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HEADLINE: SHHH!
IN WESTWOOD, PARENTS AND COACHES TAKE A TIMEOUT, LETTING THE KIDS
PLAY, AND LEARN, WITH NO YELLING FROM THE SIDELINES

BYLINE: BY MONIQUE WALKER, GLOBE STAFF

The moment the soccer ball slipped past goalkeeper Ryan DeMarinis, the 10-year-old looked to his mother in the stands. She smiled and flashed a reassuring thumbs-up. "It's OK," she said.

On any other day, Vicki Boone said, she might have been more vocal. But on Saturday, parents and coaches at Westwood Youth Soccer were trying hard to hold down the decibel level.

It was Westwood Youth Soccer's third "Just Let Them Play" day, previously known as "Silent Saturday." Parents were asked to pipe down during the game. Praise was OK, but yelling and shouting directions "Get that ball!" or "Pass to Sue!" were not. Coaches, too, were asked to limit their coaching to sideline conferences and keep quiet during play.

"It's a terrific idea that reminds all of us that this is the kids' game and to let them play on their own," Boone said. "This is something all sports could learn from at this age."

The result on Westwood's fields Saturday was obvious.

"It was much quieter today than usual. You would be amazed by how much yelling goes on with parents and coaches," said Andy Ferren of Westwood, a coach of a U-11 girls' team in Westwood Youth Soccer.

The event was initiated last May when Westwood coach and referee Melanie Hamblen became aware of how the constant yelling and screaming were affecting young players. During one game, she recalled, a girl missed a chance to make a play, and her mother yelled instructions on what she should have done. As the girl ran by the stands, she swore at her mother under her breath and Hamblen, who was refereeing, heard it.

What bothered Hamblen was the idea that the parents and players were becoming mutually alienated during what was supposed to be a fun sporting event.

"It was like it had become us against them," Hamblen said.

Hamblen researched the idea of everyone keeping quiet during a game and found that other leagues throughout the country had held a Silent Saturday. She presented

the idea to her soccer board, and members agreed to give it a try.

The first Silent Saturday brought mixed reviews. Parents said they felt punished by not being able to cheer for their kids, and some coaches did not like the idea of limiting communication with their players. The kids, on the other hand, mostly seemed to like it, Hamblen said. One asked if they could do it every game, although another believed it was too quiet.

Hamblen said she understood the challenges but learned from the event. "I was that coach who used to tell them what to do and where to go," Hamblen said. "This was an epiphany for me."

Still, parental concerns led to a somewhat different approach. Parents and coaches were not expected to remain totally silent; they were allowed to clap and give praise, but not to say anything negative or shout directions during play.

Even that limited restriction made for unusually quiet playing fields on Saturday.

The experiment has attracted the attention of at least one other area town, Norton, which is planning its own version of a Silent Saturday this fall.

"It's a very interesting exercise to do this and it's invaluable because it allows the entire community to reflect on the impact their behavior has on their kids," said Richard Ginsburg, who wrote "Whose Game Is It, Anyway?" with Stephen Durant and Amy Baltzell.

Ginsburg, a clinical psychologist in the Massachusetts General Hospital department of psychiatry, said that as a father he understands the challenges parents face when it comes to supporting their children.

"We as parents can get revved up watching these types of situations," Ginsburg said.

"It is really difficult to keep it under control for a parent. It's hard for everybody. . . . We all lose control and perspective. We want them to do well and we love them. It's very normal for us to be jittery and a little revved up."

Ginsburg said it would be best for some parents to just step away from the crowd when the game gets too intense, or maybe take a trip to the bathroom.

Ginsburg said a recent study confirmed that young players do want their parents there. But they do not benefit from parents who are too strong a presence on the sidelines. Sometimes, even "if a positive cheer gets too positive, too loud, or too distracting, it can take away from their performance just as much as a negative cheer," he said.

The difference is in the sense of urgency in a parent's voice, Ginsburg said. While the words may be positive, they can still send the wrong message if they are said with a tone of aggression.

"For the most part, they want to hear their parents cheering, but they don't want to be distracted by it," Ginsburg said. "It's not about silent cheering, it's about appropriate cheering."

There is little question in the players' minds that their parents are a significant presence at games. Ask the kids at Saturday's game in Westwood if they knew where their parents were sitting, and to a player they did.

Nine-year-old Melissa McManus said the day seemed a little quieter than usual, and she liked talking to her teammates more. She said she does not hear her parents all the time, but "if I get a goal, I look at them and see if they're happy." Other players said they noticed little difference.

A silent or quieter soccer Saturday has an added benefit of letting players make their own calls on the field, and thus learn the game in a more direct way, coaches say.

The e-mail and posting on the website that informed coaches and parents of the day also included three goals that an Ohio organization used as a reason for the "silent" event to develop players who can make on-field decisions without sideline intervention, to improve player communication on the field, and to build support and confidence in youth referees. The idea was "let them play and learn," Hamblen said. "Instead of you telling them what to do, let them figure it out for themselves, and they'll remember it."

"This is not a gag order to coaches; it is to encourage them to speak to the players, but on the sideline," said Westwood Youth Soccer president Maureen Laughlin, who is also a coach. "This is a chance for coaches to see if the kids are picking up on what they're being taught. It's surprising to hear the kids spitting out what we've been teaching them all season."

Terry Connaughton, a parent and coach, coached first-graders last year on Silent Saturday, but found that they were too young and got confused without direction. But, "as they get older, I found that, with the kids on my team, they loved it. They really like the fact that they've been given the green light to make their own decisions without any of the yelling."

Bill Lach of Norton, a coach who initiated the planned Silent Saturday for one day in Norton this fall, said he sees the exercise as a way to help ensure that kids are having fun which in turn helps them excel at the sport.

"The greatest thing we can do as coaches is to teach the kids to love the game," he said. "If they don't love it, they're not going to be successful."

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