

# THE THIRD TEAM ON THE FIELD

by Roberto Alvarez

12.August.2000

"Why am I doing this?", I think to myself, as yet another boorish, loud parent flings abuse at me from the sidelines. The scene is one of several youth tournaments I've worked this summer. I'm tired, hot, somewhat angry, and 58 minutes into a girls' U15 semi-final. It's my fourth match of the day, my feet hurt, and I can feel the sun turning my forehead a nice crispy shade of red. The Blue team is setting up for a corner kick and giving everyone a moment to yell at the ref.

Yes, I confess that I am that dreaded foe of all players, coaches and fans: a referee. Although at the moment, I cannot remember why I ever wanted to become a referee. For the past 58 minutes, the Red team's coach (who shall remain nameless, as he is also an A-League player) has questioned every call I make and every one I don't make. The team parents, naturally, pick up where he leaves off. And the Red players also take every opportunity to express their opinion. The Blue team, so as not to be left out, also pitches in now and then, just to make sure I "call it both ways".

Not that I'm doing a bad job. At halftime, the Referee Assessor who is observing the match told me and my crew that we were doing a very good job. He complemented me on several good applications of advantage and praised how our crew had handled a couple of fouls away from the ball. But now, as Blue takes the corner kick and the ball rattles around the penalty area, all that positive feedback is lost in a sea of whining, yelling, and general nastiness.

You see, I just made a call that will change the outcome of the game. To the untrained eye, namely the players, coaches and team supporters, it looks like I have made a horrendous blunder. I'm standing on the far side of the penalty area, near the 18 yard line, blowing my whistle and pointing to the center circle. As the Blue team slowly realizes that I've awarded them a goal, the Red sideline erupts in absolute hatred. How can the referee justify stopping the action in mid-play and ruling that Blue scored a goal, when the Red keeper obviously swatted the ball away? And look where he's standing! He can't call it from there! What a travesty! What an idiot! Who is this beast!?!?

This "beast" is a member of the third team on the field. One of the elite team of three people who are sworn to uphold the laws of the game. And in this case, we've just earned our pay; hours of training have resulted in making the right call. For it was not me who made that ruling, it was one of my Assistant Referees. She made that decision in a split second, without the benefit of video replay, because she was in the right place, at the right time, looking for the right thing. From the corner kick, a Blue forward had headed the ball sharply toward the near post and Red's goalkeeper managed to swat it away in mid-air, but not before it completely crossed the goal line. My Assistant Referee was perfectly positioned to see the keeper's hand reach back into the goal to stop the ball. She raised her flag, caught my eye, and ran toward the half line. That was all I needed to call it a goal.

But at this point, as I jog back to the center circle, only three people have paid attention to her actions: me, the other Assistant Referee, and the Referee Assessor. Everyone else is either celebrating the goal or commenting loudly about my questionable ancestry and lack of visual acuity.

It is at this moment, in the middle of all this turmoil, that I find the answer to my question, "Why do I do this?". As I flash a big smile and a subtle "thumbs up" signal to my Assistant Referee, I remember the four points of view\* from which a game is seen:

1. A player sees what he feels,
2. A coach sees what he wants to see,
3. The fans see what they think they see,
4. And only the referee sees what he sees.

(\*thanks to Victor Matheson, USSF National Referee)

The answer, of course, is that I do this "for the love of the game and the satisfaction of knowing WE made the right calls". I bask in the glory of that right call for a second, take a deep breath, and turn to face the angry masses for another 22 minutes.

Yes, everyone else may consider us "Three Blind Mice", but we are proud to be members of the third team on the field. We are the only ones there who are sworn to uphold the laws of the game. Others may consider us blind or deaf, but bottom line, "we sees what we sees" and uphold the laws as best we can. And every now and then, little moments like this one pop up to remind us just how much satisfaction we get from this gig.

The end.