

MIDWEST SUPER LEAGUE

Sideline Behavior & Game Day Expectations

A Guide for Parents, Families & Spectators

Creating a safe, fun, and respectful game day for everyone.

For distribution to all member club families

2026-27 Season

Section 1: Our Game Day Philosophy

1.1 Why This Document Exists

Youth soccer is at its best when players feel free to compete, make mistakes, learn, and enjoy the game. The sideline environment has a direct impact on whether kids have a positive experience or dread game day.

This guide exists to set clear expectations for everyone on the sideline so that MSL matches are a place where players thrive, coaches can coach, referees can officiate, and families can enjoy watching their kids play.

1.2 The MSL Standard

At every MSL match, we expect the sideline environment to reflect these values:

- Respect for players on BOTH teams
- Respect for coaches, referees, and opposing families
- Encouragement over criticism
- Letting the coach coach and the referee officiate
- Modeling the behavior we want our kids to develop

1.3 Remember Why We're Here

These are kids playing a game they love. The vast majority of youth soccer players will not play professionally. What they will carry with them forever is how the game made them feel. Every adult on the sideline has the power to make that experience positive or negative.

If your child's memory of game day is your voice from the sideline, something has gone wrong.

Section 2: What We Expect from Parents & Spectators

2.1 Before the Match

- Arrive on time and set up on the spectator side of the field
- Stay off the team side (behind the coaching area)
- Ensure younger siblings are supervised and not on the field
- Put away any distracting noisemakers or air horns
- Review these expectations if it's been a while

2.2 During the Match

DO:

- Cheer for good play by BOTH teams
- Encourage effort, not just results
- Applaud when your child or any player does something positive
- Stay seated or in your area (not following play up the sideline)
- Let the coach give tactical instruction
- Trust the referee's decisions, even when you disagree

DO NOT:

- Yell instructions to players (that's the coach's job)
- Criticize your child or any other player
- Challenge referee decisions verbally or with gestures
- Make negative comments about the opposing team or families
- Enter the field of play for any reason
- Confront coaches, referees, or other parents during the match

2.3 After the Match

- Applaud both teams regardless of the result
- Give your child space - let them come to you
- Avoid the post-game critique in the car ride home
- If you have concerns, contact the coach privately later (not on game day)
- Model good sportsmanship in how you discuss the match

Section 3: The Car Ride Home

3.1 The Most Important 10 Minutes

Research consistently shows that the car ride home is the moment that shapes how kids feel about their sport. What you say (or don't say) in those 10 minutes matters more than anything that happened in the match.

3.2 What Kids Want to Hear

According to youth sports research, the six words kids most want to hear from their parents after a game are:

"I love watching you play."

That's it. Not analysis. Not corrections. Not comparisons to other players. Just genuine enjoyment of watching them do their thing.

3.3 What to Avoid

- Replaying mistakes or missed opportunities
- Comparing them to teammates or opponents
- Questioning the coach's decisions (lineups, subs, tactics)
- Discussing the referee's performance
- Asking 'Why didn't you...' questions

3.4 If Your Child is Upset

If your child is frustrated after a loss or a tough game:

- Acknowledge their feelings without fixing them
- Let them talk if they want, but don't force it
- Remind them that tough games are part of development
- Save tactical conversations for another day (or leave them to the coach)

Section 4: Respect for Referees

4.1 The Reality

Youth soccer has a referee shortage across the country. Many of the officials at MSL matches are young referees (ages 14-20) who are learning their craft. Even experienced referees will make calls you disagree with. This is normal and part of the game.

4.2 Why It Matters

When parents yell at referees:

- Young referees quit (making the shortage worse)
- Players lose focus and become anxious
- The game environment becomes hostile for everyone
- Your child is embarrassed (even if they don't say so)
- You model behavior you wouldn't accept from your child

4.3 MSL Policy on Referee Abuse

The MSL takes referee abuse seriously. The following will result in consequences:

- Persistent verbal criticism of officials: Warning from field marshal
- Continued abuse after warning: Removal from the venue
- Threatening or aggressive behavior: Immediate removal + ban
- Physical confrontation: Permanent ban + law enforcement referral

Referees and field marshals have full authority to pause or abandon a match if the sideline environment becomes unsafe.

4.4 Teaching Moment

When a call goes against your team, it's actually a great teaching moment. Your child is watching how you handle adversity. Show them that disagreement doesn't require disrespect.

Section 5: What Clubs Should Promote

5.1 Setting Expectations Early

Member clubs are expected to share this document with all families at the beginning of each season. We recommend:

- Including sideline expectations in your club handbook
- Reviewing expectations at a preseason parent meeting
- Having families acknowledge this guide as part of registration
- Posting a summary at your home field (see Section 7)

5.2 Positive Sideline Culture

Clubs should actively promote a positive sideline culture by:

- Appointing a game day field marshal or parent liaison
- Recognizing families who model great sideline behavior
- Addressing issues privately and promptly (don't let it fester)
- Empowering coaches to pause play if the environment is harmful
- Creating a culture where parents hold each other accountable

5.3 Coach-Parent Communication

Many sideline issues stem from poor communication. Clubs should ensure:

- Coaches communicate clearly about playing time philosophy
- There is a defined process for parents to raise concerns (not on game day)
- Coaches set the tone by modeling respect toward referees and opponents
- A 24-hour cooling-off rule: no parent-coach discussions on game day

5.4 Handling Violations

When a sideline issue arises, clubs should follow this process:

- 1. Field marshal or coach addresses the individual calmly
- 2. If behavior continues, the individual is asked to leave the venue
- 3. Club leadership follows up with the family within 48 hours
- 4. Repeated violations are reported to the MSL league office
- 5. The league may impose additional sanctions if warranted

Section 6: Creating a Great Game Day Atmosphere

6.1 It Starts with You

A great sideline atmosphere doesn't happen by accident. It's created by individuals who choose to be positive. Here are simple things any parent can do:

- Clap for a good play by either team
- Say 'good effort' when a player tries something and fails
- Introduce yourself to opposing parents
- Thank the referee after the match (especially young officials)
- Keep conversations positive, even when the score isn't

6.2 What a Great MSL Game Day Looks Like

Imagine arriving at a match where:

- Both sets of parents are cheering positively
- Kids are smiling and competing hard
- Coaches are focused on their team, not the referee
- The referee feels respected and performs better as a result
- After the whistle, families from both teams are friendly
- Your child says 'that was fun' on the way home

This is the standard we're building in the MSL. Every person on the sideline contributes to it or takes away from it. There is no neutral.

6.3 For the Passionate Fan

We understand that parents are emotionally invested. That's natural and healthy. Being passionate about your child's team is great. The line is crossed when passion becomes:

- Directed AT individuals (referees, opponents, players)
- Negative, critical, or demeaning
- Louder than the coach's instruction
- A source of stress for your child

Channel that passion into encouragement. Be the loudest voice of support, not the loudest critic.

Section 7: Quick Reference - Post at Your Field

MSL Sideline Code

WE CHEER FOR:

- Good play by both teams
- Effort, creativity, and teamwork
- Players trying new things (even if it doesn't work)
- Sportsmanship and fair play

WE LEAVE TO THE PROFESSIONALS:

- Coaching (that's the coach's job)
- Officiating (that's the referee's job)
- Tactical decisions (trust the process)

WE DO NOT TOLERATE:

- Verbal abuse of referees, coaches, or players
- Negative comments directed at children
- Sideline coaching that conflicts with the team's coach
- Aggressive, threatening, or discriminatory behavior

REMEMBER:

- These are kids. This is a game. You are their role model.
- The best thing you can say after: 'I love watching you play.'

Clubs are encouraged to print this page and display it at home venues.

Section 8: Family Acknowledgment

The MSL recommends that clubs have families sign or acknowledge the following statement as part of seasonal registration:

I have read and understand the MSL Sideline Behavior & Game Day Expectations guide. I agree to conduct myself in a positive, respectful manner at all MSL matches. I understand that failure to meet these expectations may result in removal from the venue and potential further sanctions. I recognize that my behavior directly impacts my child's experience and I commit to making game day a positive environment for all players, coaches, officials, and families.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____ Date: _____

Player Name: _____ Club: _____

Signature: _____

This acknowledgment may be collected digitally or on paper at the club's discretion.