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Time for a Children's Revolt

By Mike Voitalla

Some of the things I've heard adults yell at children at soccer games are just downright hilarious. Like the coach who yelled at a 6-year-old, "Give him a target on the flank!" Oh, how I wish the kids would start shouting back. Go ahead and give an earful right back to the loudmouths on the sideline.

I would have loved to see the little boy turn around and say: "Excuse me! Give him a target on the what? Do you realize I'm 6 years old? How little time do you spend with 6-year-olds that would make you think 'Give him a target on the flank' makes any sense to us? Maybe after we learn how to kick the ball farther than five yards we can start giving each other targets on the whatever."

If you've been around youth soccer games you've probably noticed that whenever a little kid manages to break away from the pack and toward the goal, the shrill screams of "Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!" begin. How wonderful it would be if a kid would just stop in mid-stride, turn to the sideline, and shout:

"Listen here, and listen good! I KNOW I'm supposed to shoot. I'm 6 years old, but I'm not an idiot. And what if I didn't want to shoot? What if I wanted to dribble around the goalkeeper. Am I allowed to do that, or are you in charge of every movement and every decision I make out here?"

One the most common screams from the sidelines is "Pass it! Pass it! Pass it! Pass it! Pass it! Pass it!" I want a little kid to tell them: "So you've noticed that I've gained enough confidence to try to dribble through a mass of kids who are kicking at my shins. You see, I've been playing around with the ball in my yard and I'm starting to figure out this dribbling thing. And you want to discourage me! Well guess what? I'm going to ignore you. When my teammates start asking for the ball, then I'll start thinking about whether I should keep dribbling or pass the ball."

I once heard a mom yell at a child to pass the ball before the 6-year-old even got control of it.

"Hey Mom, do realize how ridiculous you sound?"

Just last weekend a chubby girl of about 8 years old was racing back to her own half. Watching her run was a delight. She waddled a bit, but was picking up speed and had a marvelous look of determination on her cute little face. When she stepped over the halfway line, the coach growled, "Stop! You're a forward! Get back up front."

Boy will she get confused if she stays with game and later gets admonished for "not tracking back." Instead of looking up at the coach with guilt, I wish she would have headed over to the sideline and said, "I'll run around on this field however I please!"

Yes, a lot of the sideline shouting is so inane it's comical. But it's also sad.

Last season, when we didn't have a referee for my under-8 girls team, I took the whistle. Our team's opponents got screamed at by their coach and parents throughout the entire game. When one of their girls took a shot, our keeper made one of the most amazing saves I'd ever seen a 7-year-old make. She lunged and stuck her little hand out to block a very well struck shot. The coach shouted, "I told you to shoot earlier!"

The girl who almost scored looked over at the burly screamer with an expression of genuine guilt, as if she had done something terribly wrong. It was a look of pure sorrow. What can one possibly say to a coach like that?

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