

## HOW TO KEEP FANS OUT OF YOUR HEAD

### Introduction

High numbers of soccer referees quit after a single game or a single season. This high attrition rate causes serious problems in getting enough officials on the fields. When you talk to those who have quit about their experiences, they will sometimes tell you that refereeing soccer was awful and they promise to never referee again. Maybe these people should never have started refereeing in the first place – maybe they just didn't have what it takes to continue. Maybe the game is better off without them. Well, maybe so. But maybe, if they had some preparation for what they would experience, and some help in dealing with the head game I call "help of the fans", they wouldn't have quit. Who knows what talent was lost when these referees quit?

This presentation is intended to help referees who have trouble with fans getting into their heads. The goal is to keep fans and coaches out of referee's heads so that the referees can do their job and have fun doing it.

### Presentation

I started refereeing soccer in 1984 when my daughter's U-7 team needed a referee. I registered with United States Soccer Federation in 1986 and started running lines that year. You could say that I have 18 years experience or you could say that I have one year's experience, and have repeated it 18 times.



**Eighteen Years Experience**



**One Year Experience – 18 Times**

In the last 18 years, the most advanced game I have ever refereed (in the middle) was a U-16 boy's District- 6 IAL (select) match. I have quit refereeing nearly every one of the last 18 years.

I regularly quit because I let the fans and the coaches get into my head. When I listened to them and started to think that maybe they were right and I really was the worst referee they had ever had, my self-esteem took a beating. I used to lay awake at night thinking of all the possible mistakes I could make the next day, and would hear in my head the verbal abuse I would get from the coaches and the parents. I would almost get sick worrying about the upcoming games. I would worry while driving to the field and I would walk out on the field with a knot in my stomach - not the anticipation of an exciting time, but the dread of walking into the abyss of ridicule and rejection. Finally, I asked the same question "is it really worth it"? The answer was usually, "no", so I would quit.

This year, something happened. I can't tell you exactly what it was, but for the first time in my refereeing career, I didn't worry about the fans. I didn't listen to the fans. They were there and they yelled, but it was as if their yells were directed somewhere else. I heard some of the calls for substitutions and some of the calls for players down, but the rest of the "help" was just "white noise". I don't know if this change happened over a period of time, or if it was an epiphany. Whatever it was, for the first time in 18 years I was really having fun refereeing.

I want to share what I have learned this year. Hopefully, it will help others who may still have problems with fans getting into their heads.

### **Fan's Characteristics**

This fall, I went to watch the Hanford versus West Valley match at Hanford High School. Steve Schaus was in the middle. Mike Jansky and Mikhail Alnajjar were the AR's. My wife, Pam, and I sat down on one of the bleachers among the West Valley fans. In the next one and half-hours, I had a course in **Fans-101**, which was very illuminating.

Soon after the match started, the West Valley fans became abusive with their comments directed at Steve. On each challenge for the ball, if a call wasn't made they yelled out the call that they thought should have been made (and always for their side), and if a call was made against their team, they called out the "correct" call along with derogatory references to Steve's ancestors. That day, I discovered some basic truths about fans.

The first truth I learned that day is that **NO FANS ARE OBJECTIVE**. If you don't believe me, look at yourself when you are watching your own kid's games. Fans don't see what really happens because they are watching from the emotional level, not from an intellectual level. Their view is slanted because it is their kids out there. Their kids would never do anything wrong and the referees must be against them. Fans often believe that their kids' teams never lost a game - the referees took it away from them.

A recent experience has confirmed this truth for me. My brother in-law is a football referee and is normally very objective. His daughters go to Richland High School. My daughters went to Kamiakin High School. He and I watched the Richland versus

Kamiakin girl's basketball game together and it was like we were watching different games. He complained about the fouls not called for the yellow team and I complained about the fouls not called for the red team. Neither of us was objective. **We were fans.** When I finally saw what was going on, I thought it was pretty funny.

A second truth I learned is that **FANS DON'T SEE THE SAME GAME THAT THE REFEREE DOES.** People don't see what is there even when they think they do. Experiments have been run where several people viewing the same event come up with many different descriptions of what happened. Even the video or the film may not catch the truth unless the angle is correct. Remember the foul called by the American referee in the 1998 world cup for holding in the penalty box that could not be seen on the video replay? A few days later another video was shown that clearly showed the foul?

During that game last fall, the West Valley fans were seeing a totally different game than the one Steve was watching. They saw a different game because they were on the **side** of the field and Steve was in the **middle**. What you see often depends on where you are and the angle you have to watch the play. Take offside as an example. You will regularly hear someone call for offside or complain about an offside call, but these people did not see the situation when offside is determined – when the ball is played. Usually, when offside is determined by the assistant referee (AR), only two people on that field are watching the player in question when the ball is played – the AR and the player's mother!

A third truth is that **FANS DON'T KNOW THE RULES OF THE GAME.** They think they do, but it never ceases to surprise me just how ignorant most fans are about the laws of the game, and about foul recognition. They are just **wrong** a lot of the time. One of the most common fouls the fans call for is "handball". Every time a ball and a hand contact, you will hear someone yell - "handball". How many times does a player actually play the ball, and how many times does the ball just hit the hand? One rule of thumb is that if you never call a handball, you will be correct about 90% percent of the time.

About half way through the Hanford versus West Valley match, I began to laugh quietly each time these fans let loose with another barrage. They were funny. As I looked at them, soon all I could see were clowns – clowns with the red curly hair and the big red noses. Bozo had come to the match that day and had brought several of his friends.



Now, think about this. If someone you knew, a fan for example, was so biased that his judgement was bad, and he also had flawed knowledge, would you really listen to him if he tried to tell you how to do your job? Would you take advice from such a person? Of course you would not! You are not doing yourself any favors accepting advice from them. Ignore the “help” - it isn’t any good. Remember that it can only hurt you if you let it get into your head.

### **Referees’ Job**

I talked to Steve after the Hanford-West Valley match and asked him how he dealt with all the “help” he got from the West Valley fans. Steve’s reply was that he didn’t hear any of it because he was focused on the game and he put all of his attention inside the white lines.

When we focus on what is important, we can keep the fans out of our heads. Here are a few questions to help keep focus.

- Why am I there?
- What purpose do I have?
- What is my job?

It took me a long time to develop my own answer to these questions. My answer is that, “I am there to make sure two things happen:

- 1) The players have a fair match. They have a chance to play without having “soccer gangsters” play outside the rules and gain unfair advantage by doing so, and
- 2) The players have a chance to play and not be afraid of being hurt”.

The players work hard to keep in shape and to develop skills so that they can play well and enjoy the game. They deserve to have a chance to perform without the interference of a player, or players, who want to win at any price even if it means playing like “gangsters”.

### **I AM THERE FOR THE PLAYERS AND ONLY THE PLAYERS**

Each time I walk on a soccer pitch, I remind myself why I am there. Sometimes during a game, I have to remind myself again and again why I am there. I repeat the power phrase to myself, and sometimes out loud, “I am there for only the players”.

### **“FOCUS ON THE GAME – STAY INSIDE THE WHITE LINES”.**

It is easy for me to let my mind drift away from the match at hand, and from the players. Some matches are harder to keep focused than others, but when I keep those ideals in

mind, and when I keep my attention directed toward the players and inside the white lines, the fans fade away. Everything outside the white lines, except for the assistant referees becomes non-existent. Maintaining this level of **CONCENTRATION TAKES WORK AND PRACTICE** - it isn't free, it isn't automatic and sometimes it isn't easy. Practice and discipline are required to develop concentration and focus.

Things happen quickly in a soccer match, and the referee has to pay attention to what is going on **AT THE MOMENT**. In a normal match, the referee makes a decision every three to six seconds. That means the referee makes ten or twenty decisions per minute. Do the math and you will see that the referee makes over a thousand decisions and close to two thousand decisions during a single ninety-minute match.

Somewhere in those almost two thousand decisions, the referee will make a mistake. When we make mistakes, the fans start to help, but we can't think about that because in a few seconds we have to make another decision and then another. We have to **STAY FOCUSED ON THE PRESENT**. We can't worry about a decision that was made in the past even if the past was just five seconds ago. We can't correct for mistakes we make because that only leads to more mistakes. Most of the time, the mistakes will not have an influence on the outcome of the match, and if we start drifting away from the "now", we are not focused on the match the way we need to be.

Another important tool to keep fans out of your head is to keep your sense of humor. If you can laugh at what is going on around you, your head will remain fairly "fan free". Here are two examples of referees keeping their sense of humor.

Once a coach yelled at Stewart White to tell Stewart that he was the world's worst referee, Stewart laughed and yelled back, "what a coincidence, the world's worst referee and the world's worst coach on the same field at the same time".

I was once running a line and the referee made a particularly unpopular call against the home team. Out of the crowd came a cry, "that's the worse call in all the history of soccer". At halftime, the other assistant referee came up to the middle and said, "you know, that just shows how ignorant these fans really are - I've personally seen you make much worse calls than that one".

**To summarize:**

Refereeing is fun when the only person you have in your head is you. When you let the fans into your head and listen to their help, it gets too crowded and the job starts to be “not fun”.

Keep in mind who is offering the help. Don't accept it unless you have special reason to think it has value.

Keep in mind what is important and why you are there. If the job you are doing is for the players, the fans disappear.

Keep in mind where all of your attention has to be. Don't let past events ruin the present. You can't go back and fix anything so keep focused on what is happening at the moment.

Keep in mind that a sense of humor is a necessity to have fun refereeing. Keep your perspective and don't take yourself too seriously. Sometimes the fans are funny, sometimes we are funny. Look for the fun in every event.

Hopefully, if we can keep our heads fan, coach and/or player free, our refereeing careers can be more satisfying and more fun, and we might even improve our performances.