Youth Referees Face a Tough Road

Parents and spectators should note that the youth referees seen on the field are in training. But they often don’t. Some of the refs might be working their first games while others may be in their second or third year. Even with a couple years of experience, they still have much to learn. That learning process requires many games (50-200) in order to be exposed to all the variations of rule interpretations, as well as the different personalities of coaches, players and parents. And that’s just for the average new referees; for youth referees, it takes even more time to learn how to be responsible for the players on the field who are younger as well as how to handle the parents and coaches who are much older and (in theory) much wiser.

Parents can understand it takes years of practice and good coaching to produce a mature, self-sufficient youth soccer player. It requires training, care, nurturing, and at times, a hard enforcement of rules. Most importantly, they need a positive environment to learn and grow. One would hope that parents would treat the youth referees in much the same way they would treat their child or next-door neighbor’s child. Parents have already learned a lot from life’s challenges and can use that wisdom to teach their own children life’s little lessons.

But can a parent do that for a youth referee? Does the average parent have 200 games worth of experience as a referee to offer the referee when watching from the side of the field? Probably not, and since the average parents have not had to go through what the referee will go through, they have little or no knowledge of the path that the referee must travel to gain respect and do his or her job effectively.

Veteran referees should be aware of the path youth referees travel, because most of them have traveled the same road or experienced some of the same trials. If not, they should become familiar with the requirements and pitfalls for youth refs. Veteran officials can then serve as mentors for young officials and make their road through officiating easier. Knowing what youth referees must face also may encourage some referees and officials associations to push for sportsmanship seminars for spectators and parents in youth leagues.

Here’s a typical growth path for youth referees:

The first step for referees is to attend at least 16 hours of classroom instruction. They must pass a written exam with a score of 75 percent or better to become certified as a USSF referee (NFHS and NCAA requirements differ). Next, they must learn all of the variations of games for the different youth ages of the local association. Those include length of the games, size of the ball, rules on substitution and many other aspects that are different than what was learned in the classroom. That is all before they are even allowed to step onto the field.

Most new referees start as assistant referees to get some real game experience. After a while, they get a chance to referee their first game. For their first games as referees, most don’t blow the whistle, as they think they’ll blow the call and look stupid. Fortunately, they often officiate U6 games where the parents most likely ignore it because they don’t know any better themselves.

After they get a few games under their belts, many begin to blow the whistle for everything that looks like a foul. That comes as a result of moving up to U8 and U9 games where coaches with a know-it-all attitude can be more intimidating. Right or wrong, they figure it is better to do what they are told than to incur the wrath of an angry coach.

Eventually the new referees will figure out what assistant referees are for (after ignoring them for the first few months). They will slowly realize that three people can be better than just one and start acting on the advice of the assistants on the field.

The next step in the progression for new referees is to call the game like they would if they were playing — very loose compared to what is needed for the younger players. A U9 player can’t handle the same kind of challenge as a U15 player and the end result most often is a very frustrated, vocal set of coaches and parents.

Soon, the referees come to the decision of whether or not to continue officiating. Many will quit because of all of the complaints (a lot of youth referees are lost around that stage). Those who do not quit will often develop a “hearing loss” in order to ignore coaches and parents. Unfortunately, that often leads to either being very lazy on the field or becoming dominating and challenging — as if they own the field and are allowing the players to play on it.

If the referees continue officiating, they begin to learn some advanced techniques. They learn how to move all over the field, and how to give feedback to the assistant referees. They figure out when to apply advantage and realize how to get to the right place before the ball gets there (read the play).

At some point in that learning process, the referees will begin to work club and select games. Inevitably, they will work some nasty games, where hopefully veteran referees can provide feedback on how they handle various situations with out-of-control players, spectators or coaches. Actually, most of the youth referees get their first nasty game when doing U9 or U10 games, where the parents and coaches first develop a belief that they know more about the game than the referees.

After enduring that, the referees will start to apply some more advanced techniques. Soon, the referees will correctly apply advantage for the first time. The learning curve gets steeper as they learn when to talk.

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to the players, and equally important, learn when not to talk to the players (as it offers them a chance to complain — a sort of baiting that eventually may result in the players earning a caution for dissent). Referees will also learn to watch behind the play to catch late tackles, hits, punches, etc., and how to talk players out of a pile-up so they don't throw punches trying to get away.

While the order of those events may vary for referees, all should agree that those lessons are needed before referees can hope to be recognized as a good officials. Here is some additional food for thought:

- Referees take tests every year to re-certify. A passing grade of 75 percent implies that for many, one out of four calls will be incorrect. It often takes two to four years before they get the test score up to a 90-plus, implying that their foul recognition and proper response will be high as well.

- Referees will call the perfect game — when all the players are able to score on every shot they take. In other words, people make mistakes. If parents encourage their players to try again, then shouldn't they allow the youth referees some latitude as well?

- An adult has experienced the pressure of dealing with people who are more knowledgeable in work or other scenarios. Imagine what it's like for a youth who is trying to control a game.

- Most adults wouldn't accept whining, back-talk, or foul mouths from their own kids, so why should young refs have to listen to it from an adult? Since they aren't yet adults, youth referees usually don't know the best way to deal with a child who's complaining, much less an adult.

The underlying message is that it takes a lot of games to acquire all of the tools needed to officiate at all levels of the game. Some of the referees bring maturity and personal game playing experience that enables them to move a little quicker through the levels than others. Some will never make it past the middle levels (including many adults). By the time they move through the upper levels where they learn the more advanced lessons, they get assigned to the older age groups and more challenging games. That often leaves the youth parents to be constantly exposed to new youth referees — the new referees who are in training.

Let's face it, the youth referees are still kids and they're learning. Adults and parents should be able to encourage them and support them — not whine and complain like little kids when things don't go their way. Veteran referees should step up to support them as well.

Written by Sean Roberts, a high school and USSF referee from Southlake, Texas. He also officiates lacrosse.

Dealing With Sideline Abuse

You are a referee and also a teenager. How do you deal with fan abuse? Unfortunately, only 50 percent of fans, coaches and players will agree with your calls. Dealing with that fact will determine your future as a referee.

As a young person you are conditioned by society to show respect for your elders. As a referee you are in charge from the moment you take the field. How can you show respect to an abusive person while at the same time doing your job as required by Law 5?

Have you ever watched Star Trek? Who was the most knowledgeable, smartest, and calmest person aboard the Enterprise? The obvious answer is Mr. Spock. No matter who "got in his face," Spock was calm and composed. He didn't have to show emotion because he knew he was right ... even if he was wrong.

As a young referee you must act like Spock. When somebody gets in your face you have to take a deep breath and say: "You are abusing your right as a spectator (or coach) at this match and behaving irresponsibly. If you continue to act in this manner I'll ask you to leave the field. If I ask you to leave and you refuse, I will terminate this match." Stop there. Don't end that sentence with, "OK?"

You don't really care what the person says next because, as far as you are concerned, the conversation is over and you are returning to the match. Don't get into extended conversations or attempt to get "the last word." You have stated your position and put the individual on notice. If you have to come back to that person because his or her irresponsible behavior continues, no league administrator or assigner will fault you for the action you have to take next — dismissing the person from the field.

With that thought firmly in your mind, you will never say, "I am quitting because I can't stand the abuse."

Written by Wally Lysle, the referee chairman for the United States Youth Soccer Association. This article, which appeared in the April 1997 issue of Referee, has been updated from its originally format. □