

Sports parents are horrible and referees are finally doing something about it – quitting

By [Petula Dvorak](#)

Columnist

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They've been sucker-punched, stalked and threatened. On weekends, mobs of adults shriek and bellow at them, questioning their eyesight, intelligence and humanity.

One veteran described “a cauldron of yelling and hysteria.” For all the abuse, referees working D.C.-area youth sports net about \$50 a game, job listings show. No wonder they're fleeing.

Nearly half of the referees who officiate in my son's hockey league are gone and games are being canceled every weekend. His team has been able to play just two of this season's five scheduled games so far. This is happening across the nation in all youth sports. The Friday night lights of high school football games are now [Thursdays and Saturdays](#), too – to spread the refs out. Instead of the usual three refs on a soccer pitch, some [leagues](#) are making do with two, or even one.

Much like bus drivers, baristas and servers – the folks who earn chicken-scratch pay in jobs that include a mountain of abuse – refs have had [coronavirus](#) time away from the chaos and realize they're done with it.

That's because parents and coaches in the wacko worlds of youth hockey, basketball, soccer and football can be world-class jerks.

Need some examples?

Just two weeks ago, a Pennsylvania [football mom](#) drove her Mercedes SUV onto the field and into a crowd after refs ended the youth game over fighting. That same weekend on the West Coast, a [California dad](#) stormed onto the field and sacked a soccer referee.

In my son's region, “we've racked up more than a dozen reports of players, parents and coaches thrown out of rinks for their unprofessional conduct toward officials in the first two weeks of this season,” Linda Jondo, head of the Potomac Valley Amateur Hockey Association, wrote in an [October letter](#). “We have received reports of parents chasing after officials to berate them off the ice and in the parking lot. Reports have been received of adult coaches and parents verbally abusing MINOR-AGED officials.”

Yes, adults are piling on the kids – the young refs who were just like their own kids, on the ice or the field a few years

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“So many parents are volunteer coaches,” said Ian Plenderleith, who officiated youth soccer games in the D.C. region for 15 years. “And they seem to think this role involves jumping up and down and screaming.”

The letter we got right before our son’s first hockey practice was a red flag that parents are getting even worse.

“Many young officials put their stripes on for the first time, excited and eager to pursue a hockey dream,” a letter sent to all the parents under the USA Hockey association said. “But the dream, too many times, is met with yelling or arguing from adults at rinks.”

Right after that, we had three games in a row canceled. No refs.

I’ve been hockey-parenting for almost a decade and it’s the first time we’ve so palpably felt the referee shortage, even though it’s been ongoing.

Some of that is because of the pandemic.

Remember, most refs are older. The ones I talked to were over 60. And not all of them are anxious to get back out there and risk a covid-19 case. And also, the months of lockdown that may have realigned our priorities away from office conflicts and toxic relationships crystallized how noxious youth sports have become for those pincushion refs.

“All of a sudden, [referees] are home with their families on Sundays and relaxing and realizing they don’t have to take it anymore,” said Mark Stoessel, the ref who finally broke our dry spell and officiated at my son’s game on Sunday. “And they’re not coming back.”

On a grander scale, the refs’ decisions to leave the games they love have joined a nationwide declaration of self-worth.

Like the folks in the service industry — the people who endure beratings from Karens who didn’t like the cook on their meat and the impatience of the oat-milk-trippio-low-foam-latte crowd — is still short at least 1.3 million workers deep into the holiday season, according to the [Labor Department](#).

When restaurants shut down and those folks had a chance to comprehend the daily level of abuse they endure, many of them decided not to return, reclaiming their power.

As autumn and winter sports seasons begin their post-pandemic ramp-up, most youth sports associations are reporting that nearly half of their refs are deciding to stick with the sweet sound of silence they’ve rediscovered.

Plenderleith, who writes a [blog](#) and tweets about ref abuse as a form of therapy, saw this exodus coming.

He wrote a [letter to the editor](#) in The Washington Post in 2010 about the increasing ugliness that described “hostile and hysterical coaches who, usually backed by shrieking choirs of parents who have lost all sense of sporting proportion, are far too emotionally involved to objectively critique performances.”

He’s not alone in digital therapy.

Offside is a Facebook page “Where Referees rule & parents are delusional, unsportsmanlike and reckless. You yell at us there, we make fun of you here!”

Why have things escalated?

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that fewer kids are participating in sports, and it's the adults' fault. "All that matters is if kids come from a family that has resources. If you don't have money, it's hard to play."

Club, travel and elite teams have eclipsed the days when rec leagues and school teams were the norm. As parents inject their own ambitions — and in most cases thousands of dollars into their children's careers, they're all in. And they show it. The elite youth hockey program affiliated with the Washington Capitals — the Little Caps — can cost \$20,000 a year. Of course dad's gonna wig out on a penalty call when he's half a Land Rover into his kid's season.

And second, there's a societal shift (I'll just go ahead and say it: The Trump effect) where outrage and defiance are a proxy for cheerleading and there is no shame.

When a coach peacocks for the stands by challenging a ref on every call, that coach sets the tone for fans and parents.

I talked to the two refs who officiated at my son's game to ask them for their parent horror stories. They said coaches are the bigger problem. The local referee association sent letters to coaches, warning them there would be no referees — and therefore no games — if the level of disrespect and abuse continued.

"Since that letter? I haven't heard a peep from the coaches," said the ref who asked me not to use his name. (I don't blame him. I've been right there with some of those parents.) "It's been real nice."

Plenderleith's family has since moved to Germany, where he regularly hands out five or six yellow cards every game and has begun to remember screaming Beltway parents fondly. His childhood in England is the only time he can remember parents who respected referees and playing the game was fun.

"Referees make mistakes, but without them there'd be no game," he said in his letter to the editor. "Take away the obstreperous coaches and parents, though, and the kids could still play. They might even be able to enjoy it."

By [Petula Dvorak](#)

Petula is a columnist for The Post's local team who writes about homeless shelters, gun control, high heels, high school choirs, the politics of parenting, jails, abortion clinics, mayors, modern families, strip clubs and gas prices, among other things. Before coming to The Post, she covered social issues, crime and courts. [Twitter](#)



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