

**Subject:** Youth Soccer Insider: Blaming the ref doesn't work

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## Blaming the ref doesn't work

By Mike Voitalla

I've long believed that coaches lashing out at referees is a counter-productive practice. After reffing and ARing nearly 40 youth games in the last year -- and surveying other referees -- I'm even more sure of it.

As a referee, you get a very good sense of the players' mood because you see their faces up close.

What I've seen over and over again is how children react to getting screamed at by their coaches. You see the confidence drain out of them when they're berated by the pacing, grumpy, angry adult on the sideline.

The common scenario is the momentum is going against the team, coaches get frustrated and through voice or body language send the message they've lost faith in their players. And the players respond, predictably, by being so self-conscious of their next move that things get even worse for their team.

I also see how the kids respond when they hear their coaches -- or parents -- scream at the referee.

Sometimes they start dissenting with words or gestures. I've seen this from kids as young as 9 after obvious fouls. I actually find this somewhat humorous because they look so silly in a cute childish way -- but then you wonder whether they might not end up believing their sloppy tackling is a proper way to play. Or that they'll keep getting offside because the coach 50 yards away screamed at the AR who was actually in position to see the play.

The one that really gets my goat is when after a foul is called the coach yells at the player, "It's OK, Johnny! You didn't do anything wrong!" Do these guys actually think this is a clever way to



circumvent the dissent rule? More importantly, they're setting the kid up to keep making the same mistake.

I've been screamed at "How was that a foul?" from a coach 40 yards away from his player who pushed down an opponent with both hands from behind – which my AR, two yards away and I, 10 yards away, both witnessed clearly.

I've had a coach in one game scream at me "That's a foul!" when her player tripped on the ball and "Let the kids play!" when her player threw an elbow into a chin. This coach was more than twice the distance away than I was on each incident.

I get the frustration of coaches when we do err. But refs at the very highest levels average a few mistakes per game – and somehow the man, woman, boy or girl who's reffing your U-12s is going to be perfect?

The fact is that when the youth coach demonstrably questions the referee the players not only tend to get distracted, they are being handed an excuse for why they're not succeeding.

As for the coaches who claim there's a method to their madness, do they really believe that "riding the referee" is going to help their cause? That a person they're abusing is somehow going to give their team the benefit of the doubt on the next close call?

Any referees worth their salt do not get sucked into making a makeup call and any coach who tries to win youth games by intimidating a referee shouldn't be around kids' soccer. (It is, of course, paramount that refs stifle coaches' dissent immediately so to avoid any speculation that the coach is having an influence.)

I am happy to report from the many youth games I've reffed and observed in the past year, the coaches who abuse refs are in the minority. From the repeat offenders -- and I have heard paid coaches drop F-bombs at refs in front of 11-year-olds -- I believe there's another reason for their disgraceful sideline theatrics: They want the parents who pay them to think it's the refs' fault when their teams aren't playing well.

*(Mike Voitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for [Bay Oaks/East Bay United SC](#) in Oakland, Calif and is a Grade 8 referee. He is the co-author, with Tim Mulqueen, of [The Complete Soccer Goalkeeper](#). Voitalla's youth soccer articles are archived at [YouthSoccerFun.com](#).)*

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