

Confessions of a Soccer Parent

One of the more enjoyable experiences I have each fall and spring is watching my three children play soccer. To see their growing skills and love for the game is truly a blessing. I can now confess, however, that I could have made it even more fun for both them and for me had I been a little bit more relaxed and far quieter on the sidelines. You see, until recently, I was your typical loud and obnoxious soccer dad. In the last few years, I have learned a few hard lessons that have put me on the path to recovery.

My kid's not Messi and that's ok.

I am a sports fan. I have watched a lot of college and pro sports on TV. Yet until soccer I did not watch much youth sports. The difference is appalling. I used to whine, groan and throw up my hands with every mistake the players made. I now realize how silly I was acting. First, these kids are just . . . well . . . KIDS! They are changing both mentally and physically every week. Of course they are going to make mistakes on the field that's how they learn to play the game. They felt bad enough kicking at the ball and missing; you can imagine how they must have felt to hear me moan about it.

Second, my kids probably inherited the same athletic ability that I have. To be blunt, they likely will not be professional athletes. I cannot hold them to the same standards I might hold Mia Hamm or Cobi Jones. I am learning to put my expectations in perspective and enjoy the game for what it is: recreational youth soccer.

My kid's coach is not Jose Mourinho and that's ok.

I also used to gripe to my kids about their coaches, questioning their competence. One year, my older daughter's coach would limit his sideline coaching to screaming at every chance: "Follow the ball!" We would then watch all of the kids swarm the ball like frenzied killer bees. Why doesn't the Coach teach the kids to spread out, to pass the ball, to look up when they dribble? What is he doing in practice?

Then I volunteered to coach my younger daughter's team. I quickly learned that this can be an impossible job. Not only are the kids not professional athletes, but most are not yet developmentally ready to grasp the finer points of soccer. They soon tired of my instructions and became restless. From that point they turned to rioting. I was armed with some cones and a whistle, but what I really needed was a whip and a chair.

With the girls I tried yelling and some ended up crying. I learned to gently prod them to action, encouraging them to act out and not be afraid of being physical. This year I tried the same thing with my son's team. The boys ended up attacking each other like crazed baboons. How can you teach those nifty cross-over dribbling moves when the boys are giving each other wedgies during my demonstrations. I still gripe about the coaches, but I do so to my wife, privately, with a far greater appreciation for the difficult job that they have chosen.

My kid can play without me and that's ok.

Another temptation that I often gave in to, even when I was not the coach, was instructing my kids while they played. I used to think it was appropriate to stand on the touch line and yell: "Pass the ball to Sara!" and "Shoot the ball to the left!!" I can still remember being told by a more enlightened soccer mom to get away from the goal and stop coaching my son Willie when he was a 5 year old keeper. My actual ignorant retort: "Lady, get off my back. I am helping here!!"

I now know better. First, I read in an article that most children cannot properly play the game and, at the same time, follow a coach's directions. By the time they hear me, process what I said, and then act on it, the opportunity to act is lost. My instructions were actually hurting them on the field! Besides, if they

depend on me to instruct them while they are playing, how will they learn to make decisions on their own when they can't hear me.

Another article also got me thinking. Did I stand behind my daughter Dominique while she worked on a coloring book and scream at her: "In the lines, Nique! You must color in the lines!! Use Green!! Use Green for the grass! No, Nique, not blue! Green!!" Of course I didn't. (Okay, I admit I did that with Madeleine, my oldest child, but I was much younger then.) Why should soccer be any different?

Then, after refereeing a few games, I realized how inane my own screaming had been. In the middle of the field, my voice was being drowned out by other parents who feel duty-bound to scream too. Julie's dad is yelling: "Shoot, shoot." I am yelling: "Pass, pass." You are yelling: "Stop her, stop her." It all becomes confusing, stressful noise in the middle of the field. While I am not yet an advocate of "Silent Saturdays," I now certainly see the point of sitting back and letting my kids play without my "help."

The referee is not a professional and that's ok.

When I first started watching soccer, I had no idea what the rules were. But I was certain of one thing: the referees in my kids' games were bozos and I openly let them know about it with each missed call.

It was only when I was forced into refereeing to make up for the shortage in my region that I realized how wrong I was. Refereeing is a very tough and demanding job. You have to run in the hot sun over uneven fields for an hour or more, all the time dodging little people. You make split second decisions on calls that require a deeper understanding of the game than I had imagined. You have to put up with coaches and parents who are loud and often ignorant of the rules.

I discovered that many of the ref's decisions I had challenged as "psycho dad," were simply judgment calls. Just because my watch says that the game should be over does not mean that the referee must agree with me. And on that offside call, the assistant referee probably had a much better view of the second-to-the-last defender than I had, pacing behind the coach.

I also learned that in soccer, unlike other sports I grew up with, there is a rule stating that dissent from a referee's call is misconduct. Go figure! You don't like calls? Get on the phone to your local region's referee administrators, and volunteer. It's amazing how good those black knee-high socks look on overweight, middle-aged guys like me.

So I am slowly learning that soccer should be about the kids, not about me nor the other adults. It should be about playing a game, not performing for parents and coaches. Get the kids away from TV and the Internet, interacting with friends and having FUN. It is not life and death out there. Relax and enjoy the game.

Now at my kids' games, you can usually find me in my folding chair, under an umbrella, teasing the coaches and other parents for screaming like maniacs at their kids. I try, not yet always successfully, to limit my comments to after-the-fact praising of the kids on both teams "Nice shot." "Beautiful pass." And every once in a while I will add, in a loud voice: "Follow the ball!" While it adds to the noise on the touch lines, sometimes my own child will hear me and reward me with a wonderful smile. It's moments like that when I now truly love this game.