

Coaches Need to Control Themselves -- Players Mimic Coaches

By Randy Vogt

I have been a referee with the New York Metro Intercollegiate Soccer Officials Association (NYMISOA) for the past three decades and look forward to receiving the 30-Year Service Award at the NYMISOA Awards Dinner on November 9. Also being honored are the most sporting college and junior college coaches in the New York City metro area as voted by our officials.

A generation ago, NYMISOA started this sportsmanship award. Every official at that time was sent a ballot. The instructions said to grade the coach of squads we officiated during the season on the scale of one to 10 -- one for none or a very small amount of sportsmanship and 10 for much sportsmanship.

I read the instructions incorrectly and started grading the players of the teams instead. After nearly completing the form, I realized my mistake so I crossed out my answers. In now grading the coaches, my points mimicked what I had written for the players of those teams. In nearly all cases, the points were exactly the same! So if I had given a seven for the players of State U., the coach received a seven as well.

The voting format changed and the colleges were divided into three categories: men's 4-year colleges, women's 4-year colleges and 2-year junior colleges. The officials were asked to vote for the most sporting coach in each category. Since I collect the ballots nowadays (which makes sense as my last name is pronounced "vote"), I know that the same coaches receive many votes every year while some coaches never receive any votes. Although the voting format might have changed, what has not changed is the teams continue to mimic the attitude of the coach.

The lesson to be learned here is how much coaches influence the conduct of their players. And these were college players, most of whom had been playing soccer for a decade or more. Youth players with less experience playing plus in life in general should be even more impressionable. Think of how much time a coach spends with players. Certainly, the coach's attitude toward referees and others can rub off on the players.

In the youth soccer games that I ref, I'd say the players mimic the coach's attitude toward the game 95% of the time. So if the coach is sporting, the players and their parents are sporting. If the coach is wild, the players and their parents are wild.

Get a coach who wants to complain about decisions and that team's players tend to be cautioned or sent off much more than other teams where the coach simply coaches his or her team. Of course, I cannot allow any coach give a running commentary of the officiating as that would affect my maintaining control of the game. Although I can control a dissenting coach, what I have little control over is his or her attitude toward the rules and sportsmanship plus what is taught regarding that at practice.

I was an assistant ref for an older boys game that was calm while the older boys game on the adjacent field became problematic. Midway through the first half, one coach started yelling his dissent and I heard him every couple of minutes. I wondered why the experienced ref did nothing about it and thought that game was not going to end well because of it. After all, allowing dissent on every call against that team contributes to an atmosphere in which players stop playing soccer and begin to focus on what the ref is calling, or not, which leads to more robust challenges and more dissent.

Sadly, I was correct. With five minutes left in the second half, both teams were involved in a brawl. As the officials sorted out who did what to whom and after a few red cards, the ref was somehow able to play the last five minutes of the game. The dissenting coach stopped dissenting as he realized that his yelling and the fact that the ref did nothing about it contributed to the brawl.

Another league that I have refereed with boys high school teams featured two games with two somewhat different cultures and styles of play, a doubleheader between a public school of mainly Latino players from lower- and middle-class families and a Catholic private school of middle- and upper-class kids of all racial backgrounds, just a few miles away from the other school. Perhaps the only thing the two teams had in common is soccer and that nearly all the players are Catholic. But the coaches are calm so there was sportsmanship throughout two very competitive games of excellent teams.

Not so with one game with a coach referred to as a “pest” by the league commissioner. His poor attitude rubbed off on his players, he overemphasized winning and his team’s game had many more fouls and cards than the others.

Coaches have not asked for my advice but I am going to give it anyway. You are a role model and in a wonderful position to influence the lives of children and teenagers. In turn, you are also influencing how much they and even the match referee enjoy the match. Do everybody a favor and be a positive role model instead of a negative one.

(Randy Vogt has officiated over 9,000 games during the past three decades, from professional matches in front of thousands to 6-year-olds being cheered on by very enthusiastic parents. In "[Preventive Officiating](#)," he shares his wisdom gleaned from thousands of games and hundreds of clinics to help referees not only survive but thrive on the soccer field. You can visit the book’s website at www.preventiveofficiating.com.)