

How Close Are We?

I'm not sure if many of you came across this video, or even remember the story that was all over the news a few months ago. Whether you remember it or not, I think that all of us as we watch it are both shocked and yet at the same time somehow not surprised at all by something like this.

I titled this essay "How close are we?" because I believe it is an important question we need to ask of ourselves. Are we that far away from an all-out brawl erupting at one of our soccer tournaments?

Before we jump too quickly to say no, let's take a minute to think about things a little further. First off, I doubt that anyone went into that football game in Texas looking for a fight, but emotions can do funny things and we all know that parents and coaches do not check their emotions at the door before watching a youth soccer game. Incidents like this don't take much to get going, and the sparks that ignite these events are everywhere.

How many times have we seen parents yelling at referees? Parents yelling at opposing players? Have we ever seen a coach yell at a referee; at another coach? Have we ever had upset parents try to protest games?

I can't speak for everyone, but when I think about the above questions, I can answer yes to each and every one of them. Not only that, but these were all recent events, not long ago distractions from a distant age.

The games are getting bigger and the events more competitive. There is more money being spent now on youth sports than ever before. With that kind of time and investment, there are a lot of people attached to the outcomes of children playing sports. It's a somewhat sad but true reality of our culture.

Think about this... in 2010 alone these incidents happened at YOUTH sports games:

- 1) A dad put a razor on his son's football helmet so that it would injure opponents.
- 2) A father helped his son put poison in the son's teammates Gatorade bottles to take revenge over an inner squad dispute.
- 3) A dad was so upset about his son's playing assignment that he bought the WHOLE league so that he could institute rules that his son played all the time
- 4) A volleyball coach was so upset at a fan causing her team's disqualification that she went to her car and came back to the gym with a meat cleaver
- 5) A cop paid a 10 yr old pitcher \$2 to bean a batter in a youth baseball game
- 6) Parents in a recreational team excited over the children's victory decided to form a human pyramid in celebration, upsetting the opposing parents so much that a mom from the opposing group charged the pyramid with an umbrella
- 7) A dad was arrested at a 6/7 year old soccer game for pulling a gun on the side line

With all this being said, it's easy to see that there are negative examples of bad behavior everywhere, waiting to ignite the emotions of just one disgruntled person. Remember the saying "it takes two," well I'm afraid in these cases it takes just one.

At the end of the day, I will say that it is easy to get caught up in talking about the bad examples out there and a whole separate department when it comes to preventing these kinds of issues.

And just how can we do that?

To start, we can celebrate the good examples. More than just congratulating the teams that win, we can congratulate the teams and the coaches that play well and play fair. A hand shake or an email to an opposing coach or club can go a long way in reinforcing the good.

We can stand up to the negative. This may be a bit touchy because we obviously don't want to stir up any further emotions, but when we hear people screaming at refs, we as coaches can ask them to please refrain. I'm not talking about team A coaches or parents yelling at Team B, I'm talking about policing ourselves. If you are a coach or a parent on Team A, focus on your group and ask upset parents on YOUR team to stay quiet. I have seen numerous times when coaches yell across the field at their own sets of parents, demanding they don't argue calls or yell at the opposing teams; and in every case that group of parents has gone quiet. We as professionally paid coaches have a responsibility to police our parents, rather than gossip about them while they continue to disrupt our children's sporting events.

And last, but surely not least, we need to remind ourselves every single day that this is a game. Games are meant to be competitive but games are also meant to be fun. We all have a wonderful opportunity through the best game in the world to teach our children (and ourselves) about winning, losing, adversity, sportsmanship, friendship, and character. Let our behaviors on the sidelines be some of the greatest lessons we teach our most precious possessions.

Casey Mann
Director of Coaching
Nebraska State Soccer

