

YOUTH SOCCER PLAYERS CAN BE A GREAT SOURCE OF SPORTSMANSHIP

There are thousands of adults involved in this great game of soccer who work hard to organize and administer the sport for the youth in their communities. And by a huge majority, these same adults also publish and espouse that sportsmanship is a vital part of their program.

I do not want to give my version of what sportsmanship is or is not nor why it is important to the game of soccer. We can all probably agree that sportsmanship is vital.

I am sure that all of you reading this can probably cite personal examples of adults who have demonstrated poor sportsmanship, despite the numerous messages soccer has about Fair Play, about appropriate touchline behavior, about positive coaching, etc and their roles in the sport. I do not want to list any of those examples here.

I would however, like to share with you two personal sportsmanship experiences that involve youth players.

The first involves a Under 17 Boys game that is extremely physical and foul plagued. The referee is calling the majority fouls against the team in white and deservedly so. The team in blue is on the receiving end of the majority of fouls and physical play. Spectators and coaches on both sides are complaining loudly, and most of the time not so nicely about the referee's decisions. As you would expect the complaints on one side were either that not enough fouls were called or not enough punishment (caution or send-offs) being meted out. Or, on the other side, that the referee is being one sided in his decision making since most of the fouls are being whistle on the team in white jerseys. Since this was a U-17 Boys game, one could expect that this game may not be going well and that it had the potential to become dreadfully full of further examples of poor sportsmanship and 'unfair play' . This turned out not to be the case. Because throughout the game, even though the blue team was on the receiving end of most of the fouls and hard physical contact, each one of players in blue continually reminded each other to ignore it when a call by the referee could probably have been made against the team in white jerseys, or spoke loudly and positively to their team mates about what they wanted to do on the restart after a foul was called against the team in white. The game was played to completion and continued to be dominated by the physical play and the wide majority of fouls called on the team in white shirts

The second example involves a situation where the visiting U18 Boys team has travelled to a game about 90 minutes away. The visiting team has only brought one set of uniforms (the exact reason the team only had one set with them that day has been lost on me over the years since this game was played). Both teams are prepared to play the game in white short sleeve jerseys. The rules of the competition are that if a team's jerseys conflict in color the home team will change uniforms. I need to backup for a moment and mention that the weather for this late afternoon game was sunny, virtually no wind and the temperature is in the mid 90's. The home teams alternate jerseys are long sleeve black. The home team coach refuses to wear mesh shirts and will not change to their alternate black long sleeve jerseys (it is obviously a

problem for them to do so since it is a very warm day). Despite the requirement that the home teams is to change jerseys in the event of a color conflict, either due to ignorance or incompetence, the referees side with the home team and tell the visiting team they must wear another color of jersey. After a few minutes of discussion by the visiting team's players they tell the referee that they will wear the home team's long sleeve black jerseys. The home team coach, seeing that the decision on whether this game will now be played, reluctantly hands over his black jerseys. Again, after a few minutes delay where the visiting players are sorting out sizes and a number of a black shirt they can wear, the game is started and played without further incident.

In both of these examples, young men from one of the two teams, took it upon themselves to exhibit exceptional sportsmanship while playing the game that day in less than favorable physical circumstances, despite the less than sporting actions of adult coaches, adult spectators, and in one case the adult referees.

In both of these examples, Fair Play, the most important part of the game of soccer was managed largely in part by the players of one of the teams that day. Not by the coaches, not by the spectators, not by the referees, but by youth players!!

As far as the actual game results went in these examples , I will tell you that the winning team in one case went home without any yellow or reds cards being handed out to them and in the other case the parents did not have to go home and launder any jerseys!

Terry Schneweis
North Dakota Youth Soccer Association