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Blame win-at-all-costs parents for poisonous culture



Alyson Rudd, Commentary

Imagine you are sitting on a train opposite a man and his seven-year-old son. The boy is trying to colour in an elephant. He likes purple. "Don't be a bloody idiot, elephants don't have purple ears," the father bawls. The train judders and the boy's crayon slips. "What a mess. You're useless, you're not listening. Keep. It. Neat."

You may wonder if you should phone social services, yet this kind of public humiliation occurs every weekend up and down the land at children's football games. In fact, the behaviour of parents has become so unacceptable that some youth leagues are experimenting with plastic perimeter fencing to keep the adults away from the children and the officials. The game may be split as to whether this is a long-term solution, but not over whether there is a need for a solution to be found.

Last month, Ray Ward, the secretary of Surrey County FA, sent the youth clubs affiliated to his organisation a letter that smacked of desperation. Too many matches - 12 in Surrey this season - have been abandoned because of abuse from adults. The children had been well behaved, but the same could not be said of their parents. Ward said the reports made for "sickening" reading.

Last season, a parent physically assaulted a referee's assistant during an under15 Surrey County Cup match. The game was abandoned, the police charged the parent and he was fined £1,000, ordered to pay £300 to the official and £150 in costs. "Today I have received an almost identical report," Ward writes.

According to Mark Wood, Ward's deputy, it is by far the worst season for abandonments in the past five years. He would like to see more highly qualified referees taking charge of matches (often they are overseen by a coach or parent who is not qualified), but the climate of parent nastiness means fewer people are keen to sign up.

"We have trained a number of teenage referees," Wood said. "One was a 15-year-old girl, but she was the subject of such abusive and foul language that she has given up." No doubt she thought that refereeing a seven-a-side match involving eight or nine-year-olds would be an enjoyable way to gain

experience. But it is matches involving younger children that brings out the worst in adults. Several Surrey Youth League referees have taken to printing photocopies of Ward's letter and handing them to parents before kick-off in an attempt to shame them into better behaviour.

Why are some touchline parents so dreadful? Mike Fellows, the discipline manager at the Birmingham County FA, blames the competitive culture. "Mini-soccer was supposed to be about coaching, not competition," he said. "But parents started pushing for cups and trophies and they want to win them at all costs. They are ruining the game for the kids."

Richard Bailey, Professor of Pedagogy at Roehampton University in southwest London, said: "There is a poisonous culture in youth football. There is an element of truth in the theory that parents are living vicariously through their children. Parents who were good at sport are not the problem, it is those who didn't perform well. But it is worth noting that we don't get the bad behaviour in rugby or cricket or tennis. Abusing the referee is almost like a tradition. It is part of the culture of football."

Keith Harris, chairman of the Wigan Youth League, came up with the idea of roping off one side of a pitch to keep parents away from their offspring and the officials. "I was chatting to a colleague about parents and said, as a joke, that we should fence them all in," Harris said. "He said it was a good idea. We had ten to 15 games a season being abandoned because of adults being abusive, so we had to do something."

It seems to have worked. In the first season of using plastic fencing, two matches were abandoned because of touchline behaviour; in the second, two more games failed to be completed, but because of players not supporters; and, this season, one game has been abandoned so far, but, again, not because of parents.

Michael McCourt, a Wigan Youth League referee, calls the fencing "brilliant, superb. We have a lot of young referees and it protects them," he said.

Other leagues have followed suit and, this season, the Stourbridge Youth League decided that all clubs must erect plastic posts with ropes up to six metres away from the touchline. Coaches must stand on the opposite touchline and no one is allowed to stand behind the goals.

However, Bailey is less enthusiastic about the fencing. "It is a short-term strategy that mirrors adult football," he said. "But this isn't adult football. Children's football is supposed to be different. It is there to promote certain sporting values."

He argues that the way to curb touchline overenthusiasm would be for the FA to change the rules so that a referee could award a free kick against the team supported by a parent who issues abuse.

Brian Barwick, the FA chief executive, has said that it is his ambition that behaviour improves at youth games. He may have had to alter his priorities after sacking the England head coach, but an urgent need for action remains.

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