

# Practical Advice:

Dealing with assault,  
abuse, and harassment  
against soccer referees.

Presentation written by:

Steve Montanino

*Special Thanks to Curt Hamlin, SRA  
For the use of some excerpts written by him.*

## I. Assault

# STOP!

## Assault against Referees

Get to **S**afety

**T**hink

Game **O**ver

Call the **P**olice

- No soccer referee should ever have to deal with assault.
- Even though it's a rare occurrence referee assault is an unfortunate reality.
- You won't expect it coming.
- Referee assaults catch their victims off guard.
- That's why it's important to know what to do in the event you're ever the victim of an attack.

# Remember STOP

## Get to Safety, Think, Game Over, Call the Police

### What is a referee Assault?

Referee assault is an act committed by an individual involved in a match (player, substitute, coach, team official, or spectator) against a referee that is of a violent or intimidating nature. The act of assault is always one of physical violence meaning some form of physical contact (or attempted contact) has occurred. It also includes damaging the referee's property. Assault may occur out of defiance, anger, or even hatred.

### What are some examples of referee assault?

Physical assaults:

- Grabbing the referee's body or clothes in a threatening manner.
- Slapping away the referee's hands when ref is telling player to stop or signaling.
- Snatching a card out of the referee's hand.
- Shoving the referee (*no matter how hard*)
- Spitting ON the referee.
- Striking the referee. (*kick, punch, knee, elbow, w/ the ball*)
- Inappropriate touching. (*includes kissing*)
- Tripping the referee.
- Pulling the referee's hair.
- Pouring any beverage on, or damaging a referee's personal property
- Any other form of touching is designed to intimidate or cause physical harm.

### What should I do if I am ever assaulted?

Follow the 4 steps of STOP and follow the proper USSF procedure.

1. **Get to Safety:** During the game moments may get tense, passions may flare, and players can become aggressive. If a player begins moving at you in an aggressive manner to the point where you fear for your safety, or if you are struck or otherwise physically assaulted – **GET AWAY** from the person who assaulted you. Seek out a place on or away from the field that is safe until the aggressor is calm or restrained.

Do your best not to strike anyone, if possible. You may have to defend yourself and if you must, do so. However, USSF suggests the best course of action is to be as passively defensive as possible (blocking, running away) rather than aggressively defensive (striking back, etc.)

2. **Think:** Once the situation has calmed, take a moment to think about the event and decide if what the player did was a referee assault. Common sense should tell you fairly immediately if you have been assaulted. If you are unsure, check with your assistant referee's (if you have any.) If you have decided that an assault occurred, write down every important fact about what happened. Include,

jersey #'s, names, who was involved, etc. If it's a player or substitute, don't forget to SEND HIM OFF! However, if the player/sub you're sending off seems agitated skip this part and inform the team captain or a player from his team (who is not out of control) what you are going to do. Write in the match report whether you were able to show the card and if you didn't, explain why.

**3. Game Over:** Once you have recorded your information, inform the players the match is going to be terminated. It is better to not continue matches after a referee assault has occurred. You probably won't be in a state psychologically to do the game justice, and the players will surely be on edge. It's better to keep everyone safe and end the game rather than try to continue.

**4. Call the Police:** As a matter of course, it is good practice to call the police to the field. You should file a police report and ask them to arrest the person who committed the assault. Press charges. You can always change your mind later – however, if every referee pressed charges and individuals who commit assaults were arrested and had to deal with criminal charges every time, it stands to reason that assaults will decrease. Additionally, a police report will document all issues pertinent to the event. Having a legal document of the event will also help out the state association which handles the penalties given to players. It is also useful if you decide to file civil charges later.

It is conceivable that some assaults may be minor enough where you may not need to end the game or call the police. It is up to you to use your best judgment to decide if the assault was severe enough to warrant the more severe actions. However, in the event of any physical assault the referee should always keep in mind their prerogative to call law enforcement and terminate the match. Even if you allow the match to continue you must still report the assault to the SRA and the league via match report within 48 hours and follow the steps set forth by the USSF.

---

## **II. ABUSE**

### **How does abuse and harassment differ from assault?**

Harassment and Abuse are both verbal in nature, while assault is physical.

### **What is Referee Abuse?**

**Abuse** is defined as a verbal threat or implied threat against the referee. Generally using language that threatens the referee with violence or that can be an implied threat against the referee is considered "abuse".

Some examples of abuse are remarks such as "I'll get you after the game" or "You won't get out of here in one piece," or spitting at (but not on) the referee.

Abuse like assault can be committed by a player, substitute, coach, or spectator.

### **What should I do if I am abused?**

If you are the victim of referee abuse you should follow these steps:

1. Immediately stop play, if the ball is still in play.
2. Once play is stopped, think about what was said to you. Ask your self, was I just threatened by this person? If you can answer yes, you should assess the severity of the threat.
3. Identify and record the offender's identity. Next, write down exactly what was said to you, and any threatening movements made toward you. These facts must be included in your match report.
4. If the abuse came from a player or substitute send him off and show a red card to that player/sub, so long as you feel that a red card will not escalate any danger to you. If you don't show the red card, inform the team captain or another player on the team that the player is sent off.
5. If the abuser is not a player/sub instead eject the coach, or spectator from the area of the field. Be careful not to escalate any danger toward yourself.
6. If you feel an imminent threat, or fear for your safety due to a threat of violence against you, then you should end the game and depending upon the severity of the threat or property damage, call the police without hesitation.
7. If you don't feel at risk, you may simply eject the offender. The offender must leave the field area so they are outside of "sight and sound" so they can no longer interfere with the match. If the offender is a youth player, remember that they must be under the supervision of an adult so you may not be able to force them away from the field. Usually you may send a youth player to the bench, where they must sit and change out of their game shirt into a different shirt. If the player continues to disrupt the match, then you must terminate it and report all of the details in the match report.
8. File a match report to the league and the SRA within 48 hours containing all of the details of the incident so that the State Association may punish the player appropriately.

---

## **III. Harassment**

### **What is Referee Harassment?**

**Harassment** is a verbal statement or physical act not resulting in bodily contact which is socially unacceptable but falls short of implying or threatening physical harm to a referee or the referee's property or equipment. An example of this is a person approaching you using foul, abusive, or insulting language or gestures targeted directly toward a referee.

### **What should I do if I am harassed?**

1. Immediately stop play, if the ball is still in play.
  2. Once play is stopped, decide if you were harassed. If what the individual said is harassment they should be ejected from the premises. If that person is a player or substitute, they must be sent off and shown the red card.
  3. Make sure the individual who was ejected is out of sight and sound (remember the youth participant's exception). Do not resume play until that person is gone. If the person will not leave the game, terminate the match.
  4. Record exactly what was said and the identity of who said it. If you can't identify the offender, collect as many details as possible for your match report.
  5. After the game make sure to send a match report to the league and a copy of the report to the SRA within 48 hours.
- 

## **IV. ADVICE AND SUPPORT**

### **Who can I turn to in the event that I am assaulted, abused, or harassed?**

Referees who are victims of physical or verbal attacks often feel vulnerable and violated. It is important to talk with other referee's who you trust in the event of such an incident. Here are some people you can talk to who will offer you support and guidance after an assault, abuse, or harassment:

1. The State Referee Administrator (SRA) – You are required to deal with the SRA as you must submit details of any of the offenses listed above within 48 hours. The SRA will also be able to help guide you through the appropriate process and give you ideas on how to effectively report the offenses.
  2. The District Referee Administrator (DRA) – This person is your local unit's representative to the State Referee Committee. He is also a good contact point with the local leagues. He should be able to assist you in dealing with the local leagues where the offense took place.
  3. A more experienced referee who you can trust – Talking about what happened with more experienced referee's may help you to feel better and they may be able to give you some pointers on how to handle the case in the future.
-