

Subject: Youth Soccer Insider: Ref, Can we talk?

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Ref, Can we talk?

By Mike Woitalla

Among the feedback we got from last week's column on referee abuse ("[Blaming the ref doesn't work](#)") were those who pointed out that sometimes coaches do feel a legitimate need to communicate with the referee -- especially when the coaches believe their players' safety is at risk.

I have over the years asked experienced refs: What's a reasonable way for coaches to express their grievances to refs?

"It's basically down to approach and attitude. All referees are happy to talk about the game at any convenient moment. A friendly approach and polite comment or question will draw a similar response."

That came from **Stanley Lover**, the [renowned international referee](#), instructor, and author of several officiating books, who died in 2013.

I had given Lover the following scenario: What to do if their No. 6 is throwing elbows at your No. 10?

Lover suggested the coach say, "A nice match, referee, but that young Blue No. 10 is near to tears because of the rough play of the Red No. 6, particularly her flying elbows." Enough said, the ref has got the point.

Lover stressed that coaches be aware of their body language: "An aggressive movement; a menacing stance; a thrusting scowling face; a sharp accusing question, will put the official on the defensive and not invite an answer which satisfies either party."

Mark Butler of the [National Intercollegiate Soccer Officials Association](#) told me:

"If there is a genuine concern, especially in the area of protecting a player, it is acceptable to speak to the referee. It's all about the approach. It's not screaming, or getting personal. ... The approach should not be confrontational, boisterous, demonstrative -- and the discussion should not be prolonged."

Brian Hall, former World Cup ref and four-time MLS Referee of the Year, warned of a halftime talk when I queried him in a 2010 article:

"If a coach talks to the ref at halftime," Halls says, "what will the other coach or the spectators think?"

Hall suggested a quiet word with the assistant referee on the near side. A coach could say, in a positive manner, "Maybe you guys can discuss that at halftime ..."

Also acceptable, said Hall, is if the referee comes near the coach during the game -- perhaps at a throw-in or a free kick near the sideline -- and the coach asks the referee to keep her eye out on something, "in a professional, controlled, positive manner."

(Hall also strongly advocated coaches providing feedback on referees to the league's assignors -- and not just when it's a complaint.)

[Randy Vogt](#), the author of "[Preventive Officiating](#)" and Youth Soccer Insider ref columnist, does believe halftime can be an appropriate time for a coach to approach the referee at the youth level:

"The coach should then tell the opposing coach what was said so the opposing coach does not believe his/her team is being accused of anything. If both coaches believe the ref needs to call more fouls, they can both approach the ref at halftime."

Everyone agrees coaches must not approach in anger.

"The coach needs to be calm throughout the conversation," says Vogt. "Coach could say something like, 'I realize that you are trying your best but there have been fouls that have not been whistled, the challenges have become more robust because of this and I'm fearful that somebody is about to get hurt. Could you please start calling more fouls on both teams? I believe that would serve this game well.'

"The important thing is to ask for more fouls being whistled on both teams. Otherwise, the ref could think that the coach is more interested in winning the game than the safety of the players especially if the coach says something like, 'Call more fouls on the other team as they are a bunch of dirty players who are coached that way!' That's definitely the wrong thing to say and only exacerbates the situation."

If the situation occurs in the second half or early in the game, Vogt suggests that in the older youth groups, the coach should ask the captain to communicate the coach's concerns with the same civility he recommends for the coaches.

If the kids are young and the coach cannot rely on a captain for communication, Vogt agrees with Hall that when play is near the bench the coach can attempt to convey a message to the ref -- in a calm, concise manner.

"The important thing is for the coach or captain to be pleasant and the ref to receive the impression that he/she is more concerned about the safety of all the players than simply winning the game," says Vogt.

(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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