



Quiet! Kids are playing

'Silent sidelines' at sports events are an idea whose time has come

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Silence is golden on the sidelines.

Now that my kids are playing organized soccer, it has become necessary to be a good sports parent. I've decided this means shutting up on the sidelines -- no shouting instructions of any sort.

The first time I heard of this concept was about 10 years ago when I was training with Olympic rowing coach Al Morrow.

It was one of the many life lessons he liked to lecture us on, and, at the time, it probably went in one ear and out the other for me. A father of four active kids, Morrow keeps quiet when watching their sports.

"I'll often sit by myself and enjoy the game for what it is," Morrow said.

"A lot of parents will defend (their commentary) on a whole lot of levels. They'll say: 'The refing is bad, the coaching is bad, the coach should have intervened.' There are all kinds of rationales.

"As a coach, I know it doesn't help. It interferes with the flow of the game and the coach's role to be an instructor."

With his approach, Morrow was ahead of his time.

Now it seems "silent sidelines" is an idea whose time has come. Locally, both Haldimand Youth Soccer and the Barrie Soccer Club designated "quiet" weeks last month to encourage parents and spectators to shut their traps during games.

The goals of Haldimand's Silent Sidelines Week are to develop players to make decisions on the field without sideline intervention, improve the players' communication on the field by reducing the outside noise level, and to support youth referees by eliminating dissension from the sidelines. Basically, giving the game back to the kids.

"I thought it was very well received by the parents and spectators, and most importantly, the kids gave some positive feedback," said vice-president Dave Elgin, after the club's first such week, June 14-21.

The Barrie Soccer Club's quiet week was June 22 -26.

This is the club's fourth year running with the concept, and it gets a mixed reaction, according to club manager Rick Morandini.

Coaches of all house league teams from under-8 to under-14 boys and girls are asked to clam up for the week, along with parents and spectators.

"Some coaches like the idea, other coaches struggle with it because they feel like they have to keep giving instruction," Morandini said.

"It's not so much about negativity that comes from people, it's more about the mixed bag of information that the kids get.

"There's a coach on one side saying several things and people on the other side saying different things, so we use this to bring attention to that."

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At first, the quiet on the field is a little eerie. The kids aren't used to playing in silence. Within a few minutes, though, they start making tactical calls to each other -- actual useful stuff beyond the "Kick it! Kick it! Kick it!" they often hear from parents.

The Barrie Soccer Club even scored a local sponsor, Lowe's, and named it the "Shhhhhh! The Kids Are Playing" week. There were "Shhh!" stickers for those on the sidelines to wear.

Yes, it can be tough to say nothing, but the approach truly works.

Consider the time Morrow remembers trying to encourage his son Gregory, then eight.

The kid was playing a soccer game and seemed to have no energy after a sleepover the night before, plus it was hot, so he was pooped.

"He ran right by me and I said: 'Gregory, run!' and it was about the only thing I said the whole game," Morrow recalled. "I just wanted to spur him on.

"In the car on the ride home he said: 'You know what papa, it really doesn't help me when you tell me to run.' And that was a good lesson I learned that day."

Kids like silent sidelines. It's something all teams and parents should try.

If only we could see this happen in hockey.