. The referee must inform the player of the reason for the caution, but does not have the right to insult him, at the same time. After all, what would happen to a player, if he told the referee that his decisions were *stupid*?

Another example. At a break in a game, (for) injury, a coach asked the referee...: "'Excuse me ref, but can I ask you about the decisions at the indirect free kick a moment ago?"

Back comes the response; "I don't have to explain anything to you ! If you don't like the decision, that's too bad! And if you talk to me again, you're out of the game!" **There was an abuse of power.** The laws do not allow dissent from players or club officials, but surely we can answer questions, that are politely put.

The problem with both of these referees is that they are forgetting whose game this is. The game is for the players, and it is the referee's duty to ensure that all players get the maximum enjoyment, out of playing in a match.

The referee protects them from physical attack; he ensures that they are not cheated by their opponents; he creates an environment in which a sporting contest can be fairly conducted. The referee is **NOT** a dictator. He (or she) cannot expect the players to bow down to his(or her) will, simply because he (or she) is there.

So here we have some do's and don'ts for the referees:

1. When taking disciplinary action ...say no more than the law requires: "This is a caution (yellow card) for unsporting behavior...If you commit another like that, I may have to ask you to leave the field."

If anything more needs to be said, do not get into an argument. Never insult a player. Let the player have the last word of disagreement. Then remove yourself from the discussion.

2. Learn not to be too sensitive to disagreement about decisions you make. The players will not agree ...all the time...the fact is you make mistakes ! **WE** all do. We must simply learn to live with them and try to improve, in the next game.

When someone makes a sly comment of disagreement, a suitable response may be: "Well you may be right, it might have been the other way, but we'll live with it the way it is." After all, when someone disagrees with you, they are not attacking the very soul of your being...you do not need to over-react.

3. Set a pleasant atmosphere... a technique that works for me is to seek out the coaches before the game and introduce myself. With a smile I may say something like this: 'Well it's a lovely day for a game, and I'm really looking forward to doing this one. I hope your players enjoy themselves." **AND** I never give threatening speeches to the captains at the coin toss. All that is necessary is ... a few words and "good luck to you both."
4. If you have had a major disagreement with some players or with a particular club, stay away from them for a while. Give hard feelings a chance to soften. You are not a tougher referee when you go straight back... with teams you have had problems with: you are an unwise one.

You are forgetting that the players have the right to a pleasant game.... If you're being there creates the wrong atmosphere, even before kick off... **YOU** are the one who must give way. The players are more important than the referee is. There will always be other games.

Underlying this discussion is a disturbing thought..." Those who have been once intoxicated with power, can never willingly abandon it"(Edmund Burke).

Burke understood that, because he was writing about the colonial government, in its dealings with the American revolutionaries. But we know too, because we can all think of referees who will not change their dictatorial and harsh ways.

But the great hope, in writing about this, is that we can reach referees, who may be wise enough to change their ways, for the benefit of the players-whose game this is. And if they will not, then the game may have to get along without them.