

LARRY WARD - when he blows the whistle, we'd best pay attention

Published in the Cambridge Chronicle
June 30, 2011
Reprinted with permission.

Picture this: Your team is warming up at Danehy Park, Russell Field, or at some other fine playing surface in this soccer-crazed metropolis. Your opponents are warming up too, going through the usual passing and shooting drills. Everything seems fine, except there's no ref in sight. You glance at your watch and confer with your coaching staff. "Is it time?" one of you might ask, meaning is it time to call in the chief? The head ref? **Is it time, in other words, to call Larry Ward?**



Ward has been in charge of refereeing for Cambridge Youth Soccer for more than a decade. It's a demanding though strictly volunteer position with the challenges of the job inversely proportional to the (nonexistent) salary. Ward is responsible for recruiting and training refs and lining them up for each Saturday game. If somebody doesn't show—which seems to happen at least as often as a dog eats someone's homework—he needs to find a stand-in or, failing that, call the game himself.

Things can get heated out there in the gladiator stadiums we call soccer fields. On the one hand, you've got overzealous coaches who can't keep their mouths shut, despite strict orders to handle themselves with decorum. (I know this crowd all too well because I'm one of the worst offenders.) You've got hyped-up players who want to win at all costs, despite their post game chants to the contrary: "One, two, three, four, we don't care about the score..."

Then there are the agitated parents who not infrequently want to kill the refs due to some mistake that might eventually affect their child's athletic scholarship. Cambridge Youth Soccer has a "zero tolerance" policy, which basically means zero tolerance for idiots. No one can talk to the ref once the game starts or complain about a call. Ward is a big fan of this policy, which has kept casualties in local soccer to a minimum, though he knows from experience that it's not always enough to keep the hotheads in line. That's why he shows up at games whenever he can to maintain the peace, support his refs, and keep them from defecting.

In soccer, as in show business, Ward says, "The game must go on." But for him it's much more than that. The refereeing program is really a jobs training program for area youth. He takes kids, sometimes just 11 or 12 years old, and teaches them the rules of the game and how to think on their feet, instilling them with the confidence needed to assert their authority. For their efforts, they get \$16 and up per game. Ward knows he's successful when his protégés stay at the job for five or more years, later asking him for letters of recommendation for college and jobs.

"It's a strong leadership position," he says, "and many kids come to realize that this has been a really important experience."

Surprisingly, one of the biggest problems he faces is getting parents not to give their kids an allowance so they'll stay motivated for refereeing. "I'm not an allowance kind of guy," Ward says. "All three of my daughter's reffed. They had to because I told them that if you want money, you have to work."

When I caught up with Ward at Hoyt Field on a recent Saturday, the soccer season had just ended and he'd already moved on to new things. The Hoops and Health annual basketball tournament was underway, and Ward and his friends were passing out orange slices to the players. Owing to his citrus connections and winning personality,



Ward seemed to be the most popular guy at the entire event—somebody whom everyone wanted a piece of. The next day, Ward was going to dispense orange slices to players at a flag football league in East Cambridge, which he considers "a way for me to stay connected to our city's young adults."

That's just the start of his activities. He served on the City Council in 2009 and plans to make another run this fall.



Larry is a Massachusetts-licensed guidance counselor and serves as a substitute teacher in the Cambridge School system. (My daughter, in whose class Ward recently taught, was astonished to learn that you can actually like your sub. That revelation gave her hope that maybe unicorns exist, pigs can fly, and Santa Claus is not a Hallmark invention.)

On a volunteer basis, Ward and his friends recycle ink cartridges from schools and community centers, using the proceeds (more than \$4,000 earned in the last six months) to purchase classroom supplies, (see related story on back).



While Ward keeps busy with his myriad pursuits, I'll be sitting here on my hindside, watching summer slip by as it invariably does. And before long, I'll find myself back on a soccer field, trying to rally the troops. A time will come, no doubt, when I'll be glancing at my watch, wondering if the ref will show up and whether it's time – **time to call Larry Ward.**

Steve Nadis is a soccer coach and poster child for the league's "zero tolerance" policy.

**Copyright 2011 Cambridge Chronicle.
Some rights reserved.**

DISCLAIMER: This article should not be construed as an endorsement of Larry Ward by either the Cambridge Chronicle or Steve Nadis.