

RECOGNIZING AND DEALING WITH IRRESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR

Question: Could you provide some examples of irresponsible coaching at the youth level (U8-U12) of soccer. I recently had a game that had 3 coaches for one team and two coaches for the other team. (Our league allows 4 coaches per team). Constantly throughout the game ALL six coaches would be hollering at the players providing DIRECTIONS on positioning and passing and anything else. The majority of the coaching rarely had any tactical instructions - mostly were the type of “pass now, why did you kick it with your left foot, what are you doing” type of directions. I stopped the game (after listening to them shouting for the majority of the game) and demanded that the coaches let the players play the last 4 minutes with silence from the coaches area. The coaches complied (what a relief!) and the game was ended 4 minutes later. After the game, one coach complained about my demand for silence and said “Where is it written down that I can’t shout instructions to my players?” I did not have a ready response to his question other than I don’t believe the coaching was positive, informative, or in the spirit of the game. I may have come on too strong for the situation, but I was so tired of their screaming at their players, that I felt something needed to be done. Maybe I was right and maybe I was wrong, but for 4 minutes the players played their own game and it was peaceful for the first time that game and everyone on the field had a good time. So, what constitutes irresponsible or inappropriate coaching?

USSF answer (January 18, 2010):

According to Law 5, the referee “takes action against team officials who fail to conduct themselves in a responsible manner and may, at his discretion, expel them from the field of play and its immediate surrounds.” By no stretch of the imagination do most, and certainly not many, coaches or other team officials behave irresponsibly.

Here are some examples of irresponsible behavior, based on questions received and answered here or taken from the USSF position paper of March 22, 2006, on Management of Behavior in the Technical Area. These examples were directed by coaches or other team officials at referees, assistant referees, fourth officials, players of the opposing or their own team, and opposing coaches.

1. Screaming at or verbally or physically abusing the officials or any players or other participants for any reason.
 - a youth coach “who begins to scream at his players when the game begins and does not stop until long after the game is over. With every touch of the ball by his team he gives (screams) instructions to the players off the ball as well as the player with the ball. With every touch of the ball by the other team he is giving (screaming) specific instructions to each player on his team as fast as he can get them out of his mouth. Much of what he says is negative and all mistakes are pointed out and players are taken to task. He is a physically intimidating person who loves to argue about anything and most area referees just stay as far away from him as they can.”
 - ordering a player who has made a mistake to “drop and give me ten” (pushups) right there on the field.
 - Speaking insulting words or making offensive gestures
 - making unwanted contact with opponents

There is a national trend within the soccer community toward eliminating abuse of young people by any adults. The referee is certainly empowered to ensure responsible behavior by the team officials. The method chosen would be up to the individual referee.

2. Interfering with the game in any way, such as:
 - yelling out instructions to do something illegal or giving deceptive instructions.
 - when coaches become actively involved in helping their team deceive the opponents, such as saying that player “x” should do this or that and clearly intending something else to occur (as discovered after

the restart).

- clearly instructing the players to line up within the required distance and “have the referee move you.”
- instructing his/her team, both on the field and on the bench, to jump up and down, waving their arms, and scream at the top of their lungs.
- giving tactical instructions to other players when invited to enter the field to see to the injury of a player.
- presuming to give the officials instructions on how to make or signal their calls.
- insisting that an opposing player be cautioned or sent off.
- throwing objects in protest
- kicking chairs
- striking advertising boards
- persistently and flagrantly protesting decisions by an official
- interfering with the performance of assistant referee or fourth official duties
- refusing to return to the technical area
- entering the field of play without the permission of the referee

SO, WHAT CAN THE COACH OR OTHER TEAM OFFICIALS DO?

Under the Law, only one person at a time is authorized to convey tactical instructions from the technical area. The coach and other officials must remain within its confines except in special circumstances, for example, a physiotherapist or doctor entering the field of play, with the referee’s permission, to assess an injured player. The coach and other occupants of the technical area must behave in a responsible manner.

As a practical matter, particularly at the youth level, any POSITIVE coaching is allowed. Whether at the level of the least experienced players (and coaches) or at the highest levels, any case in which the coach behaves irresponsibly will result in the coach being dismissed. (Two examples from among many: ranting at the referee, overt participation in deception of the opposing team.)

A coach has no “right” to anything in the game of soccer, other than the right to conduct him-/herself responsibly during the game – from within the technical or bench area – while offering advice to his/her team’s players. A referee who allows coaches or other team officials to parade around the field or shout abuse at players in the guise of instruction, in contravention of the requirements in Law 5 that coaches behave responsibly and that referees not permit anyone other than players to enter the field, should be ashamed.

WHAT CAN THE REFEREE DO?

Coaches and other team officials are expected to behave responsibly. (See Law 5 and Interpretations of the Laws of the Game and Guidelines for Referees, the only places in the Laws that team officials are mentioned.) The intelligent referee will generally disregard coaching comments, unless they become openly disrespectful of the game and of the referee. The referee’s first line of defense (unless the behavior is REALLY egregious) is to warn the coach who is behaving irresponsibly. This is the equivalent of a caution, but no card is shown. Then, when the behavior persists (as it usually does, because most coaches who behave this way fail to understand that they must change their errant ways), the coach is expelled from the field for failing to behave in a responsible manner. Please note that under the Laws of the Game, no card may be shown; however, showing the card may be a requirement of the rules of the competition.

Unless the matter is particularly grave, the referee would usually wait until the next stoppage. However, if the situation is indeed grave – as any case of abuse would be – then stopping the game

and drawing attention to the matter is an excellent tool in and of itself. Proactive steps such as the admonition of the coach will usually prevent players who become disgusted with their coach's behavior from acting out and thus becoming subject to punishment themselves. It sends a clear message that the referee is serious about the matter. In such cases, the referee would stop play with the ball in the possession of the abusive coach's team (if possible), advise the coach or other team official that this behavior is irresponsible and must stop if the coach or other team official wishes to remain in the vicinity of the field. If this warning is not effective, then another stoppage and the expulsion of the coach must follow. No cards, please, unless the rules of the competition require them. Also, do not engage in extended discussions when doing this in any circumstances: State the message and leave.

In all events you should prepare a supplemental game report or letter to the league on the matter. You might also suggest in the report or letter that they send someone to monitor a couple of games. The letter could be written in such a way that says perhaps the coach was having a bad day, but it should suggest that it might be beneficial to the children involved if someone from the league dropped in for a game or two just to make sure.

[In the USSF publication "Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game" we find:

5.10 BEHAVIOR OF COACH AND BENCH PERSONNEL

Coaches or other team officials, one at a time, may provide tactical advice to their players, including positive remarks and encouragement. The referee should only take action against coaches or other team officials for irresponsible behavior or for actions that bring the game into disrepute. A coach or other team official may not be cautioned or sent off nor shown any card; however, at the discretion of the referee, such persons may be warned regarding their behavior or expelled from the field of play and its immediate area. When a coach or other team official is expelled, the referee must include detailed information about such incidents in the match report.

The maximum numbers of substitutes and substitutions are set by the competition authority and with the agreement of the two teams within the requirements of Law 3. Additional people in the technical area, such as team members who are not named as players or substitutes (for the current game) on the roster or parents or other persons involved with the team, are permitted to be seated with the team in the technical area (or other designated team area) only if this is allowed by the competition authority. Such persons will be considered team officials and are therefore held to the same standards of conduct specified in Law 5 as other team officials. Although team officials cannot commit misconduct or be shown a card, they may be ordered from the field for irresponsible behavior. Full details must be included in the match report.

The "Ask, Tell, Remove" process is recommended for all officials to follow relative to conduct within the technical area:

* Ask

If a situation arises where there is irresponsible behavior, the official (referee, assistant referee, or fourth official) should ASK the person(s) to stop.

* Tell

If there is another occurrence of irresponsible behavior, the official should inform that person that the behavior is not permissible and TELL them (insist) to stop.

* Remove

If the non-accepted actions continue, the referee must REMOVE that person immediately.

These are the recommended steps, but they are not necessary if the behavior and conduct of personnel within the technical area requires immediate dismissal. Remember, where circumstances permit, match officials should use a "gentle escalate" approach so that referee team responses match the nature of the bench behavior. Try to use the least intrusive response that will solve the problem.

