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Before you scream at a ref ...

by Donna Olmstead, Thursday, Dec 17, 2009 11:00 AM ET

By Donna Olmstead

Sometimes as I slouch down in my lawn chair watching my grandchildren's soccer games, I indulge in wishful thinking. Only skillful, focused players on the field. Only knowledgeable, supportive parents on the sidelines. Only coaches who remember the bottom line is character development and not just winning games. Only top-notch officials running the lines and the field. Never going to happen. Like I said - wishful thinking.

Not that I'm an expert on the soccer subject. But I have spent 32 years immersed in youth soccer. As the chauffer. As the team mom. As the team grandmother. And any other position that needed a warm body. Some knowledge of the game is bound to rub off after awhile.

Now my daughter and granddaughters are referees as well as players. And I'm seeing games from a whole new angle.

Sitting on the bleachers watching my 14-year-old granddaughter play at a Disney tournament recently, I got annoyed at our parents for criticizing the assistant referee's seeming inability to be in position to make good calls.

When the parents grew vocal enough for the AR to hear, I decided to muffle the criticism. Duct tape would have done the job, but I used something more personal - an incident that happened to my 16-year-old granddaughter Emily at a different game the day before.

Emily was running the line on the parents' side and they gave her a bad time about her offside calls. The coach even went to the center ref after the game and complained about her. Fortunately, the center ref had been paying attention and said Emily's calls had been correct. This is a tough situation for a young referee to handle, and probably why the attrition rate is so high.

When I told our parents about Emily's experience, they were indignant about anyone's criticizing Emily. After all, she's one of ours. We know her. We know she's conscientious and unbiased. She knows the game both as a player and a certified official. How dare those parents and coach give her a rough time?!



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Then I pointed at the AR running our line and said, "She's somebody's Emily."

I know that, in the heat of competition, everyone forgets that the officials are somebody's Emily or Tom or Dave. Parents demand superhero officials. Which, in most cases, means officials that make only calls the parents agree with. And when most of the parents don't even know the difference between being offside or being in an offside position, that would be an impossible demand.

You couldn't pay me enough to take the abuse that soccer officials take. I'd probably take the field armed with a whistle and a small caliber handgun. And because I know that about myself, I stay on the sidelines. And try to encourage parents to send positive energy toward the field. And to try to help them remember that the every official is somebody's Emily.

(Florida resident Donna Olmstead has been involved in soccer through both her children and her grandchildren, as well as housing professional players and owning and running an indoor soccer facility. She is a freelance writer and spends weekends trying to remember which tournament she's supposed to be cheering at.)

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