

Oregon School Activities Association

Soccer Bulletin #6

2015

We are coming into crunch time, the last week (or so) of the regular season. The gleam of the playoffs is in the eye of many teams, more teams than will actually make it that far. That magnifies every frustration and disappointment. The result is that the amount of misconduct goes up as we get closer to the end of the season.

When we know that's happening, we have to maintain the same steady focus we've had all season on calling fouls and giving cards when they are appropriate. Protect the players from the bad guys. We don't pre-judge behavior and go harder on them at the end. We also don't "give 'em a break" just because the end of the season is close. It's just like if you would have called it in the 15th minute, you call it in the 75th minute too.

As you might expect, I am contacted pretty regularly over the season by coaches, athletic directors and referee association officers about various issues. It ranges from "can we wear pink shorts for breast cancer awareness month?" [and the answer is yes, the shorts can be any color] to issues about referee behavior and decision making. There is a clear consensus about the type of problems they are having with referees, when there are problems evident. They all come down to 'the referee didn't call enough.'

I think that most of us assume that coaches don't want "ticky-tacky" fouls called. The result is that we raise the bar for what is a foul, above what the players and coaches want. The bottom line is that players and coaches do want fouls called, whether it's on their team or the opponents. They may not agree that a particular contact by their player is a foul, but, overall, they want fouls called. Many of them have been playing for a long time and they know what's probably going to be a foul and what should be a card.

We just need to call the foul and give the card when most of the people out there expect it. We do seem to be particularly reluctant to give cards. There are players who think "I'm just going to play hard because that's what the team needs from me. If the referee is mad at me, he'll give me a caution and then I know what I can't do anymore." If that's the way a particular player is thinking, what do you think happens when we fail to give that card? He keeps doing it and then he escalates because he, apparently, hasn't hit the limit yet of what the referee will tolerate. I have actually heard players respond to their teammate's encouragement to get more physical, "I can't. I'm sitting on a yellow." If warranted, call the foul, give the card.

Sometimes, referees make snarky comments about teams, players, coaches or schools. I get that. It's going to happen because we're human. I'm sure that coaches, players and parents talk about us the same way. Please remember, however, that, unless you are well away from everyone who is not

a referee, your comments will get picked up by someone. Now you are the bad guy, the one who's prejudiced, or even just not professional. You don't want to get that label, especially if you might see that team again.

There have been a number of cases where the referee has suddenly whipped out a yellow card on a player 'out of nowhere.' In my experience, that's usually been given for language. The problem is that nobody knows why. We don't need to give our critics reasons to think that we've just gone crazy. At the same time, remember that if the players don't know why it was given, they are much less likely to improve their own behavior. Communicate! At the very least, we are mandated by rule to inform both benches of the official reason for the caution or send off. If players and/or spectators hear you doing so, so much the better. As one referee put it, "A good card leaves one guy thinking 'busted' and 21 others thinking 'I'd better not do something stupid like that.'" A card where people don't know why it was given won't change the behavior of the 21 players who didn't get one.

So far, this has been an excellent season. We've had some of "those games," but not very many. I think that the number of red cards will be down from last year and the number of coach ejections in particular seems to have shrunk. Let's just keep doing what has worked so far and change what hasn't worked.

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