

Subject: Youth Soccer Insider: Small-sided games present their own challenges for refs -- from the adults

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Small-sided games present their own challenges for refs -- from the adults

By Randy Vogt

When I started refereeing in 1978, all games under-8 on up were 11 vs. 11 on full-sided fields with goals that were 8 yards by 8 feet. Two decades ago, the younger age groups switched to small-sided games to help the players' development. After all, fewer players on the field creates more touches on the ball for all players and a smaller field with smaller goals is more practical for their small but growing bodies.

I have seen an unfortunate pattern of late that teams are relying on goalkeeper punts, which often goes into the opponent's half of the field on the smaller field, as an attacking tactic. Playing Route 1 defeats the purpose of what small-sided soccer is trying to accomplish and I would recommend that keeper punts and drop kicks be banned in small-sided play so that all teams would simply play the ball out of the back.

Not much discussed has been how small-sided games could help the new referee's development as well with fewer players on the field to watch and fewer spectators at the games. Let's be honest that the challenge in officiating small-sided games generally does not come from the players, happy to run around the field and kick the ball with their friends, but from the adults, both coaches and spectators who are sometimes living their lives vicariously through their children. Those are the adults who will need to be dealt with should they become "over-enthusiastic."

And that's the reason why I prefer to ref U-16 or senior games over U-11 games. With the older age groups, the few adults at the game have generally learned to calm down and I have a good feel with the challenges the players present. With the youngest kids, the adults can be divided into three categories:



- “It’s much more important that the kids fall in love with soccer and have fun rather than winning.” Thankfully, these adults are in the majority.
- “It’s nice that the kids are having fun but I would really like them to win as well.”
- “I’m expecting maximum effort from every player at all times! It’s the only way that we are going to win the championship!” Maybe not as bad as the evil sensei in the “Karate Kid” movie, but you get the idea.

The strange thing is a coach in the top two categories will say that I did “Tremendous” or some equally positive adjective, then the coach of the next game from the third category thinks that I do not have a clue on how to ref. What I’ve discovered is the coaches in that category can especially get out of hand when it’s a close game toward the end.

The referee needs to keep calm even if the adults are not calm. I’ve always kept calm but it’s a bit challenging when a coach, on the touchline for just a year or two, has told me that I do not know how to referee or do not know the rules. Or tried to intimidate me (good luck with that!).

The sad part is these coaches are the ones who end referee’s careers as well as the careers of their players. After all, who wants to be yelled at or hear other people being yelled at, especially if you are 8 years old?

(Randy Vogt has officiated over 9,000 games during the past three decades, from professional matches in front of thousands to 6-year-olds being cheered on by very enthusiastic parents. In “Preventive Officiating,” he shares his wisdom gleaned from thousands of games and hundreds of clinics to help referees not only survive but thrive on the soccer field. You can visit the book’s website at www.preventiveofficiating.com.)

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