



Center Circle

Officials' v Coaches: The Age Old Story

It seems to be getting worse. After observing the relationship between coaches and officials for over thirty years, it is getting worse. It is getting worse at all levels. The relationship between players and officials and coaches and officials in all sports is difficult at best. Coaches and players just don't agree with all (any) calls. Any call made by an official usually brings the wrath of fifty percent of the fans and participants. And on this level all can agree that will never change. The participants will never agree on all the calls. If the disagreements between players/coaches and officials stopped there it could be acceptable.

But the relationship between the two parties has become antagonistic and even counter productive. There is a tension that is apparent even before the game begins between coaches and officials. Does the culture of each group breed this hostility? Do the coaches (most of whom are former players) have a deep seated distrust of officials? Are young officials "brain washed" by their more worldly elders about the evils of the coaching fraternity?

As the author has often done in the past, an informal e-mail survey was sent to fifty one coaches. It was very unscientific and there was a big mistake we will discuss later. The group included men's and women's college coaches from all divisions and NAIA and high school coaches. The three questions were open ended and were:

- How has the officiating been generally this season?
- How do you best describe the relationship between you as a coach and the officials? Before, during and after a game.
- Have you seen any changes in this relationship in your years as a player and/or coach? Please let me know how many years you have been involved with soccer.

As I said, very unscientific and open ended. The fact that it was open ended drew many opinions...some very lengthy. The answers may not be surprising, but are definitely cause for some concern. In a general summary:

- The technical side of officiating has been good overall
- The relationship between the two parties was described repeatedly as...TENSE!
- The relationship has become more contentious over the past few years

The big mistake? I didn't ask officials! But, I am a coach and it did not occur to me to include the multicolored horde! But, you will soon see that we took care of that oversight.

This relationship is a problem. Assuming all of us associated with soccer want the game to improve and "catch on" in America, then working together for the common good is imperative. So, how do we do that?

Paul McGinlay, men's soccer coach at Trinity (Texas) University came up with a document entitled "Coach's Starting Eleven: A Perspective of What Referees Should Understand About Coaches". Paul shared this document with NISOA organizations in the Southwest. He passed it on to me. I shared it with NISOA groups in the Midwest. In both cases the response from the NISOA groups was very positive.

Here is the starting IX for the coach:

1. Arrive at the game site early and physically prepare for your responsibility
2. Show obvious signs to both teams that the officiating crew is acting together as a team
3. Work hard to stay as close to the play as possible – it is hard to argue a call if the official is in position!
4. Help keep the game flowing

5. Understand the difference between the “letter of the law” and the “spirit of the law”, and always officiate with the spirit of the law in mind
6. On the occasion of a potentially cautionable offense, speak in a non demanding and non threatening tone first and caution as a last resort
7. Respect everyone involved, and do your part to keep all participants in the game
8. Give clear and prompt signals. In the event that a mistake is made, it is okay to reverse the decision. Players and coaches know that you are human
9. Keep the game safe and fair for both teams
10. Show obvious signs that you are enjoying the game and your role in the game
11. Understand that we should all do our part to leave the game a little better than when we found it

All good stuff and accepted with enthusiasm from the NISOA groups. It is interesting to note that the focus is on the “professionalism” not on the “calls”.

A NISOA group in Ohio asked if they could submit a “Referee’s Starting Eleven: A Referee’s Perspective of What Coaches Should Understand About Referees”. Of course they could. Dr Jim Ruether, a long time official in Ohio and a NISOA National Assessor and Clinician undertook the charge. He worked with several NISOA groups and came up with the Starting IX for officials in their expectation of coaches:

1. Officials feel the match should be decided by the teams playing soccer in a fair, safe and exciting manner with as little need for official intervention as possible
2. The officials job is to be firm, but fair, and keep “cheating by the teams equal”; which is very difficult
3. Officials do not care who wins the game. There is no reason to favor one side over another.
4. Officials will allow the game to flow by giving advantage only when player safety and game control are not compromised.

5. Officials understand that fouls are not always equal. Some teams foul persistently to offset superior opponent skills or lack of discipline.
6. Officials understand that players (and coaches) may dissent as much as when a call is correct as when it is incorrect and will be tolerant if the game continues in a positive manner
7. Officials do not give cards to players; players earn cards for reckless or careless play that has no other purpose than to disrupt play or injure an opponent
8. Officials have a very difficult decision in when to give the first card. Not all fouls against your team merit cards; not all of your teams' fouls are immune from cards.
9. Officials understand that coaches have legitimate arguments. But when picking battles coaches should not dissent trifling stuff. Who cares about a throw in at midfield with the score 4-0?
10. Officials have bad days. Objective and respectful feedback, or even silence, is a better way to help the official refocus and get better.
11. Officials appreciate it if when they do a good job and give an effort, coaches remember their name and understand that the "third team" on the field has also had a good game.

So, there it is. Both "sides" have spoken. Will this help? It is very important that officials and coaches/players not only coexist, but work together to improve the game and make it enjoyable for all players, coaches, fans and, yes, even officials.

Let's work together. We should understand that we all have a responsibility to leave the game a little better than when we found it.

By Dr. Jay Martin. Editor Soccer Journal

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