

## The Current State of Youth Soccer Refereeing

Youth soccer – and youth sports in general – has a referee problem, both in terms of quantity and quality, causing a shortage of available officials at all levels of play. Certain weekends may be especially problematic, when there are multiple leagues or tournaments taking place simultaneously.

Bottom line up front: this shortage is not going to fix itself (read on for why this exists, and steps Loudoun Soccer has taken on its own to address it, or skip ahead as to what players, coaches and families can do to help).

It's up to each of us as community members to do our part in addressing this situation.

### **REASONS FOR THIS SHORTAGE:**

There are numerous reasons as to why this referee shortage exists; most are years in the making, and others are due to recent circumstances.

***Too many games:*** youth soccer has been a fast-growing and popular sport in the United States for many years. Outside of a significant but short term reduction due to the pandemic, game counts have been high every season, and there is little to no coordination among competing programs and leagues to prevent schedule conflicts. The pool of officials for the reasons stated in this article is too small for the game count each season.

This also includes other, separate competitions, like college and high school matches. More qualified and driven referees will choose to pursue more competitive matches, which in turn trickles down to the youth levels. Lower level refs either step up to fill the void, or accept lesser assignments leaving older, competitive youth matches with few available referees.

***Nature of assigning:*** referees are independent contractors, free to work when they want to, and accept assignments from whatever league or event needs referees. Referees are asked to provide assignors (certified individuals who schedule referees to games that best fit their abilities) their availability at the start of the season, so assignors can schedule those referees with as much advanced notice as possible.

For the vast majority of referees – this role is not their first priority. They have other commitments – families, school, full-time jobs, social lives, etc. – which limit their ability to provide assignors their availability too far into the future. These commitments may also change at the last minute, which impacts the referee assignments.

This creates chaos for the assignors, as they're able to assign few referees into the future, and then must assemble that weekend's game schedule like a puzzle, where the pieces are constantly changing because referee availability is also changing. More often than not, this task of assigning referees for that day's slate of matches is completed on that date, for some games even hours or minutes before kickoff.

It's a flawed system that can be fixed either by decreasing the number of games and/or increasing the number of referees. But given the fact referee availability will vary from

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week to week, the potential for uncovered games will always exist even if the game count reduces or the referee pool increases.

**“Life” happens:** even when the assignors are able to fully cover all matches, last minute issues can arise. “Life” happens and a referee assigned to a match doesn’t show – it could be car troubles, or an illness or injury, or they slept through their alarm.

**Insufficient training and continuing development:** certifying and recertifying as a referee through the United States Soccer Federation has never been easier. Certifying as a new referee consists of an online module and exam, followed by an in-person field training module; this is about 10 total hours of training, and costs \$85.

Referees must recertify annually; the recertification process is even easier. All training is online, and consists of modules lasting about three hours. The recertification fee is \$85. Referees with lapsed certification (less than four years between recertification) have a pathway to recertify too.

These changes were made by US Soccer prior to the pandemic to standardize content taught throughout the country, and now during the pandemic are in place to limit in-person classroom sessions.

While they have streamlined the certification process, they fail to address a major blind spot: continuing education. Most referees do not receive any in-person feedback while on the field officiating. It’s often dependent on the state, city, or league they’re part of. Some areas have organized referee support organizations and/or designated referee mentors, but most don’t.

All states have a State Referee Committee that oversees soccer officials, disciplinary issues, and the certification process, and also help to develop more talented and motivated referees who wish to progress up the ranks, but are terribly limited in their ability to reach grassroots referees (e.g. the teenager officiating your child’s 3<sup>rd</sup> grade match).

The sad reality: the vast majority of referees certify, and then are thrown into the deep end without any additional support. The only constructive feedback they might receive is if they officiate with a senior referee, who can provide them instruction and guidance on areas to improve. But that is dependent on chance, in terms of being assigned with a senior referee and that senior referee being gracious enough to provide them feedback. Most of the feedback they do receive falls under abuse – parents and coaches and players telling them what they did wrong, often in ugly tones and words.

The support system for players (a club and its staff teaching its curriculum and providing them feedback) and for coaches (a club’s Director of Coaching and/or Technical Staff providing guidance and feedback to them, along with formal licensing and certification opportunities by US Soccer, United Soccer Coaches, and other organizations) does not exist for the vast of most referees; as such, players, coaches and clubs have

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progressed significantly over the last 20+ years, while referee development has not kept pace at the same rate.

In short: referees who are available for games are often ill-equipped to properly manage the match because there is little-to-no on-the-job-training provided to them, and that in-person support is often a critical element to ensure those younger referees continue.

***The game environment – from constant criticism to outright abuse:*** players, parents, and coaches can be competitive, which brings emotion to the field. It's natural to be emotional when a call goes against your team, or a call for your team is missed. What's not OK is to channel that emotion into disrespectful behavior.

This can range from yelling at or about calls (whether a handball occurred, or which team last touched the ball before it went out) to generic commentary ("C'mon ref!") to outright abuse in tone and/or words. And even worse, physical threats and contact can occur.

Culturally, referees are often ridiculed – whether it's a blind referee costume for Halloween, or regular booing at professional or collegiate matches where the stakes are higher, and fans feel justified for bad behavior because they paid for tickets. Those values have no place in youth sports (and one can argue they have no place in professional or collegiate sports either).

Too often, referees quit officiating while they're too young (in their teens) before they have the opportunity to improve. The constant criticism from each individual game adds up over time, and many referees will reach a breaking point when they feel it's no longer worth their time.

While referees of all ages and abilities are paid for their time, that pay does not give us as parents, coaches, or players the right to question or abuse them; both are often violations of most codes of conducts families agree to when joining a soccer club.

***Young referees often stop officiating post-high school:*** for those young referees who do return each year, their referee journey is often stalled or outright stopped once they leave high school. Most of these teenagers will attend college, and few of them will continue officiating during this time. Those who do continue officiating will have plenty of opportunities, as the pool of officials ages 18-23 is usually small.

However, most referees who officiate while in college will eventually hang up the whistle as they enter their mid-20s and early 30s. It's not surprising – their free time becomes more limited. They have jobs, social lives, are starting families, etc. There is not enough time in their schedules to allow them to continue officiating.

The end result: the referee pool often consists of teenagers still learning about officiating, and older adults (40+) who have resumed or become officials to stay active, because they have more time, so they may officiate with their children, etc. There is a major gap of 20 and 30 year-old candidates who are not regularly officiating matches.

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**Former players become coaches instead of referees:** many former players who no longer play competitively but who wish to stay involved in soccer become coaches. This may range from the former player whose child is now playing recreational soccer, and the parent coaches their team; to those who wish to coach at the competitive levels as a part-time or full-time paid coach.

Few choose to remain in the game by becoming officials. It's not surprising – teaching and coaching players is more fun and provides more instant reward, and can also satisfy the competitive urge they once had as players. It usually pays better too. Officiating is not the most attractive position given the abuse they often receive, even though the potential for advancement as a referee is likely higher than as a coach, from a pure market standpoint (there are a lot of coaches, and not a lot of referees).

A capable referee often can see the game from the viewpoint of players, and creating a pipeline of former players to become referees would help resolve this shortage. However, there's still a lot of work behind the scenes at the local, state, and national levels that is needed for that to occur.

**Recent USSF changes:** although the current certification process is easier, the actual registration process to become a referee is often clunky and frustrating to complete. Individuals who wish to certify or recertify must register both with US Soccer, and with their State Referee Committee – two separate systems and processes. The smoothness of this two-step process depends on the SRC the referee registers with, as their system may have a smooth or a rocky Application Programming Interface (API) with US Soccer's. When this change first was implemented, many SRC's were not prepared for the deluge of registration issues. Out of frustration, some referees chose not to recertify.

US Soccer also reclassified referees from a nine-level Grade classification (the majority were Grade 8 officials, who could upgrade to Grade 7 and Grade 6 based on experience, fitness testing, and assessments, with additional upgrade levels available) to a five-level system. Grade 8 referees were reclassified as Grassroots referees. Grade 6 referees were reclassified as Regional referees; however, Grade 7 referees – who had put in more time and energy to upgrade their level – were reclassified as Grassroots. Some former Grade 7 referees out of protest chose not to recertify.

There will always be fallout from any transition; these changes, while designed to improve the referee pathway, may have caused additional issues in the short term.

**COVID-19:** the recent pandemic only delayed the inevitability of this shortage. The Spring 2020 season for much of the country was lost, and soccer resumed in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 with lower participation. As youth soccer numbers increase toward pre-pandemic levels, the referee pool has not. Some have allowed their certification to lapse during this time and have not renewed, while others have avoided returning all together due to health concerns.

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**Industry-wide staffing issues:** the current labor shortage experienced in other industries like restaurants and hospitality may also have reached officiating in youth soccer and other sports. For whatever reasons (generational, economical, etc.), people capable of work are not pursuing work. The same may be true for certified referees.

**Lack of investment from clubs and leagues:** lastly but still significantly: most clubs and leagues have not supported or insufficiently support referee development. This is partially by design – referees are independent, and clubs/leagues need to avoid influencing them in order to maintain that critical independence on the field, so any bias (real or perceived) is avoided. However, State Referee Committees are not as well organized as leagues and clubs, as SRCs are often volunteer-driven organizations, and also do not have the influence that leagues and clubs have recruiting or connecting with potential referees.

Nobody drives around with a soccer referee magnet on their car, but they do drive around with magnets or stickers supporting their youth soccer club. Clubs need to promote opportunities to its membership, and encourage individuals to certify.

The cultural, adversarial relationship with referees also influences this separation. There is often a “not my problem” response from clubs and leagues when referee issues occur, since referees are independent. That’s a shortsighted response – while referees, the certification process, the oversight of their behavior, etc. are not the responsibility of clubs and leagues, clubs and leagues still must invest in referee development for there to be enough available officials in their local referee pool. This attitude must change for referee growth to occur.

### **LOUDOUN SOCCER’S EFFORTS TO CERTIFY, DEVELOP, AND ASSIGN REFEREES:**

Loudoun Soccer has taken several steps to address this referee shortage, often above and beyond efforts by other organizations. These steps include:

**Annually hosting the most number of referee courses in Virginia:** Loudoun Soccer hosts several certification courses, absorbing the cost of meeting space, field rentals, and paying senior referees to support the training led by instructors, while also providing teams to participate in the on-field training, providing newly certifying referees the opportunity to practice in a game-like environment before actually officiating.

**Multiple levels and year-round programming:** Loudoun Soccer as a full-service organization hosts games of all levels – from the highest ECNL matches to weeknight Adult League matches, to Saturday grassroots Rec matches. This provides referees of all abilities ample opportunities to officiate. Programming is held year-round too, and includes large scale tournaments. A referee can exclusively accept assignments from Loudoun Soccer.

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**Competitive pay rates and bonus structure:** while many pay rates are set by the leagues Loudoun Soccer participates in, the remaining games like Rec, Adult, and tournaments are set competitively to compensate referees accordingly. Additionally: Loudoun Soccer pays referees a bonus rate each season for matches officiated under its umbrella. The more LS matches a referee officiates, the more they'll be compensated.

**Coordinated scheduling with assignors:** assigning referees is hard enough (the constantly changing jigsaw puzzle analogy). Loudoun Soccer schedules its games with this in mind, so that assignors can better assign referees to a block of games appropriate to their level. Loudoun Soccer also contracts with three assignors, so all levels of game can receive appropriate attention from their respective assignor.

**Referee Development Coordinator and Senior Mentors:** Loudoun Soccer recently created a Referee Development Coordinator position, whose primary task is to be on-site at games, working with referees before, during, in-between, and after matches. This is a critical element of support all young referees need, and Loudoun Soccer has stepped up to help fill that void. The RDC position also is responsible for developing a team of senior referee mentors, to better reach all of the local referees, and to organize continuing education opportunities (pre-season meetings, Zoom sessions, match observations, etc.) for all referees.

Although referees are considered independent – free to accept assignments for any league or event nationwide – Loudoun Soccer has invested time, money, and energy into this continuing education process, something few if any clubs have done.

**Dialogue and best practices with State Referee Committee:** to better address these issues at the state level, Loudoun Soccer has engaged with the State Referee Committee on several fronts to provide feedback and to collaborate on solutions. The SRC traditionally has only interacted with the state youth soccer association, but the hope is this grassroots, ground-level connection will bear more plentiful fruit.

### **HOW PLAYERS, COACHES, AND PARENTS CAN HELP:**

***When you have referees at your game: remember they're human beings.***

Officiating is difficult, and they're going to make mistakes. It happens at all levels of soccer and in every sport, so anticipate it occurring during your child's weekend morning soccer game.

Those individual referees are human beings. They have limitations, and feelings. Don't let the anti-referee culture we see in professional sports influence the way we act in youth sports.

***Avoid questioning or criticizing them.***

This is not necessarily the loud, inappropriate, and obnoxious yelling at refs that can be considered abuse (more on that next). It's the emotional reaction we have when

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something goes against us or our team – like a foul not whistled or an off-side call missed, or a throw-in awarded to the wrong team. Imagine having a crowd of 30-60 people watching you at work for an hour and at least one person commenting on every action or inaction you take during that time. Not fun. It adds up, and will eventually chase referees from the game.

### ***Recognize there is ZERO TOLERANCE toward referee abuse.***

Now take that constant criticism and kick it up a level Put yourself in the referee's shoes while being insulted ("what are you blind!?") or intimidated or threatened. All of the goodwill and positive feelings a referee might experience from their role in allowing children to play soccer can be quickly destroyed beyond recovery by one act of abuse. Don't be the person who chases that referee away. That one action is selfish, immature, and inappropriate, and can ripple and impact numerous teams and games in the future because of one referee chased from the game.

### **Thank them.**

Post match – regardless of result or their performance – thank them. You don't have to say "good job" if you don't think they did it, but still thank them for officiating your match. That sign of good sportsmanship will go a long way to toward retaining them.

### ***Have perspective and be flexible.***

Your child's game may not have a referee. That's a 21<sup>st</sup> century, First World problem. It's more important for the kids to play a game without a referee than to sit at home idle or on their screens, or to not participate at all. Children take their cues from adults. If you make it an issue it'll be one for them. If you roll with it, so will they. While it's clearly not ideal, coaches can manage the match to the best of their ability. Ensure the kids get to play.

### ***Become a referee yourself.***

Certification courses take place year-round but typically during the Winter months. Officiating is beneficial in numerous ways – from additional exercise, to becoming more knowledgeable about the sport, to earning money, but most importantly toward giving back to the community. Parents and children ages 13 and older are eligible – officiating together can be a positive parent-child bonding experience. Visit the [State Referee Committee's website](#) for information on how to certify.

There is a lot to unpack with this issue, but a clear pathway forward. Grow the pool of officials, and change the culture of abuse. To accomplish this task requires everyone to do their minimum part, but ideally to step up and do more. Please help be part of the solution.