



Joe Fawcett — Making a good call

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It's an early afternoon on an overcast day, making it a perfect time to play a good game of soccer. Running along with two high-school teams is referee Joe Fawcett of the Laboratory's Bioscience Division Office. Joe's been a soccer referee for more than 25 years. He refs an average of 70 games each year, working with adult and high-school teams.

"I've never really played soccer, except in high school as part of physical education class," says Joe with a sheepish grin. "I don't think I ever ran a mile in my life until I became a soccer referee after the age of 40."

Joe's principal job as a referee is to make sure games are played safely and within the rules. Something few people think about is that a referee must also be in great physical shape, as they remain on the field for the full length of the game.

"You don't get subbed out for a breather," explains Joe. "I'm constantly on the run, keeping up with the ball and the players contending for it. Refereeing has turned out to be a great activity for me to stay healthy."

Getting into the game

Joe didn't give much thought to sports or refereeing until his sons joined soccer teams. "For me it seemed like the natural thing to do, to participate with my sons in games by working as a referee. My youngest son, not only did he play soccer but he too eventually became a referee at age 11. He and I refereed games for a number of years together. It was a great bonding experience for him and me."

Joe has received the appropriate training to work as an official for the U.S. Soccer Federation and the National Federation of State High School Associations. Both organizations have their own rules and regulations.

"Once you've learned the ins and outs of soccer and the rules and regulations designed to oversee game-play, you're assigned to an experienced referee for on-the-field training," says Joe. "The organizations want you to have a positive experience during your first games, as officiating can get stressful at times."

Fast forward more than 25 years and Joe is now a referee veteran, holding a Regional Emeritus Referee License as a former State Referee. "As I grow older and find it more difficult physically to referee games, I am transitioning to teaching up-and-coming referees to learn from my years of experience. It's another way to give back to the game I've enjoyed for so many years."

Staying cool under pressure

One thing that needs to be learned but is not typically taught to become a successful referee is appropriately handling people and their emotions.

“Things can get heated during the game between players,” notes Joe. “Add to the mix coaches, parents and other spectators, and you can imagine the level of excitement and passion during these games.”

Caught up in any encounter is a referee who often has to make a difficult call on one of the team’s players for a foul. “It’s important to calm things down before they escalate,” explains Joe. “I do this by letting everyone know that I advocate for fair play and for the safety of all players. I acknowledge different points of view but remind them that the best possible outcome is for me to remain impartial. My overall goal on the field is that everyone enjoys the game.”

This approach to officiating games has translated successfully to Joe’s day job. “I find that I can’t be judgmental about a person’s attitude on some days because of what may be going on in that person’s life. I give them the benefit of the doubt and try my best to understand their point of view. As with soccer, I remain fair and advocate for differing points of view.”

For Joe, a successful game is as follows: “You leave the field knowing the game was decided by the players, not by the referee. That’s a good and satisfying feeling.”

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