



Dissent: By Word and Action
2009 Referee Program Directives
February 2, 2009

What is Dissent?

The Laws of the Game (Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct) identifies “dissent by word or action” as one of the seven cautionable offenses. Although each referee must determine how to implement the Law based on the manner in which dissent is exhibited throughout a game and from game to game, the fundamentals of what is dissent and why dissent must be managed do not change. Dissent consists of language (both verbal and nonverbal) which disputes an official’s decision. Dissent must be managed because it:

- Erodes the authority of the referee;
- Reduces the enjoyment of other participants and spectators; and
- Can spread if left unchecked.

It must also be remembered that dissent must be dealt with when it is directed at an assistant referee or fourth official.

FIFA’s 2008/2009 “Interpretation of the Laws of the Game and Guidelines for Referees” (Interpretations) provides that “A player who is guilty of dissent . . . must be cautioned. The captain of a team has no special status or privileges under the Laws of the Game but he has a degree of responsibility for the behavior of his team.”

Law 12 provides directly for a player to be sent off if the player is guilty of “using offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures.” Dissent and the use of offensive language are two different things, though they may occur together, and accordingly must be kept separate in deciding what action to take. This paper presumes that the player is not using offensive language while committing dissent. If offensive language is used, then the referee may send the player off based upon the context in which the language is used.

In deciding, among a range of options, which response will be most effective in managing a player who protests against a decision, the following criteria should be taken into account:

- **Public**
Are the player’s actions public in nature? How widely can the player’s language be heard and/or the gestures be seen? In general, stronger measures are needed as the message is spread wider. Consider the volume of the comments and who can hear the comments (other players, spectators, television).

- **Personal**

Is the protest aimed at an official or merely a generalized display of frustration without specific blame being placed on the referee? Are the comments a reasonable emotional reaction or are the comments directed at an official? Do gestures and body language make it clear that an official is being blamed? Is the player using the official's name or personal pronouns (e.g., "you" or "your") which focus on the official? In general, stronger measures are needed when dissent is personalized.

- **Provocative**

Are the comments or actions intended to incite further misconduct, make the dissent seem acceptable, or heighten the tension level? Are the comments likely to spark anger among others and potentially provoke further conflict on the field? Consider that racial, religious, ethnic or gender based comments, even if spoken in connection with dissent, must almost certainly be considered offensive language and require that the speaker be sent off. In general, stronger measures are needed when dissents only heightens tension and serves only to provoke others.

Overall, are the comments and actions disrespectful to "any referee" – not just to the referee to whom they were addressed? Officials must be aware of actions/comments that undermine the authority of the referee and must take the *appropriate action that corresponds to the actions of the player*. In short, the player's actions might be dissent in all cases but the referee must carefully gauge the most effective response in each specific case.

Forms of Dissent

It is not possible to catalog all the ways in which a player may display verbal or visual dissent but the following are some examples of actions which can be seen as disputing an official's (referee, assistant referee or fourth official) decision. They therefore require the referee's consideration and an effective response. The following forms of dissent are examples that can be exhibited toward any member of the referee team (referee, assistant referee or fourth official):

- Actions (verbal and visual) that bring the game into disrepute
- Actions that make the player's presence the focus of attention by injecting a negative temperament/attitude toward the referee
- Actions which convey aggressiveness toward the referee
- Mass confrontation around an official
- The use of words, tone, body language, facial expressions which demonstrate a negative, condescending attitude toward an official. The manner in which a player approaches the referee should be considered
- The extended nature and persistence of the player's actions make the player's intent even more obvious including persisting in displaying dissent after having been warned (see below – "The Stop Sign")

- Waving hands at an official, kicking balls away, charging toward an official, invading an official's body space, aggressively following an official around, physically moving toward an official, players having to be restrained from moving toward/at an official, players having to physically remove the player from the area around an official
- Strong and excessively loud comments, directed at an official, that can be heard by other players and spectators
- Gestures, non-offensive in nature, that are directed at an official and have been observed by spectators that show disgust over a decision or disrespect

Ask yourself: "Is this a quick emotional outburst or dissent?" If it is an "outburst," consider alternative methods of addressing the behavior. If it is dissent, then the referee must caution the player.

2009 Instructions to Referees: Taking Action

- **Common Sense Approach**

Referees must utilize common sense when deciding to caution players for dissent. The referee must make a determination given the game and the manner in which the dissent is delivered whether a yellow card is warranted or whether another method (like a severe verbal reprimand) of managing the situation will deliver positive results. The referee's response to dissent must be consistent with the potential impact of the dissent. Just as dissent can range from minor to moderate to serious based on the public, personal, and provocative guidelines discussed above, the response can range from ignoring a momentary emotional outburst (not directed at an official and not overly public), to talking to or warning the player, to engaging in public admonishment of the player, up to the actual cautioning of the player for dissent.

- **Early Action and Messages**

First and foremost, referees need to attempt to put a stop to dissent early in the match by positively addressing situations where dissent may arise or before a situation deteriorates where dissention is prevalent. Early recognition and early attempts to address protesting players will send a message that will hopefully resonate throughout the remainder of the game. Issuing yellow cards for dissent early in the match is not necessarily the answer as these early, unnecessary cards may handcuff the referee later. However, early action by the referee to impart presence and personality thereby communicating his tolerance level and dissatisfaction to the protesting player and other game participants can be very effective in "drawing the line" and setting the tone for allowable future player actions.

Although team captains are not exempt from Law 12's restriction on dissent, allowing a team captain (or similar team leader like the "Designated Player" described below) to respectfully present a contrary opinion may serve as a

useful outlet (keeping in mind the “public, personal, and provocative” guidelines). Such messages may provide useful “early warnings” for the referee to consider and may serve to keep a lid on further dissent by demonstrating the referee’s willingness to listen to player concerns.

Referees should attempt to send early messages regarding dissent and not ignore players and team personnel who protest. The objective is to do the least necessary to achieve the desired result. If the response is not successful, the firmness of the referee’s action must be escalated but there is no requirement to follow any specific steps. Remember, however, *referees are not required to initially warn players prior to cautioning* for dissent if the player’s actions are not manageable or if they immediately and blatantly bring the referee’s authority into question.

- **The “Stop Sign”**

Beginning in 2009, officials (referees, assistant referees and fourth officials) are encouraged to use the “**stop sign**” (arm extended out and palm facing the player) to indicate to a player that any further dissent (verbally or visually) may result in a caution. This is an immediate visual warning to be issued by the referee that can be seen by the players, team personnel, spectators, and press. The “stop sign” should be used by the referee to signify that the referee has “drawn the line in the sand” and further dissent by the player(s) may result in a caution being issued. Additionally, the “stop sign” is a signal intended to dissuade a player from approaching or making a run toward an official. When using the “stop sign,” the referee is indicating to the players that they should immediately cease their negative actions and/or protesting or be cautioned.



Note: The use of the “stop sign” does not preclude the referee from immediately cautioning a player (before the sign is used) depending upon the severity of the infringement or protest.

- **The “Designated Player” < MLS ONLY >**

Teams will be permitted to have a “designated player” who may be given the opportunity to talk to the referee in a responsible and professional manner. During the conversation with the “designated player,” all other players must remain at a distance or be dealt with according to the Laws of the Game. If the “designated player’s” actions are not professional and deemed to be dissent by the referee, the “designated player” will be cautioned. The referee may use the “designated player” to assist in defusing situations.

If the “designated player” is not the team captain he/she shall be indicated on the official line-up must specify (using “DP”) who the “designated player” is.

Designating a player other than the captain means the captain shall be treated as any other field player in terms of their rights to address the referee.

- **Offensive, Insulting or Abusive Language and/or Gestures**

Any player who uses offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures must be red carded if the player's actions exceed the boundaries of the "Personal, Public and Provocative" standards.

- **Physical Contact with an Official**

Any player who makes deliberate physical contact with an official in order to dispute a decision, must be sent off for violent conduct. The referee should not tolerate physical contact by a player (including a substitute, substituted player, or any other person under the authority of the referee) which:

- Involves force or aggression (grabbing, pushing, slapping, bumping, stepping on feet, and so forth)
- The official has sought to avoid by moving away and by making a gesture which clearly indicates any further approach is unwelcome (continued pursuit by a player, if performed in a threatening manner, is included here even if physical contact does not result)
- Is initiated from an unexpected direction and unaccompanied by any warning
- Is delivered in a context which clearly includes disapproval, lack of friendliness, or anger
- Restrains or prevents an official from withdrawing from the contact (e.g., by blocking retreat or holding)