

WHY A RED CARD?

Make Sportsmanship a Goal

Well here goes, another article on sportsmanship and why it's important and what you (the player, the coach, the parent, the referee) should do about it. Having been an active participant in the red card process from all sides (well, except as the sport parent – my son is not quite 3 and has not yet been carded), I'd like to focus on the issue now wearing my sport psychology hat.

The first step to solving any problem is to become aware of it. According to CYSA there has been a rise in red cards in recent years. At this point it is important to note that there is a difference between a violent tackle from behind out of frustration and picking up a second yellow for an intentional handball. The intent of this article is to focus on the unsportsmanlike and violent red card offenses.

What do we do about it? In past articles I have read, it seems like the approach has been a bit unrealistic (think of that lady on the Simpsons who says hysterically: “Won't somebody *please* think of the children?!”). While being a good sport sounds good on paper while sitting in a comfortable chair, it's a whole different story in the blazing sun in the heat of battle on the field. Red cards are a part of soccer: unfortunate, yes, but very real. So let's deal with the problem in an equally realistic manner. Eliminating red cards completely will never happen, but reducing the number of senseless unsportsmanlike and violent incidents is well within our control as a soccer community.

Soccer is the most passion-inducing game in the history of the planet. Evidence of this can be seen in any highlight tape of goal celebrations not only from players but fans as well. This is one of the reasons we love it. Soccer mirrors life the way it's supposed to be: train hard, prepare hard, and play hard as a team and you should win. But on the other side of that coin, sometimes in life you do everything the right way, and you may still lose (i.e.: not getting the job you wanted or your girlfriend breaking up with you for no apparent reason). Similarly, soccer can also turn into the frustration of playing your heart out and not putting “the bulge in the old onion bag” to steal a quote from Tommy Smyth,

That said, how can we retain the passion of the game without crossing the line into unsportsmanlike and even violent behavior?

WHY A RED CARD HAPPENS

Red card offenses are usually born from intense emotions: frustration, anger, revenge, lack of perceived control over a situation, hopelessness, and feelings of having nothing-to-lose. In all these cases, the passion and emotion arising in these players (or coaches or parents) is coming out in negative and counter-productive ways. But let's

realize that this passion and emotion can be translated into positive and highly productive uses.

GOAL SETTING

Sport psychology offers many techniques to deal with these issues: relaxation, positive self-talk, and visualization to name a few. But one of the best ways to focus this energy and refocus it during the natural fluctuations during a match is proper goal setting. Goal setting is a staple in sport psychology and has been consistently proven in research to help with motivation, focus, effort, and enjoyment in sports. And best of all, everyone can set goals: players, coaches, parents, and referees alike.

While setting goals properly can serve to challenge, motivate, and keep players focused on the right things, poorly set goals often have the opposite effect. And while most athletes and coaches do set goals, oftentimes they are not set as effectively as possible. Most participants in the game set goals such as winning the game, scoring a certain number of goals, or getting a shutout. While there is nothing wrong with setting such goals, these goals are incomplete, because, what if both teams set the exact same goals?

Reality-check: But Brian, playing our best is great, but we want to win. Are you saying we shouldn't try to win?

BB: On the contrary, winning is a part of the game, that's why we keep score. In some cases, making sportsmanship a goal can actually help with winning.

To illustrate this point, imagine that the Strikers, the best team in the league, are playing the Stumblers, the worst team in the league. The Strikers come into the game knowing they are going to win big, and the only goal their coach focuses on all week is to win 5-0. On the outset, it sounds reasonable enough, but the game turns out to be another story. The Strikers go on the attack early, but just can't seem to break through. With a minute left to go in the half, the Stumblers get a breakaway and score a goal.

At halftime, the Strikers coach, intending to motivate his players, sticks to the goal of winning by 5 goals, and yells at his team to step it up and play harder. As the second half starts, the Strikers are bewildered and give up a fluke own goal, so now they are down by two. They continue to work hard, but they fail to work smart. Players start playing with desperation: first dribbling and trying to do it all on their own and taking prayer shots from 30 yards out, and then yelling at each other and making silly fouls. Then with 10 minutes left, the captain of the Strikers, frustrated that the team is not going to win, deliberately trips a Stumbler from behind. Red card. Now, not only have the Strikers lost the match, but their captain is now out another few games, and on top of that he has injured another player.

Many problems arise when winning is the only or most often-stated goal. Proper goal setting at the club-level, on the coaching level, and at a personal level, can direct players' and teams' focus toward personal improvement and overall enjoyment of the

game, and away from a win at all cost attitude. The latter can lead to frustration and taking that frustration out on an opponent as opposed to focusing on a goal such as working hard even though you are losing and working on skills, and continuing to learn.

So now let's rewind to the Strikers-Stumblers match. Their goals leading up to the game were to stay focused on keeping their shape, playing well for a full 90 minutes, and outworking their opponent. "If we do these things, the result will take care of itself," was the coach's message before the game.

So in the same situation at halftime, the coach expresses some disappointment that they are down, but also reminds the players of their goals, and tells them he is confident that if they stick to their goals, they will win the game. So, down 2-0 with 10 minutes left, instead of playing with desperation, they focus on keeping their shape and playing their game until the last whistle (after all, they are the better team and the game is 90 minutes long).

Maybe they come back and win (all coaches know that 2-0 is far from a safe lead), maybe they get a draw. Maybe they still lose the game, but they lose with class and they don't lose their captain for the next game against the Warriors, the 2nd ranked team in their league.

Soccer is beautiful game in the world because of the passion it brings to the lives of everyone who participates either on the field or on the sidelines. Unfortunately, that is also what can make it the ugly game. Awareness of that fact is a key to good sportsmanship. Every soccer game our kids play in is, just like life, is a great opportunity for a learning experience. But you have to be in the game! Make sportsmanship a goal and you always win.

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