

### **Come On, Coach**

On a chilly spring evening, I eagerly swapped my bright yellow jersey with a warm jacket, stuffing its pockets with a whistle, pen, and match report. It had been an unusually drawn-out ninety minutes of refereeing and I was anxious to return home. Suddenly, a lurking specter emerged within my periphery. As happens all too frequently in youth soccer, a coach, clad in a button-down shirt and slacks, began his aggressive march toward me, lower lip jutting out in a frustrated pout. “Hey ref, let’s talk about that call,” he caustically growled. Seizing the moment, I decided to reframe this familiar conundrum. Rather than patiently enduring complaints once again, I recognized a hopeful opportunity. Here and now I could take one step toward altering the cultural stigma associated with sports officials.

However, in order to approach this problem, I would need to dodge a landmine. Specifically, a dispute with the potential to become, in a euphemistic sense, sour. My strategy was to act contrary to the coach’s expectations. By lumbering in my direction and challenging what he saw as a “handball,” the coach was probably hoping to gain self-satisfaction through a verbal battle with me. Presumably, he hoped to draw out an unprepared or aggressive response to his confrontation. Rather than offering him some compelling content for the next coaches’ meeting, I channeled a cheery mood and embraced the encounter.

“Yeah, I remember that little deflection off the player’s arm near you,” I replied. With some dramatic hand gestures, the coach ardently claimed “Yes, that girl stuck her arms straight up and knocked the ball. I don’t know how you couldn’t call that! Her hand was in a really awkward position!” I could not help but smile. After all, the scrupulous art of making a call is why officiating is so enjoyable. “You know, calling a handball can sometimes be pretty complex with all of the thought that goes into it,” I pointed out. Then I sensed my moment, it was time to draw the coach into the referee’s world. Energetically, I mentioned clauses from the *FIFA Laws of the Game* to reinforce the rationale behind my decision. All the while, I could not help but relish the

quizzical look on the coach's face. It was clear that he had been in a debate with a referee before, but with a bit more shouting and a bit less tutoring. Emotionally deflated, he walked away, hopefully more knowledgeable and sympathetic to a referee's perspective.

Through an uncommonly civilized discussion, I am confident that the coach and I moved toward understanding and a peaceful youth sports environment that night. This particular man left the game without dramatically sparring with the referee. In turn, the conversation among coaches, players, and parents about horrendous officials did not continue afterward. It is my hope that instead, the coach returned home and thought "I guess referees aren't gruff and ill-willed after all," or "Was it really necessary to try and intimidate that high-schooler after a ten-year-olds' soccer game?" Even without this reaction, minimizing anti-referee sentiments to any degree is progress toward solving this persistent societal conflict. Over time, an accumulation of similar interactions can have a broad impact; steadily, the hate enveloping youth sports will be corroded. Moreover, I learned on that chilly soccer field that with a readjustable mentality, there is no limit to the scope of problems that can be solved.