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HEADLINE: Without referees, teams forfeit

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Parents, coaches and players for the Port St. John Rockets youth football league were dispirited Saturday after having to forfeit all home games against the Sebastian Sharks, which would have been each division's final regular-season game of 2006.

Tackle games were canceled because volunteer referees representing the Mid-Coast Officials Association refused to show up, Port St. John league officials said.

Animosity between referees and Rockets coaches began during a Mighty Mites division game Monday, when a group of Rockets coaches and parents verbally assaulted four referees on the field.

"I think it's ridiculous that this even happened," said Kerri Dobbs, parent of a Pee Wee player and a rookie player in the league. "Parents need to learn to control themselves."

Instead of playing Saturday's scheduled tackle games, coaches gave players the option to participate in a "fun day" of playing flag football among themselves at Space Coast Sports Complex in Cocoa.

Brian Horton, head referee of the Mid-Coast Officials Association, told FLORIDA TODAY on Friday that Monday night's incident was the "final straw."

Referees demanded the presence of two uniformed officers at every youth football league in Brevard County; otherwise, they would not stay.

Horton said that the referees did not refuse to show up for Port St. John's games on Saturday, but that the league president forfeited the games first.

"It's a rumor," Horton said. "I don't know why they forfeited. You'd have to ask their league president."

The Rockets' league president, Kurt Kolczynski, was unavailable for comment Saturday.

Rockets coaches and board members maintained that the only explanation for the forfeits was the referees did not show up.

The Rockets' Mighty Mites division was suspended from its final game as well as the

playoffs shortly after the incident Monday, but the rest of the league's divisions had planned to play their final games Saturday -- until they were "forced" to forfeit.

"I don't believe it's fair in any way," said Dave Inman, rookies division coach for the Rockets. "How can you penalize 500 kids for this?"

Inman said the rookies would have been able to make it to the playoffs if they had beaten Sebastian, but now they aren't eligible.

A meeting of Brevard County Youth Football League officials will be held at 1 p.m. today to determine whether Port St. John teams can make up Saturday's games this week, reversing all of the forfeits.

"This really stinks for the kids," said Steve Crosby, player agent for the Rockets who will represent the league at today's meeting. "I don't know what's going to happen next year. I just hope the refs will eventually come back."

Parents say many of the players -- especially players on the teams who needed to win to make the playoffs -- were disappointed.

"A lot of kids were so upset they were crying," said Chris Mancini, cheer agent for the league.

Mancini said the Rockets cheerleaders still will be able to compete in county cheer competitions, but that they were looking forward to cheering at Saturday's games.

"They work really hard on the cheers for the games," said Renee Falkner, Mighty Mites cheer coach. "It's just too bad."

Some Rockets fans blame the actions of parents and coaches that started the whole battle on Monday.

"I get upset at the referees sometimes, too," said Javier Calderin, an assistant coach in the league. "But you cannot cuss at a ref, especially when kids and families are around. There's no excuse for what happened."

On Monday, three parents of Port St. John players allegedly used profanity and others shouted insults, according to one of the referees on the field.

The only games held at Space Coast Sports Complex on Saturday in addition to the tackle division's "fun day" were the league's flag division games. As a parent with two young children on Rockets flag football teams, Jack Mutter said he was disappointed in the behavior of tackle division parents.

"Parents need to set a better example for their children," said Mutter, who hopes to see both of his sons advance to tackle divisions some day. "It's a real shame that everyone has to pay the price because of some stupid actions. Youth football is about teaching the fundamentals of the game and having fun."