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TAMING LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS ...

Biking to the 'Big Time'

By Jason Reed

I rode my 10-speed to the officials' meeting room at the local bank. As I walked in the door, there was a little sweat trickling down my forehead. It wasn't from the bike ride. I was nervous. I looked around the room and saw "them" — the men who had refereed my games every Saturday for the past three years. One turned toward me and asked, "You the junior?" "Uh, yes sir," I replied.

The room was filled with dads who could stand to lose a few around the middle. Some were a little hard to recognize at first. After all, before that night I had only seen them in their black uniforms.

It was August 1978 and the first year of the AYSO Junior Referee Program. I was the first — actually the only — junior referee in Region 159 (Los Alamitos/Seal Beach, Calif.) that season and one of the first in the program nationally. As I stepped into that first class I had no idea where it would lead.

I was 13, and soccer had only been in my beach community for three seasons. I didn't realize it at the time,

but I would later find out I had a distinct advantage over those fathers in their 30s and 40s; I had played the game.

Most of those volunteers did so because their kids were just starting to play and the league harassed the parents to give up some weekend time.

I distinctly remember my first game with a whistle. I don't know why I was so nervous; it was only K-League, which, to put it simply, is a swarm of five- and six-year-olds around a ball with a goalie at each end. All I really had to do was pick a team to throw the ball in when it went out of bounds and grab the ball out of the net on the rare occasion someone scored.

A few weeks into the season, I was riding my bike home from a game when the moment that changed everything arrived. As I passed by one of the fields, a parent flagged me down.

"Our game should have started five minutes ago and there is no referee. Can you help?" I looked across the field and realized that these were not K-Leaguers; this was *real* soccer: seven- and eight-year-olds! "You bet," I said as I nervously fumbled around, trying to lock my bike to the fence.

The butterflies in my stomach finally settled down early in the third quarter. After the game, a father came walking up to me. He was probably all of five-feet-seven-inches, but he seemed like Goliath at the time.

"Could you please tell me why you called that penalty kick during the second half?" I explained the rule. He thanked me and walked away without stomping all over me! Later that night I received a phone call from the chief of referees.

"I understand you reffed an upper-division game today."

"Uh, yes sir," I mumbled, wondering what I did wrong. I pictured my refereeing "career" ending after only a few glorious weeks.

"I just got a call from one of the coaches, and he said you did a great job. Would you like to start reffing at that level all the time?" he asked.

Now I was in the big time! Things went pretty smooth the rest of that first year. By season's end I had issued my first red card and told a coach to shut his mouth.

By age 15 I was helping to lead the referee classes, and at age 16 I became the youngest Section Referee in Southern California, maybe in the nation; no one was really sure. Ultimately, I spent a few years officiating at the high school level before hanging up my whistle, but never had any desire to move on from there.

I recently purchased a new rulebook and started looking at the latest in soccer officials "fashion." My daughter will be five in August. She'll soon be playing soccer — and you know how soccer leagues harass the parents to give up some weekend time!

Jason Reed officiated AYSO soccer for nine years and high school soccer for six years in Southern California. □



"This was *real* soccer: seven- and eight-year-olds!"



Do you have a personal officiating story to tell? Send your story or queries to lastcall@referee.com.