

2011 Women's World Cup

Hang with the U.S. Referees

# REFEREE

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# THE BLAME GAME

## Officials Often the Scapegoat in Losing Teams' Psychology

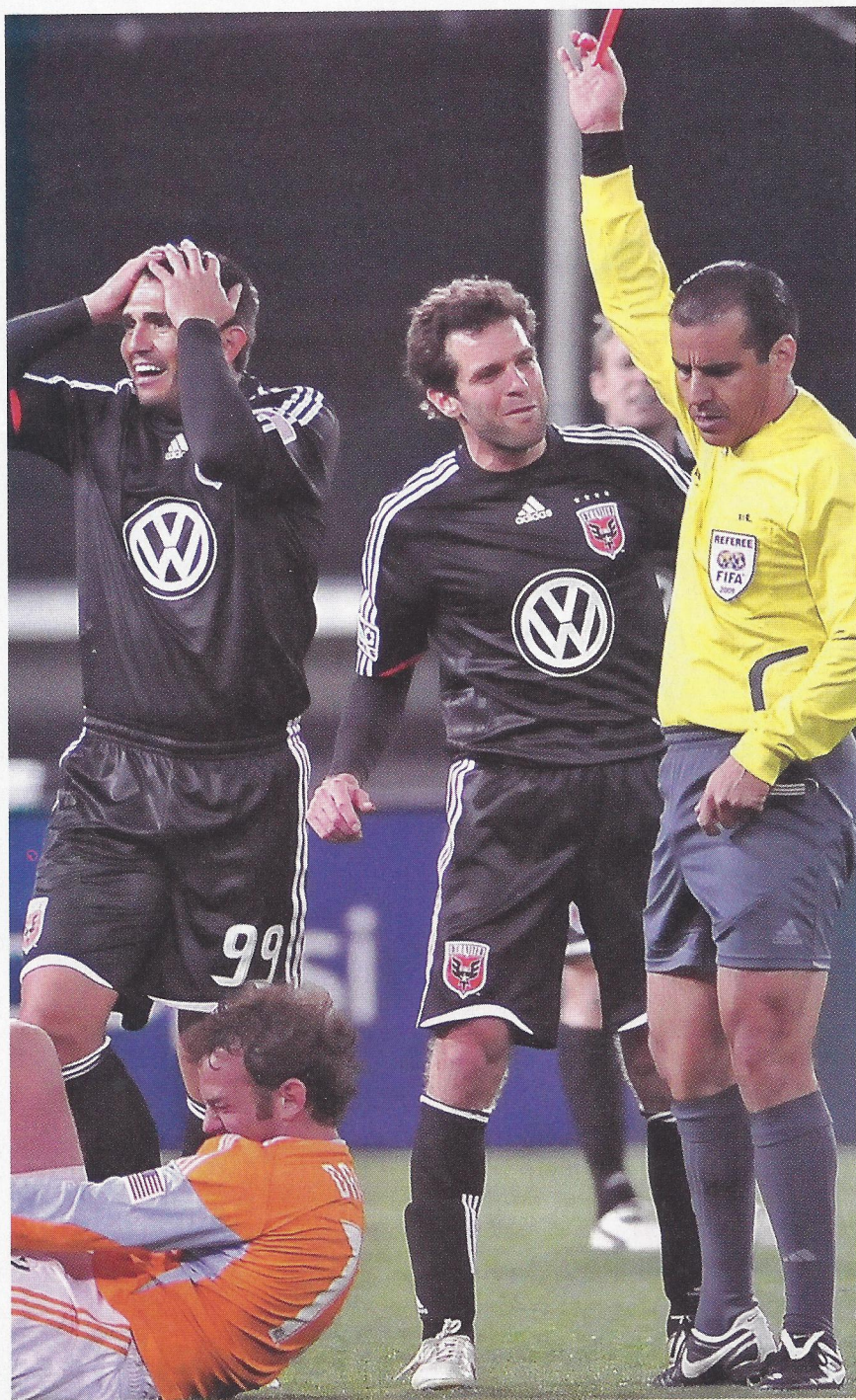
By Steve Gedon

Referees today have available to them a variety of tools and strategies to acknowledge and defuse the complaints and criticisms that come from frustrated and confused coaches, players and fans. Over time referees learn to recognize those not-so-subtle verbal jabs as both an emotional response to competition and an attempt to influence future decisions, usually referred to as "working the officials."

A closer look reveals an often ignored side effect on the morale and motivation of the team they are intended to support. Over the years I have watched the psychological impact of complaining deteriorate the mental focus of players and their ability to keep focused on the game. While coaches and fans often enjoy that emotional aspect of the game, I believe we would all do well to consider its unintended consequences on game performance.

When it comes to complaining, officials quickly learn a simple rule of thumb: Losing teams tend to complain more. That is not particularly surprising especially when coaches and players search for a convenient way to vent their frustrations, justify poor performance and deflect responsibility. When viewed solely at the end of the game, however, it is easy to overlook the effect criticism had on the mental focus of the players while the outcome was still in question. In the midst of a closely contested match when emotions are running high, the intensity of the criticism is not always a response to losing but may shift morale just enough to produce it.

Even if losing teams do complain more, coaches and players need



A player vents his frustrations toward referee Baldomero Toledo, Norwalk, Calif., after Toledo issues a red card for a foul that the player committed in the wake of his opponent's injury during a game.

MY REFeree

**Don't Try to Win the Argument**

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JOHN DEFEITAS



to seriously consider whether the corollary is also true: Complaining teams tend to lose more. That leads to an interesting question: Which comes first? It has been my experience that there are unintended psychological consequences from complaining that create a losing attitude, inhibit learning and drain enthusiasm.

When coaches and players complain to the officials during a game, they do so in an attempt to deflect responsibility and rationalize away the mistakes they will only continue to make. That is, of course, the exact opposite of what is necessary for creative, adaptive behavior to occur. Since all teams are faced with unknowns in the course of play, successful teams will learn to adapt quickly to different levels of play by learning from their mistakes.

That is not to say, of course, that officials are above reproach or that criticism is never valid. Far from it. Referees, just like everyone else, need to pursue excellence in the sport they manage through regular reviews, training and assessments. It is when the criticism becomes a convenient escape that referees need to be careful not to step into a minefield of misguided accusations.

#### **Learning and adaptation.**

When players and coaches blame the officials for a play that did not go as expected, it immediately creates a mental smokescreen or fog which distracts players from the real mistakes that are being made in positioning or execution. That psychological fog prevents creative learning from taking place by hiding the real cause of the problem.

Every competitive sport requires some level of adaptation to the opponent's skill level and the overall team strategy. Complaining interrupts the player's view of current reality and inserts the official as a distraction. When players find a convenient scapegoat, they effectively give up their power to change. Many referees have watched helplessly as frustrated players become so fixated on the officials that they fail to see their part in the mistakes they continue to make.

A good coach, however, will turn any mistake into a teachable moment and extract from every loss the last nugget of learning possible. Coaches who blame and criticize officials as an easy scapegoat, however, squander a golden opportunity to improve the team's level of play by encouraging personal accountability and an honest assessment of the team's performance. Only by accepting and confronting mistakes openly and honestly can players see where they can improve and avoid the inevitable cycle of accusations common when playing the "blame game."

**Attitude and motivation.** Prior to the start of every match, coaches typically give some kind of pep talk designed to elevate their players' mental attitude through positive reinforcement. Coaches review their game plan, focus on the teams' strengths and inspire players to believe in themselves with a solid "can-do" attitude. It is the underdogs that we admire who persevere against all odds, who believe in themselves and who ultimately find a way to win that keeps fans cheering enthusiastically and makes competition so rewarding.

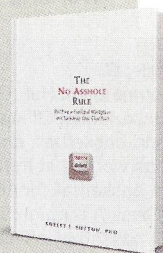
But for teams and coaches that complain to relieve stress, that "can-do" attitude is quickly squandered on the "woe-is-me" attitude. The confidence that started the game quickly evaporates when players hear from the bench or from the stands a constant stream of negativity that is both demeaning and laced with self-pity. I have seen numerous teams simply wilt under the weight of criticism from an angry coach or fans who argue incessantly about every play. The message players hear is clear: "We can't win against these odds." Complaining then becomes an excuse and a slow bleed of much needed enthusiasm and hope.

In 2006, following a loss to Stoke City, West Bromwich Albion Manager Tony Mowbray remarked, "We should be good enough not to be complaining about a penalty." That unique perspective challenges players to rise above the "blame

## **TOOLS**

### ***The No Asshole Rule***

A book that applies well to association leaders as well as officials in game situations, *The No Asshole Rule* (Business Plus/2007) by Robert I. Sutton, Ph.D., focuses on the modern workplace and how it is beset with jerks. Sutton (*Weird Ideas That Work*) is a professor of management science at Stanford University. He argues that those who deliberately make coworkers feel bad about themselves and who focus their aggression on the less powerful poison the work environment, decrease productivity, induce qualified employees to quit and therefore are detrimental to businesses, regardless of their individual effectiveness. Direct and punchy, Sutton uses accessible language and a bevy of examples. The book is available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), priced between \$4.99 and \$14.95.



## **THEY SAID IT**

"You've got this group of young men and women who in many ways are given an intent based upon what their mission is, and that is to hopefully officiate a perfect game. We know that's a stretch goal. That's their mission. They've got guidelines. They've got intent but when they get out there they're on their own. So all this motivation, inspiration, everything you need to do needs to happen before they get on that court because once they're on the court you depend on them."

— Ron Johnson, NBA senior vice president, referee operations

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

How often do you drink water? Here and there? Consistently? A study at the University of Utah found that people who are better hydrated have higher metabolic rates. Eight to 12 eight-ounce glasses of water every day will do the trick.

SOURCE: HOWSTUFFWORKS.COM



## 5 MINUTES WITH LARRY SORRELLS

Working two sports in one season requires extra focus.

**Age:** 53**Hometown:** Hull, Ga.

**Experience:** Official since 1982 in football and basketball, and since 1986 in softball; has worked at the state tournament level in basketball for 18 of the last 20 years (Class A through 5A); former NCAA Division III basketball official. Was named official of the year in 2004 for the state of Georgia; worked the first Georgia-Florida high school all-star game in football; has been to the state softball tournament. Basketball and softball assigner for Northeast Georgia Officials Association and first vice president of Georgia Athletic Officials Association.

**REFEREE:** Did you start working all three sports at once?

**SORRELLS:** I started with football first for a couple of years, then I got into basketball. I tried baseball for a year or two, but I just didn't like it. It's a long game compared to softball.

**REFEREE:** What is your favorite sport?

**SORRELLS:** Basketball. I played it in high school and I like the challenge of reacting to a play. In basketball, you've got to make a call right away and if you think about it, it's too late.

**REFEREE:** What are some of the challenges of officiating multiple sports?

**SORRELLS:** The biggest challenge is in the fall of the year. In Georgia, the softball and football seasons are at the same time. So I have to get ready for both seasons at the same time. I've got to remember when I'm going from one sport to the other one and not get the rules crossed up. They're not the same, but I've got to go to a softball game with the mentality that I'm doing softball today and the next day I may be working football. It's the same for meetings. We have meetings on Sunday for softball and on Monday for football.

**REFEREE:** How do you go about studying the rules for two sports that are played at the same time?

**SORRELLS:** One day a week, I'll focus on softball. Like on Tuesday, it's softball day and on Thursday, it's football day. I want to give my mind time to think about what I studied Tuesday for Wednesday and before I study the other sport. I take

a day in between before I study the rules of the next sport.

**REFEREE:** When you schedule games for each of the sports during a multisport season, do you give yourself a break in between games during the week to prepare and adjust for the other sport?

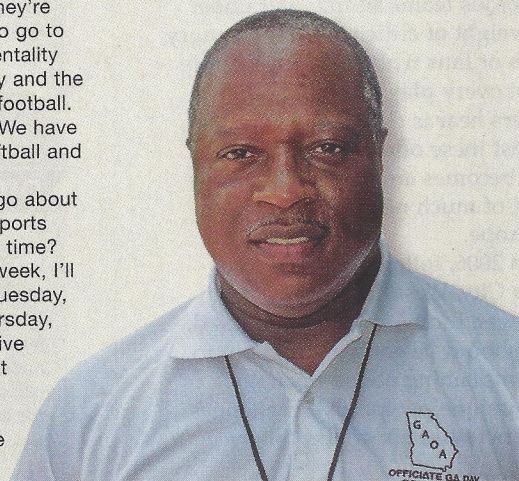
**SORRELLS:** I do. I am also an assigner for softball and basketball. Softball games are usually played Monday through Friday, so I want to keep myself available for softball, so I only work football on Friday nights.

**REFEREE:** With your accomplishments of working at the state tournament in basketball and softball, do you still set goals for yourself?

**SORRELLS:** I make it a point to attend a camp each year. As long as you do that, there is something that you can learn. No matter how old you are or how long you've been an official, there is something that you can learn. My goal each year is to get better at what I do. I may not be as fast as I used to be, but if I know the game and know the angles, I can still keep up with the game.

**REFEREE:** Do you find at times with officiating multiple sports, that each sport can help you in some way to be a better overall official?

**SORRELLS:** It does. When you're working one sport, you can see how your peers or fans react, then when you go to the other sport you know what you should be doing to not get yourself in a certain situation. Sometimes, if you're working one sport, you might take it for granted that they don't know what they're talking about and you might not know how to react right away. □



game" and focus on the whole game, not just one play out of a hundred. It encourages players to see every mistake for what it is, another opportunity to improve.

**Transference.** The psychology of blame involves how and to whom we choose to assign fault. Losing teams will even assign blame to neutral objects like the field conditions, the ball, the wind, anything and everything including their own teammates rather than accept responsibility. When we place blame on others it confuses where the real solutions can be found and makes the obstacles appear twice as big as they really are. In fact, many coaches and players become so focused on the officials that they spend more time "working" the officials than working from their own strengths and game plan. That transference of energy and focus has cost more games than it will ever win.

By consistently calling a fair, impartial game and avoiding getting drawn into emotional arguments with irate coaches, officials can remove themselves as pawns in the blame game, reduce the negativity and help teams maintain their focus on their own level of play. By taking a no-blame attitude, coaches can inspire their teams to play at a higher level, to learn continually and to see mistakes as an opportunity to improve. Players who accept responsibility for what happens on the field generally will improve their skills faster, possess a positive attitude about the game, avoid burnout and generally have more fun. Above all they will learn important skills necessary to succeed in all aspects of life.

While it is certainly tempting to vent our frustration on whoever or whatever we can, complaining and shifting blame leaves players in a deeper hole of confusion and disappointment out of which few can climb.

Steve Gedon, Ph.D, is a senior pastor at First United Methodist Church, Williamstown, W.Va. He has been a referee for four years and serves on the board of the West Virginia-Ohio High School Soccer Referee Association. □

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