

Inexperienced Youth Referees Cause Problems

The parents are not the only ones to blame when a youth sporting event gets out of hand. There are four key players who play an active role in securing a fun, safe and learning atmosphere: coaches, referees, parents, and the team players. All four fall under the guidance and supervision of the organization's administration.

I have spent a lot of time talking about the coaches, parents and team players. The referees play a huge part in making sure the game is played within the boundaries of the rules, but yet in a way that is fun, safe, and educational for the kids.

I recently was at a youth basketball tournament for kids in the 5th-8th grades. There was a \$300 team entrance fee, which is a normal price for a club basketball weekend tournament. The tournament committee did a great job of setting up the tournament with the game brackets, snack bar, clean facility, pre-tournament communication and keeping the games on schedule.

The problem came when I heard one referee make his first call. The sound that came out of his whistle was a short, little "toot". I knew right away that this was a new referee who was insecure in his position. You see, a strong, confident referee doesn't "toot", he blows that whistle long and loud. He is not afraid to make the call.

I shared this inside refereeing scoop to a woman sitting next to me. Of all people that I could have shared that with, she just happened to be the referee's mom. She assured me that her son wasn't afraid to make a call, but that his whistle was just broken. Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better.

As the game continued, the calls got worse from all three referees. (I guess all three whistles were broken.) Insecure referees, broken whistles, and bleachers full of youth parents is not a great mix.

It didn't take long for the crowd of parents, friends and family to get out of hand. The crowd was getting irate at the inconsistent calls and the lack of control the referees had over the game. Several parents got concerned about the safety of their child.

I knew it wouldn't take long, and it started ... Parents now were standing and the focus shifted away from the kids, the fun, and the game and on to the referees. Shouting at the referees and the parents at each other from both teams escalated.

The next step was inevitable: One referee stopped the game, pointed to a dad in the stands and asked him to leave the gym. The crowd now grew silent as the dad and the referee yelled at each other. The referee had to ask for help from two tournament committee administrators to assist the dad out of the building.

The atmosphere in that gym was changed. There was disbelief that it had gone to this level. There was a feeling of shock that a fun game for these kids ended in such a sad way. The fun was gone.

The biggest problem in this situation, believe it or not, was the referees. It was their lack of confidence which caused their inability to control the game and create a fun and safe environment that created this situation.

You see, they were volunteer referees! The host organization was trying to save money by getting volunteer referees. These referees were parents of the host team.

This is not the area in which you cut financial corners. Kids need to have the benefit of certified or educated and experienced referees, not volunteer, inexperienced ones with broken whistles.

Next week I will highlight one of the best youth referees I have met and watched work with kids, Art Wilson. He is the epitome of a youth referee. I will also outline the guidelines, boundaries and responsibilities of a youth referee.

Until next week, make sure your referees are experienced, certified and don't use broken whistles.