

## Opinion

### Treat them like players – not girls

**By Rick Burns**

It's become increasingly clear that the soccer world treats the genders differently. That observation comes from the perspective of six years as a college men's coach and 11 years as a college women's coach. I've also officiated both genders at the high school and college levels for 10 years.

Referees and coaches apply different standards to the physical aspect of the women's game, especially at the high school level. What is a foul in a women's match is often not a foul in a men's contest. Referees, with at least the covert approval of coaches as well as pressure from fans, are sucking the nectar from the women's game with too many whistles for phantom fouls. If there is a collision, a girl is bumped off the ball or someone lands on the pitch, the mindset is that something has to be done. What is done is usually an obtuse foul call and a demand to take it easy. Referees are not messengers sent from God to control the show, rather they should allow the game to develop a fluid tempo. Referees need to overcome handicapping female players with dainty, fluffy treatment. Those young women chose to play.

We male referees and coaches want the women to be protected because we are taught by society to believe that females are more fragile than males.

Referees end up treating the young women like little girls rather than soccer players. The fans, often parents, are even worse. When refereeing, I receive a steady shower of abuse for allowing the game to have the continuity it needs and deserves.

Referees must turn against the tide of the times and cease strip mining the young women of their right to vigorous play and the physical challenges that are allowed by the Laws of the Game. Women, like men, need to be taught the importance and appropriateness of the physical aspect of soccer. There are plenty of differences between young women and young men in speed, strength, emotion and ego, but the physical aspect of playing the game is not one of them.

As a college coach, after skill and vision, I look for tough, hard women who will not veer away from physical challenges and love to play with an intense, seize-the-day mentality. I challenge my players to play without expecting every little bump to be called.

While refereeing a high school match, I enjoyed a wonderful crowning moment. The star central midfielders of the two powerhouse rivals rose to challenge for a flighted ball in midfield. They flew heavily into each other and both crashed to the turf as the ball squirted forward. The crowd was momentarily hushed before the usual inane comments spurted forth: "Get control of the game before someone gets hurt," and, "Open your eyes. You're missing a good game, ref."

One of the girls lay prone and one girl rose slowly. I held my palms up to the coaches to indicate they should stay off the pitch as I let play go on. The girl who got up clenched her lower lip under her front teeth, warily jogged a few steps and then, realizing she was unbroken, raced toward the ball. The second girl slowly got to her feet, stretched her shoulder like a tennis player serving and then, humming with energy after her brief, grounded respite, chased after the play as well. They were OK. They lived. They challenged fairly and powerfully, went down, got up and

carried on. They were warrior's - passionate, physical warriors. About 10 of their teammates, their coaches and several fans shouted condescendingly, "Are you OK Becky? Are you all right, Kristin?" They were. They were at least as resilient as male players.

I enjoyed letting that defining moment of clarity occur for all to see. The spirit of the game had superseded unwarranted caution. The knuckles of fair, hard play had rapped them on the head and they had survived with aplomb.

I believe referees must pursue with patience and persistence a new path that allows for the enhanced physical aspect of play in the women's game. Protecting females with incessant calls not only is at odds with the Laws of the Game, but detracts from the flow and tempo of the game and hurts them in the end by detracting from competing with wonderful, satisfying abandon. Timidity on the field limits the confidence of the young women in life. If referees stop indulging the girls on the field, stop asking less of them, the game will free them to develop wholly as athletes and people. Only then will the young women, like their male counterparts, be able to draw the best from themselves.

(Rick Burns is from Springfield, Mo. He is the women's soccer coach at Drury College and refereed soccer for 10 years)