

Parents On The Other Side

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Written by Emily Cohen. From Soccer America's Youth Soccer Insider, learn more at www.SoccerAmerica.com. Have an opinion on this story? Click the comment link.

Two weeks ago, our soccer league had its end of year tournament. As the previous game ended, my daughter's coach strode to the far side of the field to set up the bench for the girls. The coach -- and the parents -- of our opponents surprisingly followed suit, setting up camp directly next to our team.

After politely asking the other team's coach and parents to go to the other side of the field and receiving the reply, "No, we'd like to stay right here," my daughter's coach shrugged his shoulders and sighed -- and hoped for the best. What was that? That the parents on the other team would respect the game and not scream and shout at the players, as we had just seen occur in the prior game.

Luckily, the other team's parents granted our wish and were well-behaved in our game. But the game before ours was ugly. Both teams and their respective parents were on the same side of the field. Just as the game got underway, one team's parents started a rousing cheer. As soon as they were done, the other team's parents looked at each other and, not to be outdone, came up with a similar -- but louder -- cheer for their team.

The constant organized cheers continued throughout the game, along with parents yelling "instructions" to the players ("Where were you going with that ball, Katie?" and "Kick it, Susie!" were just two of the so-called encouraging comments overheard) at the same time as the coaches. It was complete cacophony. The parents were louder than the coaches. And the girls had no idea whom to listen to.

While many leagues' (including ours) rules of play both dictate that, wherever possible, teams should be on opposite sides of the field and their supporters and parents must be on the same side as their team, I think it's time to put a new standard in place across all of youth soccer: Parents should be on the opposite touchline as the players and the coaches.

Why? First, players need to be able to distinguish instruction from the coach or coaches and noise from the parents, who are not supposed to be coaching. As one parent of three youth soccer players put it, "You get the whole sideline full of parents yelling to the kids while the coaches are also trying to be heard." If parents are on the opposite touchline, players can more readily hear their coach or coaches and can make adjustments quickly in a fast-paced game. Simply put, it helps players play better.

Second, keeping parents and coaches separate on opposite sidelines helps referees do their jobs better. Brian Hall, the USSF Referee Department's Manager of Assessment and Training, recently told Soccer America that he is in favor of restricting parents to the opposite sideline because, "It makes it easy for referees to distinguish between the parents and the coaches when they want to take action," Hall said. "You know specifically who you're dealing with - who you can do something official with."

And finally, keeping parents away from the team helps coaches coach better too. One longtime youth soccer coach, when asked whether he would continue to coach, joked, "Only for a team of 11 orphans." Another coach told me that, although team on one side and parents on the other is the rule in his league, he'd "prefer to have the team and coaches on one side and have the parents stay at home. Actually, some duct tape for the parents would suffice too."

One well-respected coach in our league said that he felt parents were a distraction to the players, not just verbally, but also physically. He recalled several situations where a player would come out of the game and her parent would ask her -- in front of the coach -- if she was too tired to go back into the game! And another parent would sit so close to the bench that her daughter sat on her lap rather than with her teammates on the bench.

It's pretty clear from these examples that parents get in the way of players' ability to play, referees' ability to ref, and coaches' ability to coach. Recognizing this, the English FA has recently gone as far as to dictate that parents must be on the opposite touchline from the teams in all youth games and that they watch from a marked area two yards back from the sideline. This puts parents even further back from the action and give the players and referees more room to play and ref the game.

I think it's time American youth soccer gives the game back to the players, coaches, and refs and out of the mouths of parents.

(Emily Cohen is a freelance writer living in Berkeley, Calif. She is the mother of a son, 12, and a daughter, 9, who both play multiple sports. She has been a team manager for her children's soccer, baseball and softball teams.)

