

Hi Referees,

We have 43 games every Saturday, and almost all of them go very smoothly with no dissent or arguing about calls from any of the coaches or parents involved. However, every now and then an exception comes up. I would like to review the recommended way to deal with this situation. This is always a subject that we get questions on at refresher training.

What is dissent?

It is any form of disagreement with or criticism of the referee's decisions. There is the obvious dissent, such as:

"Come on ref, that was a hand ball !!"

"How was that a push?"

"What do you mean, blue throw? Didn't you see this player touch the ball?"

And there is the more subtle form:

"They (referees) missed that one, don't worry, we'll get the next one" (coach speaking to his players)

Generally I don't consider the very occasional very brief outburst (ie, "what?") to be dissent, as long as it does not happen very often. If it is followed by an apology and a period of good behavior, it fades from my memory (mostly).

I can't list every form dissent can take, but I know it when I hear it, and so will you, and really that is all that matters.

Don't try to ignore it

It is important to deal with dissent quickly, decisively, and firmly, as soon as it starts. Trying to ignore dissent is a mistake for several reasons. First, if you as the referee are thinking about what a coach or parent is saying to you, you aren't 100% focused on what is happening on the field, and you should be. Second, it is important that the coach understands that dissent is not acceptable - that in AYSO we do not behave that way. Finally, if you successfully ignore it, then you are setting up the next referee for an equally bad (or worse) experience.

How to deal with it

1. The first response can be non-verbal. The first time you find yourself thinking "I didn't like that remark", you can pause or stop, look at the coach or parent, and give them the "stop" hand signal, that is, the palm of your hand. Then just go on with what you are doing. This tells the dissenter that you heard it, you didn't like it, and you are prepared to do something about it. In many cases this will be sufficient.
2. If the dissent continues you need to move to the next step: a verbal warning. When the dissent happens again, you need to stop the game to talk to the coach. But, you don't want to stop the game when the other team has the advantage. For example, if the red team has the ball in front of the blue goal, and the blue coach starts yelling about a "hand ball", you don't stop the game and deny the red team a chance to score because of misconduct by the blue coach. You wait until the advantage ends and then stop the game. Then you note the position of the restart (drop ball, unless the ball is already out of play) and walk over to the dissenting coach, have him step onto the field with you, away from the other parents, and say something like: "Coach, I will be making the calls in this game. You need to focus on coaching your team and let me make the calls. The dissent must stop now. This is a warning." Then walk away and get the game going.
3. If the dissent continues you need to move to the next step: a formal caution. Follow the guidelines above about when to stop the game to do this, but it needs to be done quickly

- within a few seconds of the dissent. Then you note the position of the restart (drop ball, unless the ball is already out of play) and walk over to the dissenting coach, have him step onto the field with you, away from the other parents, and say something like: "Coach, I have already spoken to you about dissent. It must stop now. This is a formal caution and it will be reported to the board. The next step will be a send off." Note that the yellow card is for players only; you do not show cards to coaches or anyone else that isn't a player. Then walk away and get the game going. After the game, you need to send me a report that summarizes what happened. I will give you a call to get any additional needed information. I will also probably talk to the other coach and any adult ARs that were present. We will then refer it to the appropriate division coordinator, with a recommendation for any consequences.
4. So at this point everyone's having a really bad day, but regardless, if the dissent continues after all this you need to send off the coach. If there is no assistant coach to take over, you must terminate the match. This time, after the dissent, you stop the game, pick up the game ball, call your assistant referees to an area of the field that is away from the dissenting coach's touchline and near the exit from the field, hand one of them the ball and have them wait for you there. Then you go over to the coach and say something like: "Coach, I have already spoken to you several times about dissent. The dissent has continued and now I am sending you off. You must leave the area of the field. If you do not leave the match will be terminated. Please have your assistant coach come and talk to me." Again, the red card is for players only; you do not show cards to coaches or anyone else that isn't a player. Then you walk away and join your assistants and watch to see if the coach leaves or not. If he doesn't leave within a few minutes, inform the other coach that the match has been terminated and leave the field. As for #3, I need to get a report after the match that summarizes what happened. When a coach is sent off, the board reviews the situation. It is pretty serious and will at least result in a one-game suspension.

What if it's a parent and not the coach?

The key in this case is that the coach is responsible for the behavior of everyone on his touch line, whether they are parents, grandparents, siblings, friends or anything else. Step 1 is exactly the same. At step 2 you would say something like "Coach, I will be making the calls in this game. I am hearing some dissent from people on your touchline. I need them to let me make the calls. Please explain to them that the dissent must stop now. This is a warning." and so on for the caution and send off. When you are talking to a coach about a parent on his touchline, sometimes it can help if the parent hears you warning the coach about their behavior. In this case you might talk to the coach on the touchline with the other parents without asking him to step onto the field.

ARs and dissent

When ARing a match, you will be very close to, in some cases right on top of, the coaches and parents. It is inevitable that you will overhear some discussion about things they don't understand about what the referee is doing or not doing, that does not necessarily constitute dissent. If it is just people talking among themselves and you don't feel it is intended as implied criticism, then you can allow some latitude. On the other hand, if it starts to bother you or you feel that it is intended for you to hear, I have found that a comment like "The referee was 5 yards from the play and has a much better view than we do" will often put a damper on the chatter. A word or two of explanation is also OK if you think it will help and it won't distract you from the AR job - remember, you are there to referee a game for the kids, not to educate the parents. If they want education, they can come to training.

This is not to say that criticism of an ARs calls should be ignored, any more than criticism of the referee's calls should be. As soon as you feel that the parents are expressing dissent, you

should call the referee over and let him know what is going on discreetly, so he can decide how to handle the situation.

Youth ARs should enjoy a higher level of protection. When you referee with youth ARs, be sure to ask them to let you know immediately if they feel that the parents are making any comments about their calls or your calls. They should not have to try to figure out the intent of comments about calls.

A philosophical comment

Since in addition to a fair amount of refereeing, I have coached my son through BU14 and am now coaching my daughter in GU12, I'm going to indulge in a little philosophy about the game. When I am coaching I think of the referee and his or her calls as a part of the field. Complaining about a referee's call is to me like complaining about the height of the crossbar. "If only the crossbar was higher, that shot would have been a goal!" Maybe that's true, but so what? The fact is that the crossbar is where it is, the shot glanced over it, and now the team needs to get the ball down there again for another chance - and maybe execute a little better. It should be no different when responding to a referee's decisions. The referee said A, from where I am it looked like B, but so what? As a coach, I want my team to respond by staying in the game and playing a little harder next time. If I spend energy complaining about the referee's calls, my team will follow my lead and they are more likely to get into "why bother, the referee doesn't like us" frame of mind, which leads to less effort, not more. Since I am fairly knowledgeable about refereeing, I could spend a lot of time second guessing calls when I'm coaching. But when I coach a game, I spend about as much time thinking about the referee's calls as I do thinking about the height of the crossbar, and the result is that I can focus on things that my team has control over, that is, how they play.

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