

WHAT TO DO ABOUT A POOR REFEREE



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No matter how long you've coached, there's no doubt you've walked away from a game saying to yourself "that referee was just awful." Every coach, player, and sports parent has been there. For some people, these frustrations can boil over and turn into yelling or making sarcastic comments to the referee during the game. Screaming at referees seems to be a national pastime and is evident in all levels of sports. ***This is not okay.***

While poor refereeing does happen, it's important to start by saying that yelling, screaming or intimidating a youth referee is never the right course of action for a coach, player, or parent. In this article we will discuss the proper actions to address refereeing, but it is important to start with why yelling at a ref is always the wrong thing to do:

YOU ARE PROVIDING A POOR ROLE-MODEL TO YOUR PLAYERS

If you have children of your own, do you condone them screaming and throwing a fit when they are frustrated? Are you okay with them yelling at you when they don't like a decision you've made? Of course not; parents work hard to teach their children how to interact and problem solve with others. By yelling at a referee, you are showing your players (and own children), that it is okay to throw a fit when you're not getting your way.

YOUTH REFEREES ARE OFTEN YOUNG THEMSELVES

Refereeing provides players often with their very first job ever. It has a flexible schedule, works around their own games that they play in, and allows them to be around the sport they love even more. Refereeing teaches responsibility, leadership, and communication. However, because they are young and any job has a steep learning curve, they will absolutely make mistakes. By yelling when these mistakes are made, you are publicly demeaning and shattering the confidence of young players. How long would you last in your current job if a superior publicly yelled at you every time they thought you made a mistake?

REFEREES ARE HUMAN

Are your players infallible? Are you? Would you be okay with someone yelling at your players, or even your child, whenever they missed a pass or had a poor touch? How long would your players stay in the game if they got yelled at in every game they played? How long would you coach for if the parents on your team yelled at you after every game? A parent walked over to another parent on the sideline of a youth soccer game:

“Which one is your child” the first parent asked.

“Why? the second responded.

“I just wanted to know who to yell at and tell how bad they are”

“What’s wrong with you?! You can’t do that to my kid”

“Why not? You’ve been doing it all game to mine”

“Who’s your kid?”

“The ref”

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

We’ve addressed why not to yell at a referee, but what should a coach do if they have a referee who is having a bad game?

BUILD A RAPPORT

Before the game even begins, create a dialogue and learn the ref’s name. Referees will respect you and like the fact that you're talking to them like they are a human being.

TREAT THEM WITH RESPECT

If they make a call that you don’t agree with, ask them about in a non-threatening tone. For example, if there was an offside call, just ask which player was off. Don’t raise your voice. If you approach someone as “help me understand” rather than “you’re wrong” you will most likely get a respectful answer in return. This will also teach your players how to question authority in a mature manner.

TREAT THE REFEREES LIKE YOU WOULD WANT TO BE TREATED

Doing this will help to develop a quality relationship with them during the game. Even if they are having a bad game, yelling at them will not improve their performance. In fact, it may diminish it further as they

second guess all their calls. It's okay to question a call, but you need to do it in a way that shows you respect them. Also, please note that sometimes you may not get an immediate answer back.

ASK A QUESTION AFTER THE GAME

When the game is complete, go to shake their hand, thank them, and ask a question about a call that you didn't understand. It is important to watch your tone when you do this. Sometimes the referee will even say "coach, you were right I messed that one up." Other times they may explain to you what they saw which will help you understand their point of view. Don't drag it out, and please note that once a referee leaves the field THEY ARE DONE. Never follow a referee off the field or talk to them in the parking lot.

UNDERSTAND YOU MAY BE THE ONE WHO IS WRONG

Since you are human and, most of the time, the referee is closer to the on-field action than you are. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that they may see something that you do not. If it was easier to referee from the sideline, then why do referees run around in the middle? If a call happens that you do not agree with, note that the referee may be able to see something you can not. You are also capable of making mistakes!

LET THE LEAGUE KNOW

If the referee had a truly poor performance (and, yes, it does happen), then talk to your league about it. Most recreational and competitive leagues have a method for referee feedback, and all referees have a Referee Assignor who is in charge of scheduling and training the referees in the league. If a referee gets repeated poor feedback, the Assignor may schedule them for easier games, or schedule an evaluation. It's important to take this route, opposed to screaming at a ref during or after a game, because it gives the referee an opportunity to get feedback in a non-threatening manner. Everyone makes mistakes, and we want the referees to learn so they will stay in the sport and get better, rather than them quitting in frustration and embarrassment.

Also, please wait 24 hours before contacting a league about a referee. Let your emotions calm before you fire off an angry letter. It will be better received, and you will be more eloquent in your message.