

We recently had an unfortunate incident involving a frustrated spectator. The specifics are not particularly important here (although they will be thoroughly considered as the Board decides what to do with this individual), but it seems like a good time to address this issue and how we, as referees, can handle overwrought spectators.

Before we go on to specific techniques you must understand that you, the referee, have the authority to stop the game for this type of interference. AYSOs "Guidance for Referees and Coaches" ([http://www.aysohelp.org/referee/Manuals/AYSO\\_Manuals/guidance.pdf](http://www.aysohelp.org/referee/Manuals/AYSO_Manuals/guidance.pdf)) states:

"...coaches and referees must work together to ensure the comments and behavior of spectators are within the boundaries of the AYSO philosophical tenets. Comments and behavior that may be common at the high school, college or professional level are often not appropriate in youth sports. Referees are authorized to stop, suspend or terminate play for outside interference of any kind. AYSO is about 'kids first and soccer second.'..."

Cooperation between coaches and referees is essential in maintaining an appropriate environment for the players. The lessons young players learn from the behavior coaches and referees demonstrate will long endure after win/loss records are forgotten."

At any point in an escalating situation you have the authority to gather your ARs and inform the coaches that the game cannot continue safely with the interference, then end the match and walk off the field.

OK, we've established that your power in relationship to the match is almost absolute. But we all want our matches to conclude normally so it is much better to never let it get to that point (although sometimes it will no matter what you do).

First, here is a short list of definite "dos" and "do-nots." These are true for ALL referees!

1. Remain calm. If you cannot remain calm, end the match and walk away IMMEDIATELY. Don't forget that you hold all the cards as far as the match is concerned.
2. Remain respectful. It is almost certain that the frustrated spectator doesn't know you from Adam (or Eve) so their complaints cannot be personal. They're probably just amateurishly "playing the ref" in hopes of helping their children win.
3. Remain humble. I've seen upset parents that were correct in their technical claim. Your problem parent may be right about you screwing up a call, but that DOES NOT give them the right to loud dissent or personal attacks. Right or wrong, the problem is not in that they disagree with you, the problem is in HOW they disagree with you!
4. Do not respond in kind. Bad behavior directed at you is not your ticket to repeat that bad behavior.
5. Do not forget that children and parents are watching. Somebody needs to "be the adult" and that somebody is you. Your reaction and actions will either support the organization's ideals and teach children important lessons, making your future games easier to referee, or you will validate your problem parent's actions and just make your life as a referee harder.
6. Do not punish the coach. The coach is probably as frustrated as you are. Unless, of course, the coach is the problem!

Here are some techniques that may work for you. The success of each of these techniques depends upon you, your refereeing style, and the situation. Modify them to suit yourself but don't forget the rules above.

#### INITIAL RESPONSES TO SPECTATOR COMPLAINTS

1. People will whine about your calls. Ignore this unless they direct their complaints at you in a disrespectful or disruptive way. But listen, too. Referees learn a lot by watching players and parents respond to their calls.
2. If somebody goes too far and you can identify them, don't stop the game--just look at them, point at them, and give them your mother's best "I'm so disappointed in you" look. If you cannot conjure the look of parental sorrow, try your Dad's "that's enough of that" look. You can even say, firmly, something along the lines of "that's enough of that" or "I won't have any more of that" or just waggle your finger accusingly. I've even seen the finger-on-lips "quiet" signal used to good effect. This is their first warning.
3. If you cannot identify your problem parent, look at your fellow volunteer (the coach on that side) and politely ask him or her to help. The coach is not your enemy, but if you come down hard on the coach you might change that!
4. Try these techniques a few times with your problem spectators. Sometimes your feedback takes time to sink in!

#### THE SPECTATOR CANNOT BE CHASTISED INTO QUIETING DOWN

1. Once you've established that a spectator will not respond to your feedback, the instant you hear the problem parent again, blow your whistle to stop play (don't forget to note the position of the ball and who has possession), move to a position where you can speak directly to the coach, and ask for the coach's help in handling the parent. Drop the ball to the team that had possession when you stopped play--it is important that you do not punish the team's children. They are already suffering enough from this spectator.
2. Alternately, you can wait for a break in play, or talk to the coach privately, or speak directly to the parent. You do what works best for you.

#### THE COACH CANNOT HELP (NOW it is time to get serious--you and the coach have a real problem.)

1. It is time to show your trump card. Stop play as in above then calmly inform the coach that the spectator is disrupting the game to the point that it cannot continue. Tell the coach that if the problem doesn't stop, the next step is to end the match until the spectator leaves. Promise yourself to follow-up on your threat. If you cannot do this, do not make it. You can either do this privately or publicly--if you have temper issues, do it privately.
2. At this point, deal ONLY with the coach. Let the coach and the parents around him/her speak to the spectator.
3. Restart the game.

#### THE LAST STRAW.

1. Stop the game immediately--nothing is more important to the game now than removing the spectator. Bring your assistant referees to the center of the field. Once the three of you are together, stay together.
2. Avoid the spectator. Inform the coach either privately or publicly that the game will continue once the spectator has left. Keep your cards in your pockets.

3. While the coach is handling the spectator, explain the situation to the opposing coach on the opposite side of the field. Being on the opposing side of the field makes it harder for the parent to argue with you.

4. DO NOT speak to the offending spectator. If you must, do it at a distance and with other people around. Restate your ultimatum and do not argue. Either the parent goes or the game is over. Period. You are not negotiating here--you are merely stating a fact.

Of course, you may have to go immediately to any one of these steps. For instance, if a parent runs on the field challenging you to "go to the parking lot" you can pretty much go straight to "THE LAST STRAW" and might consider asking (loudly) for somebody to call 911!

Fortunately, this is extraordinarily rare! Other situations that require immediate use of the ultimatum are a spectator that goes directly into a foul-mouthed complaint over a call, any physical threats to you or anyone else, or any other time that you believe that the safety of the players or other spectators is being compromised.

But through all this, remember that almost everybody on both sides of the field is wishing that your problem spectator would just shut up or go away. Ask any experienced referee--you will be thanked after the game by parents of both sides (and especially the same side as the offender) if you deal promptly and resolutely with your troublesome spectator.