



## **Respecting the Game**

By: Michael Amato

Overall the benefits of participating in youth soccer cannot be understated; getting exercise outdoors, making friends, and learning lessons like teamwork and fair play. However, inevitably there are issues that arise no matter the age group or the level of play. You can always hear one coach that's just a little more boisterous than all the others, or there is at least one parent whose comments are bordering on unnecessary. Of course all parents want to encourage their kids to be the best they can be, but there is a delicate balance that has to be respected. That balance would be a line between positive reinforcement, and downright belligerence.

So what makes people cross that line? I have been involved in minor sports for over 20 years as either a player, coach or administrator and I have met many rational people that seem to morph into something else while on the sidelines. Is it just human nature and adrenaline that makes people act inappropriately? There must be a reason. We are long passed the stage of isolated incidents and are now into full blown long term problems. It is no longer just one or two people ruining it for everyone else.

The answer could be, as simple as it sounds a lack of common sense and a loss of perspective. The problem is in the heat of the moment people simply act without thinking logically. Whether it's a call on the field, an issue with playing time or frustration with a child's play, people simply do not see the forest through the trees. No one seems to realize the big picture.

Many times we want to compare what we see on television to our local soccer fields. Plush fields, precise passing, and world class refereeing are simply not things you will find at your local soccer pitch. As much as we would like to experience those they are simply not realistic at the community soccer level. At this level the goal should be enjoying the game at its most basic form. If you like soccer with out all the glitz and glam you will be hooked for life. All you need is a ball and some friends and you can enjoy the sport pretty much anywhere. We should all be grateful for the opportunities and luxuries we have compared to other communities around the world.

Often times people take the game far too seriously. I am not suggesting that players and coaches alike should not care about winning but that is not always the most important thing. There is always that coach that talks about an upcoming game like it's the most important thing going on in the world today. Never mind cancer, poverty or world hunger, this 9 year old soccer game tops them all! Obviously sometimes a change of perspective is really important when people start taking minor sports too seriously.

The will to win can cloud a person's good judgement as well. This is usually where equal playing time comes into the equation. Coaches and parents become so consumed with winning that they will not give everyone an equal opportunity to participate. This simply cannot happen at a recreational level. Everyone needs to get an equal opportunity to play. Soccer is a team sport and that's what makes it so great. Getting a chance to build something together as a team is one of the most important lessons the game can teach you. If you don't want to worry about other players then sign up for an individual sport like karate or golf.

Perhaps the strangest sight is when parents seem to be way more involved or invested then their kids. If the kids are happy then why can't the parents be happy as well? The pressure on children in today's society is astronomical and the last thing they need is to feel even more pressure on the soccer field. Coaches and parents try and force lessons and strategies down their throat all the while forgetting to let them enjoy the game. Most kids under 11 years of age can't even spell "holding midfielder", let alone understand its concept.

There seems to be much more emphasis on the results instead of the experience. Try asking your kids the score of last week's game. I bet most of them couldn't even tell you and that's not a bad thing. If they are enjoying their soccer experience then the score is not important. The main thing is that they want to play again next week.

The truth is there are many great people involved in minor soccer that make it an enjoyable experience. There are also many great people that lose their way at times and can ruin it for everyone else. Are we going to fix these issues overnight? Probably not, however, if we all take a second before we act then it could make things a lot easier. Youth sports are exactly that, about the youth. Let's try and always keep that perspective going forward and always show respect for the great game.

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