

Understanding the Role of the Referee in a Soccer Match

Unlike any other sport, USSF/FIFA Soccer, as played in youth town, travel and club programs and in amateur and professional leagues, is the **players game**. Only the players and the officials have status or are allowed to participate in the match or have any role in its outcome. While bench personnel (ie. coaches) are permitted in the technical area (and required in most youth leagues), they actually have greater restrictions on their behavior than those placed on spectators.

Soccer is a game of Laws, not rules. The referee applies the *Laws of the Game*, as the context to judge what is occurring on the field and determine whether it is necessary to intervene. In essence, the referee makes up the rules as they go along, to fit the level and circumstances of each game, and at any given moment. It is totally dynamic..... and totally bewildering to those who have only been exposed to rule based sports such as baseball, football, basketball, hockey, and even high school soccer.

This concept is best expressed by **Law 5** and **8 (V8)**:

The Laws of the Game are intended to provide that games should be played with as little interference as possible, and in this view it is the duty of referees to penalize only deliberate breaches of the Law. Constant whistling for trifling and doubtful breaches produces bad feeling and loss of temper on the part of the players and spoils the pleasure of spectators.

At most games the referee crew are the only neutral or unbiased people at the game. They are the only ones with the authority and training to ensure fair play. Further they are specifically instructed in V8 not to interfere unless it is absolutely necessary.

The following is from the *USSF Advice to Referees on the Laws of the Game*:

5.2 REFEREE'S AUTHORITY The referee's authority begins upon arrival at the area of the field of play and continues until he or she has left the area of the field after the game has been completed. The referee's authority extends to time when the ball is not in play, to temporary suspensions, to the half-time break, and to additional periods of play or kicks from the penalty mark required by the rules of the competition.

What this means is that from the moment the referee steps on the field, they are the boss, they are in charge, they are the judge, jury and executioner and no-one, not their assignor, not even Sepp Blatter, president of FIFA has any greater authority over them to tell them what to do, or even advise/assist them, unless specifically given permission as in the case of assistant referees, club linesmen, and others in certain cases.

It is important to note that the referee's authority extends through their assistant referees. If an assistant referee asks a spectator, substitute, or bench personnel to move back, it is the same as if the referee said it directly. Assistants have a delegated responsibility to manage the touch lines, substitutions and the bench area.

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*

While it is common sense to first warn a coach who is misbehaving, or even keep them around in the hopes that they will learn to act responsibly, it is not required, and, in fact, can be risky for the youth referee because it often appears to the adult coach that such behavior is tolerated or OK. Permitting this does nothing but reinforce the bad behavior and make it more difficult for the next referee who gets this coach.

Dealing with Fouls (the 7 and 3):

In soccer there are only 10 penal offenses. Three of these offenses: Deliberate handling of the ball, Holding an opponent, and Spitting at an opponent, only need to occur in order to be considered foul play, however even if the referee sees them occur, they do not stop play and award a restart unless the opponent is disadvantaged or the team for whom the foul was committed gains an unfair advantage. Sometimes the referee will recognize the foul, but signal 'advantage/play-on' to allow time to determine if the anticipated advantage materializes and, if not, call the ball back to the point of the original offense.

The other seven acts by a player against an opponent, during play, on the field of play usually occur in the normal course of play and only become fouls if, in the opinion of the referee they are done in a manner which is careless, reckless or with undue force. These acts are to kick, trip, jump at, charge, strike, push, or tackle, including the attempt to kick, trip, or strike.

In other words, it is perfectly normal for arms and elbows to contact an opponent, for players to tackle and charge, kick and jump at, and, yes, even push the other players. It is all part of the game. It is only when, in the referee's judgment, these actions cross the line by becoming dangerous or unfair that they become fouls, and if the team committing the foul gains an unfair advantage, the referee has the power to stop play and restart the game to take away any advantage which was unfairly gained.

While the whistle is the preferred signaling device for soccer, it is not a game where players “**play the whistle**”. With the exception of this situations outlined in the ATR, below, whistles are not blown except as needed by the referee to communicate or get the players’ attention.

5.4 REFEREE SIGNALS ... The whistle is required for all ceremonial restarts (every penalty kick and kick-off, plus any other restart which the referee has delayed for any reason). The whistle is needed to:

- *start play (1st, 2nd half), after a goal*
- *stop play for a free kick or penalty kick, if match is suspended or abandoned, or when a period of play has ended due to the expiration of time*
- *restart play at free kicks when the wall is ordered back the appropriate distance or for penalty kicks*
- *restart play after it has been stopped due to the issue of a yellow or red card for misconduct, injury, or substitution*

The whistle is NOT needed

- *to stop play for a goal kick, corner kick or throw-in, a goal*
- *to restart play from a free kick, goal kick, corner kick, throw-in*

No whistle is needed when play is restarted with a dropped ball. Except where required, whistling at other times should be held to a minimum so that, when it is truly needed to gain the attention of players, the whistle is more likely to have the desired impact. 5.5