

## OPINION

# Kiuchi: Abuse of officials in youth sports must stop

Yuya Kiuchi, guest writer    Published 5:30 a.m. ET Feb. 21, 2019



Yuya Kiuchi (Photo 11: Courtesy photo)

Our favorite team loses because of a missed call. A questionable decision costs our favorite player a match. If you play a sport, you have been there, too. If you are a parent of an athletic child, you know how that experience feels. Of course, in reality, missed shots or critical mistakes by players cost the game far more than just a controversial call. But a call can also affect the outcome of a contest.

A lot is at stake. At a higher level of competition, it may be one's career, or a multi-million dollar contract. At the youth level, it may be a possible Division I college scholarship. Or maybe it is just bragging rights. When you feel that an official got in the way of your or your team's victory, it is natural that you have an emotional reaction. Sometimes it escalates to an official being abused or assaulted.

We cannot let this happen.

About five years ago, a player killed a referee during an adult men's recreational soccer game in Michigan. The story touched many people involved in various sports. But officials continue to be assaulted or abused. They are taunted by coaches, players, and fans. They are chased to the parking lot. It is not a coincidence referees back their car into a parking spot before a game. Many grassroots officials are in their teens or younger. It is a sad but common sight that multiple parents sitting in lawn chairs taunt, or even verbally abuse, a referee who is only a year or two older than their children.

These incidents are so frequent that various sport leagues and associations have launched efforts to stop referee assaults and abuses. But these efforts are overshadowed by such actions like the one by the Grand Rapids Drive, an NBA G League professional basketball team, that posted a sponsored ad on social media through a ticketing agency encouraging fans to "yell at some refs."

Official abuse and assault must stop not because they have a difficult job, they are doing the best they can, or athletes make far more mistakes than officials. While these are all true statements, abuse and assault must stop simply because it is wrong. Plain and simple. There is no place for the abuse or assault of any official, as well as any player, coach, staff, parent, and fan. There is no place for it anywhere, anytime, and toward anybody. This is not just about sports.

Officials will remain accountable for their performance. Professional sport organizations will continue to scrutinize and evaluate officials' performance. Their mistakes continue to be analyzed and shared so that they will not happen again. At a lower and more local level, coaching and mentoring of officials must be further encouraged and supported.

Fans can still talk about questionable calls. It is OK to pretend you could make a better call. It is OK to say a bad call was made, especially after you had a chance to see the play at three different speeds, including frame by frame, from five different angles, while sitting on your couch. It is an important part of fan experience.

But there is a line that one must not cross. Just think, how you would feel if someone yelled at you just like the way you yell at a referee? What if the official was your child, and not one of the players on the field? Just because someone is in a black-and-white stripe shirt does not justify abuse or assaults. Respect our officials.

*Yuya Kiuchi is an assistant professor at Michigan State University and a Class 1 National Referee registered through the Japan Football (Soccer) Association.*