

Secret GAA Coach: Why parents need to stop shouting from the sidelines at referees and their kids

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If you've spent enough time on the sidelines, as a coach, spectator or parent, you will know that sport regularly brings out the best – and worst – in its participants.

The perfect storm of ego, ambition, immaturity and raw emotion consumes an ever-increasing cohort of mentors and parents the length and breadth of the country every weekend.

Given the regularity with which young and impressionable players get to witness some appalling behaviour from their supposed role models, why would they be expected to behave any differently themselves?

Historically, referees have borne the brunt of the onlookers' ire but they are far from the only target for Mr and/or Mrs Angry.

While shouts of "Ah! Ref" are commonplace at every match, they are certainly on the milder end of the scale in terms of what referees,

players and mentors have to endure.

It's no secret that people get emotional at games. There are plenty of yarns about the fellow who took it all a bit too seriously. Most of which are recalled, from a safe remove, with cartoonish glee.

What I'm talking about is more sinister in nature and unlikely to find its way into any future incarnation of D'Unbelievables.

Regrettably, we have a few such serial offenders in our club. The sort of people for whom reason and decorum are viewed in much the same way that a covid-denier would view a vaccine.

They take obvious pride in causing a match to be held up while a referee waits for their verbal abuser to vacate the sideline. Usually, the referee will request the perpetrator's name for inclusion in their subsequent report.

At one point, a fellow club member was having his name taken with such regularity that he resorted to giving the referee a false name.

In his wisdom, the name he used was that of a highly respected club stalwart whose blemish-free disciplinary record was now being called into question.

Fortunately, the investigation that followed quickly established the facts and resulted in a three-month suspension for our friend.

Which isn't to suggest that he learned his lesson. If anything, what emerged after the three-month hiatus was a re-energised vessel of bile and belligerence.

Worse still, his wife was now in tow, echoing his unrequited anger

towards the GAA community at every opportunity. Worryingly, this new scattergun approach to issuing abuse now brought their own children into scope.

Talented as they might have been, they did not respond well to criticism. Or to ridicule. Sadly, they were exposed to both in equal measure when their parents were on the line (which was more often than not).

A number of diplomatic approaches were made to the parents but to little avail.

A behind-the-scenes discussion around possible ways to offset the impact of the parents' behaviour was similarly fruitless.

As coach to one of the boys, I was acutely aware of what was going on and how it was affecting the child. Efforts to praise and encourage him would only work until the parents piped up.

I would switch the player to the wing opposite his parents in order to minimize the exposure but this wasn't a realistic long-term solution.

On a good day, the player could be a match-winner but negative external influences and his own insecurities meant that he struggled under the slightest pressure.

It was for situations exactly like this that the GAA has become one of the latest sporting organisations to introduce the Silent Sideline initiative.

Basically, this allows one designated mentor to coach players during breaks in play.

It removes the hysteria that surrounds so much of underage sport and allows children to develop at their own pace without the input or influence of the helicopter parent.

It allows children to make mistakes, to learn from them and to work things out for themselves.

In much the same way that Christy Ring or Jimmy Doyle honed their genius in the days before structured coaching and omnipresent parenting, it offers children the opportunity to play the game for the sheer, old-fashioned fun of it.

Of course, the Silent Sideline cannot legislate for the long drive home where the parent shares every mental note pertaining to the match with the child.

Of the little bit that registers with them in the car, how much of the parent's post-mortem will the child actually remember by the time they next set foot on a pitch?

As parents and coaches, all our efforts should be to provide them with the opportunity to play and enjoy sport with their friends.

By suggesting otherwise, you're wasting your breath.

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