Effective March 2025

REFEREE ABUSE PREVENTION

PENALTY SUMMARY

POLICY 531-9 / YOUTH & AMATEUR SOCCER

RESPECT THE CALL

RESPECT THE CALL

PROTECTING OUR REFEREES

With referee abuse on the rise for youth and amateur matches, it's time to take a stand.

Referees are essential to soccer, but far too often risk their emotional and physical well-being in service to the game.

Win, lose, or draw, we're in this together.

When you take your anger out on the referee, everybody loses, and the call on the field still stands.

Referee abuse is damaging for everyone involved – and for the future of soccer.

Thank you for doing your part.

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PENALTY OVERVIEW

The Penalties Matrix defines consequences associated with physical and non-physical offenses against Referees.

NON-PHYSICAL OFFENSES of gross misconduct, abuse, and / or assault

NON-PHYSICAL*	MIN. GAMES	TIME
Insulting, Belittling, Insinuating or Taunting Behavior Undermining Referee Authority	2	
Harassment, Intimidation, Retaliation, Abusive, or Threatening (Non Physical) Language	4	
Aggression, Attacking, Derogatory, Cyberbullying, Doxing or Threatening (Physical / Violence) Language	6	6 - 24 Months
Offensive or Discriminatory Act	10	12 - 24 Months

PHYSICAL OFFENSES of gross misconduct, abuse, and / or assault

PHYSICAL*	MIN. GAMES	TIME
Minor or Slight Deliberate Touching	3	1 - 6 Months
Pushing, Grabbing, Pulling, Squeezing, Pinching, Lightly Slapping, Use of Object in Non Striking Manner, or Physical Property Damage	10	6 - 24 Months
Hitting, Punching, Elbowing, Kicking, Biting, Spiting, Choking, Tackling, Throwing or Use of Object or Any Part of Body (Forearm, Knee, Head) in a Striking Manner		12 Months - Lifetime

(*) Disclaimer: *These are only a few examples of abuse – other actions or statements may also fall into this category.*

KEY PENALTY FACTORS

- Single offenses are at **minimum the prescribed game penalty or time penalty** for non red zone offenses
- Penalties can be **both game and time depending on severity** / circumstances
- Second time offenders receive **double punishment**
- Third time offenders receive a **lifetime ban**
- More than one offense at the same time is **at least the punishment for the most serious offense**
- Offenses against minors are automatically subject to **a "minor multiplier" resulting in triple punishment**
- **One offense warning per league** to be managed by states and leagues collaboratively
- Game consequences are **inclusive of 1 game penalty for any red cards given**
- Optionality for **50% penalty for first offense from a minor**

Please follow your current reporting structure – updated reporting procedure will be a part of Phase 3.

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HOW TO PREPARE FOR MARCH 2025

Here are steps you can take to make sure you're ready and know what to expect when the updated policy takes effect in March 2025:

1. CAREFULLY READ THIS PENALTY OVERVIEW

By the end of this guide, you will fully understand the updated policy and the consequences for abuse.

2. VISIT USSOCCER.COM/RAP FOR MORE POLICY DETAILS AND UPDATES

Additional information about the policy is available on our website – and we'll be continuing to share more information.

3. SHARE POLICY INFORMATION WITH YOUR U.S. SOCCER COMMUNITY

Support our referees by sharing policy information with your players, coaches, teams, and leagues. We need your help to raise awareness!

4. ONCE THE POLICY TAKES EFFECT, DO YOUR PART BY REPORTING REFEREE ABUSE

The penalty framework in the new policy only takes effect after abuse is reported. Do your part to protect referees by reporting abuse and encouraging your community to do the same. U.S. Soccer will be providing updated reporting procedure – but for now please follow your current reporting structure.

Thank you for your support!

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NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE

Contact doesn't have to be made for damage to occur. Non-physical abuse – hurtful language and aggressive behavior – has no place in our game. It disrupts matches, interferes with the referee's ability to do their job, and it hurts the game for everyone. Left unchecked, non-physical abuse takes an emotional toll and has the potential to escalate into physically dangerous situations. The updated policy is designed to eliminate this behavior.

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NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 1: VERBAL TAUNTING

Speech or gestures intended to belittle the referee, damage their credibility, and undermine their ability to effectively officiate the game.

DEFINITION

Insulting, Belittling, Insinuating or Taunting Behavior Undermining Referee Authority.

EXAMPLES

- **Questioning Competence:**
  "Do you even know the rules?"
- **Mocking Appearance or Abilities:**
  "Did you forget your glasses?"
- **Accusations of Bias:**
  "What's the other team paying you?"
- **Dismissive Language:**
  "You suck."
- **Aggressive Tone:**
  "You're the worst ref we've ever had."

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

If you have concerns about a call, respectfully ask the referee for clarification. Share your perspective calmly, avoiding yelling, insults, or offensive gestures.

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NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 2: HARASSMENT/INTIMIDATION

Occurs when language or body language is intended to make a referee feel unsafe but where the threat of violence remains unspoken.

DEFINITION

Harassment, Intimidation, Retaliation, Abusive or Threatening (Non-Physical) Language.

EXAMPLES

- **Using Expletives:**
  *"That call was complete $H*t!"*
- **Personal Attacks:**
  "You're a F-ing joke!"
- **Escalating Intensity:**
  *"You can't make a single good f****** call!"*
- **Getting In The Referee's Face.**

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Take a moment to gather yourself before you speak to the referee. Ask for clarification calmly, aiming for constructive communication rather than causing conflict.

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NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 3: THREATS/DEROGATORY LANGUAGE

When aggressive language or threats of violence enter the mix – or when abuse spills online.

DEFINITION

Aggression, Attacking, Derogatory, Cyberbullying, Doxing, or Threatening (Physical / Violence) Language.

EXAMPLES

- **Threatening To Inflict Harm On A Referee:**
  - *"You're gonna pay for that!"*
  - *"I'll see you in the parking lot"*
  - *"I'm going to shove that card down your throat!"*
  - *"You better watch your back!"*
- **Public Attacks Online** such as uploading a post to social media attacking the referee.

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

When you feel frustrated by a referee's call, take a moment to pause and breathe. Reflect on how your reaction impacts your experience and the overall atmosphere of the game for everyone involved.

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NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 4: OFFENSIVE OR DISCRIMINATORY ACT

U.S. Soccer is inclusive of everyone. Discrimination – attacking referees for who they are, or offending their dignity – will not be tolerated.

DEFINITION

Discriminatory or derogatory words or actions on account of race, skin color, ethnicity, nationality, social origin, gender, disability, sexual orientation, language, or religion.

EXAMPLES

- **Racial or ethnic slurs.**
- **Offensive gestures.**
- **Homophobic language.**
- **Using harmful or sexist stereotypes.**

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Remember that soccer is for everyone. We're all human, and everybody deserves the opportunity to enjoy the game without being made to feel bad about who they are.

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PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical abuse makes the game unsafe for everyone. It's also easy to avoid. Outside of friendly handshakes, there's never a reason to touch the referee. Any unwanted physical contact is considered physical abuse. Physical violence can also result in criminal charges, lawsuits, or medical liability.

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PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 1: MINOR OR SLIGHT TOUCHING

Even minor deliberate touches can be unwanted and make referees feel unsafe and are considered physical abuse.

DEFINITION

Minor or Slight Deliberate Touching.

EXAMPLES

- **Tapping the referee's shoulder to get their attention.**
- **Touching the referee's chest with your finger.**
- **Grabbing the referee's jersey to get their attention.**
- **Intentionally bumping lightly into the referee.**

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Respectfully get the referee's attention without touching them – and, even in the heat of the moment, make a conscious effort to keep your hands to yourself.

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PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 2: INTENTIONAL CONFRONTATION

Escalation of using contact to intimidate or provoke a physical confrontation – or causing damage to property – without the intent to cause bodily harm.

DEFINITION

Pushing, Grabbing, Pulling, Squeezing, Pinching, Lightly Slapping, Use of Object in Non-Striking Manner, or Physical Property Damage

EXAMPLES

- **Shoving the referee.**
- **Forcefully grabbing the referee's arm.**
- **Throwing a water bottle at the ground in front of the referee.**
- **Dumping the referee's bag into a trashcan.**
- **Aggressively grabbing the referee's jersey.**
- **Following the referee to the parking lot or to their car.**

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Understand that this behavior not only won't change the outcome on the field, it will keep you out of the game for a long time. Channel that energy to drive better on-field performance. Remove yourself from the situation if you need to calm down.

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PHYSICAL ABUSE

LEVEL 3: VIOLENT CONTACT

Malicious, violent contact intended to cause bodily harm – this is considered assault and can result in criminal punishment, legal suits, and medical liability.

DEFINITION

Hitting, Punching, Elbowing, Kicking, Biting, Spitting, Choking, Tackling, Throwing or Use of Object or Any Part of Body (Forearm, Knee, Head) in a Striking Manner

EXAMPLES

- **Kicking the referee's shin.**
- **Throwing a punch at the referee.**
- **Placing hands on the neck to choke the referee.**
- **Throwing a water bottle with intent to hit the referee.**
- **Intentionally kicking the ball at the referee.**

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Before physical abuse ever escalates to this level, there are plenty of opportunities to choose another course of action. Remove yourself from the situation and give yourself time for your anger to defuse before doing something with serious long-term consequences.

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REPORTING ABUSE

We understand the vast majority of players, coaches, and spectators already do the right thing. A small minority hurts the game for the rest of us – but it's up to all of us to uphold the integrity of the game. **With the updated policy, players, coaches, and spectators are encouraged to report abuse. The penalty framework only take effect if abuse is reported. We're asking you to do your part to support referees by reporting any instance of referee abuse.**

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GUIDELINES

- **Understand what does and doesn't constitute abuse – as well as the definitions for the different categories of abuse.**
- **Submit written reports of the abuse within 48 hours of the incident if possible. Include the following:**
  - Match details, including team information, age group, score, and date.
  - Detailed description of the incident and the behavior that constitutes abuse.
  - Unedited audio or video clips if available.
- **We will be providing details on the appropriate designee to submit reports to, as well as more in-depth procedure for reporting abuse as part of Phase 3 of the policy update. For now follow your current reporting structure.**
- **The Competition Authority will review all documents and submit the following to the Member Organization:**
  - All documents, exhibits, and other evidence in the case.
  - Copies of all rules, procedures, and bylaws used to support the charges and conduct the hearing.
  - The notice of charges and/or hearing provided the defendant/appellant.
  - The decision of the hearing body and any appeals decisions.
- **Athletes reported for abuse will have an opportunity to appeal.**

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