

# Poor Sportmanship

**Fans who scream at officials are hurting young people who work as referees for minor sports across Canada, and are being blamed for a shortage of soccer referees**

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EDMONTON Screaming a blue streak at the referee after a blown call is as much a part of sport for many fans as cheering on the home team.

But some say that attitude is hurting the youngsters who work as referees for minor sports across Canada, and who sometimes face abuse from players their own age as well as from coaches and parents.

It's one of several factors being blamed for a shortage of minor soccer referees in Edmonton.

"One of the reasons why refs leave soccer is because of abuse by coaches and parents," said Eric Mahabir, president of the Southwest Edmonton Minor Soccer Association.

"Many of the refs are young and they feel inhibited by adults."

In Edmonton, the referees only need to be two years older than the age level they officiate, so a 14 year old could be the referee for an under-12 game.

Mahabir said his group's annual referee training clinic usually attracts 60 kids, but this year only a handful showed up.

"We will be short from time to time, but I think there are just enough to carry on the season," Mahabir said.

**To help deal with aggressive coaches and parents, the association has instituted a new rule this season requiring each team to have a designated "referee liaison" who is responsible for keeping parents and coaches in line.**

Richard Robillard, a 15-year-old ref, says he's seen parents and coaches get hostile with other officials, but says he's only encountered a big problem once when a coach was "way out of line" in disputing a call.

He said the ref has one way to deal with it: "You set them straight. Most refs clarify what they call. The refs who just take it (the abuse); they're the ones who get discouraged."

Richard said he likes the idea of the referee liaison person on the sidelines.

"In a sense it provides security so if you make a bad call at least you're not alone, you get some help. You don't have to drag your parents to the game."

The problem of abuse toward young referees transcends soccer and is an issue of youth sport in general, says **Bob Sawtell**, a member of referees committee with the Canadian Soccer Association.

Just last month, his group launched a national poster campaign called Respect the Referee targeted at players and coaches across the country.

"Officials are not fair game for anyone who wants to go out and berate somebody on a Saturday afternoon," he said.

He stressed that thousands of games take place each year without any incident of abuse toward officials.

However, retaining referees has become an issue for minor sports, he said.

Some soccer associations in B.C. have taken to holding games at a multi-field sportsplex, where an adult official can walk from game to game, co-ordinating with young referees and looking for any signs of inappropriate behaviour from spectators.

Other school districts offer students credit for refereeing youth sports.

**Jose Branco**, referee development co-ordinator for B.C. Soccer, said the success of different associations in keeping their young referees often depends on the supports they have available.

"It's very, very good to have the kids involved as officials. The issues are always the conduct of the people that surround the game sometime and their attitude," Branco said.

He said screaming parents and coaches need to take a step back from an act he calls nothing short of child abuse.

"They don't put in in perspective that (their) kids are learning to play the game, and these are kids learning to referee the game. And they're both going to make mistakes."

Another reason Alberta soccer officials believe they're short referees is because of the demand for workers from local businesses, which are facing a labour shortage.

Bob Moore, an Edmonton area soccer director, said his daughter is earning \$10.50 an hour for a part-time job at a convenience store so he understands why some kids don't referee.

Some areas are considering offering more money to referees next year to keep them on the field and not in fast food joints in coming years.

Dale Henwood, the chair of Sport Alberta, says he's hearing of high turnover rates among volunteers in sports, especially for referees in hockey.

"There's just so many options for people as to where they can volunteer," he said. "If I'm going to give away my free time, I want to do something that's enjoyable."

Sawtell of the Canadian Soccer Association said competition from the other job markets is always an issue when dealing with teenagers.

"If they can find a better and less stressful way to make their pocket money, they're probably not going to opt for a more stressful situation."