

Confessions of a Referee

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What a fun service this is. I get to talk about something I absolutely love doing—being a soccer referee.

For thirteen years I've been officiating in both the fall and spring seasons. I have of course learned a lot about the laws of the game and the technical aspects of officiating. And naturally, having all that knowledge and experience has made me a better referee. But when I compare my officiating today to that of my early days, I think the most dramatic changes have come, not from an increase in technical know-how, but from a better appreciation and understanding of human nature, both my own and that of the players, coaches and spectators.

One way it's changed is that I enjoy it much more now than at first. It has become an absolute love of mine. Twice a year I get the fever... anxiously waiting for the season to start.

Another change is much more quantifiable. I now call fewer fouls and show far fewer cards. I suspect they're related. Perhaps I enjoy it more now **because** I've learned how to do it in a less adversarial way.

For those who don't know, let me explain what I mean by cards. In soccer, a player shown a red card is ejected from the game. A

yellow card is a milder reprimand, a warning that he needs to change what he's doing. Two yellows in the same game is equivalent to getting a red—ejection.

When I first started I showed a lot of cards. I rather perversely prided myself on throwing out both players and coaches who didn't behave properly.

This last season I believe my entire season total came to two red cards (One of them to a coach) and something like seven yellow cards. In my early days a single bad game could have produced the same numbers.

As the referee, you're often the only one on or near the field who has absolutely no preference for one side or the other. This gives you a unique and interesting perspective, allowing you to observe the partisan emotions of others in a neutral and (hopefully) impassionate way.

Thirteen years of that view has taught me a lot. What's interesting is that the lessons learned apply to dealing with people in any context, not just on a playing field.

Lesson 1) If you want respect, you have to earn it.

For starters that means I need to be and act professional:

- Show up on time,
- be in a complete and clean uniform.
- Know the rules backwards and forwards

- Hustle to get into the right position to make the call

Lesson 2) There are some things you just can't do anything about.

People will disagree with you. You just have to grow a tough skin and accept it as something you can do nothing about—so don't even try.

People often see what they want to see. Despite the fact that they were 60 yards away, don't know the rules, had a bad angle, and have a bias for one team, they'll swear that player X played the ball with his arm, even though **you** were only 5 yards away, had a clear view with a great angle, know the rules, have far more experience, have no bias and clearly saw that the ball bounced off his hip, not his arm.

A close corollary is that you can't reason with someone who doesn't want to listen to reason. A ranting coach may want to argue a call with you, but it would be pointless and would end up getting both of you more emotional. His mind is already made up and there's nothing you can do about it, so it's best to recognize that, respectfully state that you're not going to debate it, and walk away.

Lesson 3:

Sometimes things go smoother if you just cut people some slack. Try to understand where they're coming from. Related lessons are

- Doing a bad thing doesn't make you a bad person
- A bad **pattern** requires intervention, but a single bad event can sometimes be allowed to slide"
- Just because you have the authority to deal out punishment doesn't always mean you should.

For example, sometimes players get frustrated and let out an expletive. By the book that requires a card. But a ref who does so in all cases is being unreasonable and ... quite frankly stupid! If it wasn't screamed real loud and wasn't aimed at himself, then a simple verbal reminder: "*watch your language please*" is all that's needed. Anything more makes people correctly see you as unreasonable.

Emotions are often short-lived. I remember a game in which a goalie got hurt. The coach and mom came on to the field to attend to her. The coach told me something to the effect of "*You know, if you actually started calling fouls this wouldn't have happened. You're not calling a damn thing*". Which wasn't at all true. It had been a normal game and I thought I had called it well. In fact the injury hadn't even been caused by a foul—the goalie had simply slid into the goal post.

But I now see that he was just being emotionally protective of his players. His player was in pain and as the coach, he's responsible for her.

Since the goalie, the mom and myself were the only ones that heard him, I should've just given him some time to calm down,

either keeping quiet or saying something conciliatory like “*I hear you coach—I’ll try and keep a tighter rein on the game*”.

But, lacking experience, I instead told him “*that’s out of line coach. No more of that*”. To which he reacted defensively and I in turn showed him a yellow card for dissent. He reacted again and I told him “*one more thing coach and you’re out*”. Of course he did not react well to that and by that time I had painted myself into a corner and had no choice but to make him go sit in the parking lot. Had I cut him some slack things wouldn’t have escalated to that point.

Just because you have cards in your pocket doesn’t mean you have to use them. Recently, having just blown my whistle to start the 2nd half, I turned around to find a bunch of players running on and off the field. I whistled to stop the game and gave the coach a shout: “*Coach! What’s this? Please tell your players they may not sub unless I’ve waved them on. A friendly warning : Technically I’m supposed to give them each a yellow card, but this is a rec game so of course I won’t. But some day you’re going to get a ‘by the books’ ref and they won’t be so lucky.*” By my words and tone I not only educated everyone within earshot, but also told them I’m a reasonable person.

You can also use pro-active communication to prevent a problem from even starting. I’ve become good at spotting potential retaliations, possibly because I was a pretty hot-headed player myself. When a pugnacious player has the ball taken away from him and you see his jaw or hands clench, and fire in his eyes as he

takes off after his opponent, that's the time to run up to him and quietly say "*easy now... I'm watching*". Usually that's all it takes.

Very often a word or two is a much better way to deal with an issue than blowing a whistle or showing a card. If the play was a bit rough and it was in the grey zone as to whether it was worth calling a foul, I'll often just shout something like "*a bit too rough there...I may call it next time*". Or if I did call a foul and it was rough enough that I briefly considered showing a yellow card, I might tell him "*I wanna see you tone it down—Next time that may well be yellow*".

One tip I would give new refs is to keep your red card some place that takes an extra second or two to get out. Several of my shorts have a zipped back pocket. I keep the yellow card in my breast pocket and the red card in the zipped one. Having those extra seconds to think about whether or not I **really** want to use this harsh punishment has saved me on a number of occasions.

It's kind of like being a parent, or a teacher, or a boss, or a ... Rules exist. And sometimes you **must** make people face consequences for breaking them. But it has to be done with wisdom and understanding. Otherwise you're not only seen as being unreasonable... you probably are.

Lesson 4) It's OK to admit you make mistakes, **If you have their respect.**

Lesson 5) When people see you as a person rather than a position, they're less likely to heap abuse on you.

I promise all of you that at midnight after calling my next perfect game, I'll call each of you to tell you about it. Don't worry though, that promise will never cause you to lose any sleep.

All referees make mistakes. And even if I our judgement was perfect and we knew how to apply every rule perfectly under every circumstance, it would still be true that many times we just didn't see what happened.

A foul might occur near the head...just as my eyes flash down to the feet to try and catch a trip; OR at the ball's current location...while my eyes linger an extra second to watch for possible injury or retaliation at the site of the last play, a particularly rough challenge; OR while players' bodies are blocking my view; OR while I'm blinking or wiping sweat from my eyes; OR...

There are many valid reasons why a ref may not have seen something. And sometimes you **must** make a decision, even when you didn't see what happened. The naked truths of officiating are that you can't see everything and sometimes you just have to take your best guess.

Sometimes the actions and words of the players make me think my guess was wrong. Of course, unless both teams are saying the same thing, I can't reverse my call based on what players say

or do... that's a very slippery slope. But I've found that, every now and then there are circumstances where it's OK to tell a player. *"I used my best judgment based on what I thought I saw. If I got it wrong I'm sorry—hopefully it'll all even out."*

If you were hustling to stay near the play, then it can be useful to admit you took a best guess. Players appreciate the honesty, see you as a person trying his best, and are willing to forgive what they see as a wrong call. But you better not try this if you haven't gained their respect by hustling into position. Admitting you may have got it wrong when you're standing near the center circle, far from the play, will only get them ticked off, and rightfully so.

I'm a bit of an unusual referee in the degree to which I talk to players. I'm constantly running alongside them saying things like ... *"that was borderline, let's be a bit less aggressive next time"*, or *"watch your late kick please"*. These things not only make my expectations clear, but also show them that I'm nearby, watching, taking care of fairness and everyone's safety. That's lesson 6: Things go better when people know what you expect of them.

Listening is also important, as is respecting what is said. Early on I would ignore players who would say things like *"ref, #24 is holding a lot"*, thinking that to respond would show a bias. But now I respectfully respond with. *"Thanks ... I'll try and keep an*

eye on it.”. It’s all about lesson 7 (People who feel their complaints aren’t being heard are much more likely to get angry) and lesson 8 (When people know you respect them, they’re more likely to respect you)

I’d like to close with the lessons that I think are most important.

Lesson 9) Children are amazing, wonderful, unique, and vulnerable.

I love being out there with the kids, even those half-kids we call teenagers. I love talking to them, running with them, laughing with them. I see their joy and their pain. Sometimes I see them grow—right there on the field, right in front of my eyes. I see the bold ones, the shy ones, the jokers, the leaders, the angry ones, the team-unity builders, the protectors... All of them unique and wonderful. I love them all

And I see how their head lifts, how their eyes sparkle, how a smile lights up their face... when they’re made to feel good, special. Sometimes just one word, or one look, especially from a parent or coach, can make this happen. It’s a wonderful thing to see.

But I also see the flip side. How a critical tone or word can get them down. I’ve seen it make them stop smiling, seen how they

beat themselves up when they make a mistake... because they've been told that they "should've..." or that they were too slow or too dumb. Often these things aren't said in words—a single whining "Oh Come-on" will do the trick. It gets heard as "You idiot!"

Lesson 10) Criticism makes people timid / Praise makes them bold.

There's a phrase in soccer that good coaches will often use... "Pass the ball, not the responsibility!". For example, a girl with one opponent in front of her passes it to a teammate who isn't any closer to the goal than she is and also faces an opponent. That's passing the responsibility. It comes from fear of making a mistake.

It's interesting that the same parents and coaches who want a kid to get better, who try to teach her new skills and techniques, will then turn around and without knowing it, give her every incentive **not** to try out that new skill. They unintentionally do this by criticizing mistakes and not praising failed attempts to try new things. And of course, unfamiliar skills will fail more often than not.

Once I started looking for this, I started seeing it everywhere: The kid who seems to have the right physical attributes to be good, but who gets the ball and just kicks it away... The goalie who won't run out of the goal to get the ball... The defender who will only go a certain distance from the goal... The kid who

could definitely have gotten to a loose ball first, but backed up instead...

I once officiated an amazing high school boys rec game. It was amazing because of the stark contrast of coaching styles and the resulting behaviors of the players. One coach was constantly shouting at his players, telling them what to do and what they did wrong. The other opened up a lounge chair (I'm not kidding), put it near the half line and shouted not one word of advice the whole game. From his mouth came a constant stream of "great play", "good effort", "right idea"... and so on. Nothing but praise and encouragement.

The difference on the field was obvious. The lounge chair coach's boys were communicating well, passing the ball but not the responsibility, whereas the other team had two good players who did most of the work while the rest served pretty much just to kick the ball up the field hoping one of these two would get it. By the end of the game the yelled-at team had players bickering among themselves.

Which brings up lesson 11) In a team scenario, the coach sets the example. Man! Is this true.

And my final lesson:

12) Giving kids confidence is more important than teaching them skill.

All right. Maybe this isn't a lesson as much as it is an opinion. But I feel so strongly about it that I need to express it here.

One thing I take very seriously as a ref is my responsibility to keep players safe, especially when they're kids. And that includes mental and emotional safety.

What's the point of signing a child up for a recreational activity and then constantly tell her what she should have done or what she did wrong? Kids get this from both parents and coaches. And, since I've been there as both a parent and a coach, I understand why it happens. You want the best for your kids. You want them to become good at it so that ... "so that what??" So they can be happy? Does it make sense to make them unhappy in the process?

I've come to have a strong belief that it's **not** important that they become good at IT! Whether the "it" be soccer, ballet, art, music, or ... and I know some of you will disagree with me on this... school. These things are important only to the extent that they add joy to the child's life. Whether or not they get good at it is so damn trivial compared with the things that **are** important: That they become proud of who they are, confident in themselves, and happy.

Comments like "*You can't let yourself get pushed off the ball that way*" or "*You gotta start playing tougher*"—pretty much any sentence that starts with "*you can't*", "*you shouldn't*" or "*you gotta*" is something to be avoided. If your child wants your

advice on how to improve, she'll ask for it. Even after the game, your only comments should be positive. Make no recommendations about her play unless she asks for it.

Fortunately the leagues I work with recognize the effect of negative comments and authorize the refs to remind adults of their responsibilities in this area, and to report those that are too negative.

Unfortunately, I've never seen any other ref do this. I however am not so shy about it. I have on many occasions respectfully brought the issue up with coaches.

I once stopped a game, beckoned a coach over for a private conference and asked him to stop shouting "*You gotta*", reminding him that "*in a rec game, the only thing they 'gotta do' is have fun.*"

I will often tell a coach to "*Remember that every game offers a thousand opportunities for praise and encouragement. Please use as many as you can.*"

Surprisingly, this works more often than I thought it would. I think it's because many coaches want to do the right thing, but get caught up in the heat of the game or the rivalry with other teams, and end up forgetting. These coaches just need a reminder.

In one game I blew my whistle just shortly before halftime, called the coach over and privately told him that although I had just

heard him say “*Good run Karla*”, it was the first positive thing I had heard him say all game. I told him he really needed to change his tone and words.” Surprisingly he said nothing. But his behavior in the 2nd half was totally different, almost entirely positive. Occasionally he would momentarily relapse, but then he would remember. You could almost hear him remember and quickly switch over to a “nice job!”. Sometimes all it takes is someone to make them aware of what they’re doing.

Perhaps my greatest joy as a referee comes from seeing the smile on a player's face when I give a compliment. I suspect many refs would frown on complimenting players on the field. But it seems to work well for me and has never caused a problem.

If a particularly nice play was made, I'll often comment on it, quietly, as I pass by: “*Nice run you had there!*”, “*Great pass – good eyes*”, “*courageous save goalie!*”, “*you're an excellent shielder*”. Even things that fail will sometimes elicit “*I saw what you intended – it was a good idea*”. As long as I keep it balanced for both sides I don't see anything wrong with that. Hey, I'm a fan of the game—I appreciate a nice play too.

And it does wonders for game control. A player who receives a compliment from me no longer sees me as someone who's out there to control or punish him. Also great for game control is to let players know why you did NOT call something. For example, sometimes you get a physical battle between two

players of roughly equal strength and ability. Technically maybe both are doing too much pushing, but since its equal on both sides, who do you call it on? So I let it go and then, when that play is over, say something like “*I enjoyed watching that great battle—a bit rough on both sides though so both of you tone it down next time*”. This way they understand why no foul was called and are both complimented.

It takes experience to determine the right amount of talk, as well as the right type and timing, but its well worth learning how to do it. It builds trust and understanding, with players and referee each seeing the other as a person.

Often humor plays a role. I remember a particularly speedy girl smiling after I went up to her, gasping and saying “*You gotta stop running so fast!*”

Another time, within the first minute of a game I spotted a boy pulling another’s shirt as they were contesting for the ball. I blew my whistle, and gave a loud shout, meant for all to hear: “ *Holding! I know the pros often get away with shirt pulling, but I don’t allow it.*”. At this point the boy and I looked at each other. He smiled and pointed at me. I pointed and smiled back at him. Without any words we understood each other—I was letting him know “*no hard feelings—I understand that part of sports is seeing what the ref will let you get away with—I appreciate your athleticism and determination*” and he was saying “*OK, you caught me right away—good job*”.

Another time, late in the game, while someone was chasing a ball that had gone down a hill, I found myself next to a teenage boy who put his arm on my shoulder and leaned against me sighing “*Oh man I’m exhausted. Stay put ref—I need a rest*”. To which I replied... “*me too, think your coach can sub for me?*”.

Those personal moments are what I’ve come to love most about refereeing.