

Code of Conduct Lesson #4

Youth Soccer Referee Abuse Level 4

A guide for parents, coaches & spectators

Based on U.S. Soccer Policy 531-9



Effective
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LEVEL 4: DISCRIMINATION. THE HIGHEST PENALTY IN POLICY 531-9

Discriminatory acts carry a 10-game minimum suspension plus 12–24 months — regardless of who hears it.

10

GAME MINIMUM SUSPENSION

+ 12 to 24 months — the longest time ban in the non-physical category



Discrimination attacks who the referee IS — not what they decided.



Youth referees are often teenagers, first-generation immigrants, LGBTQ+, or women — the most vulnerable to this harm.



Discriminatory conduct may also violate federal and state civil rights law, beyond Policy 531-9.

RACIAL OR ETHNIC SLURS DIRECTED AT THE REFEREE

Level 4 Abuse — Discriminatory Language Based on Race or Ethnicity

"Comments targeting the referee's race, skin color, nationality, or ethnicity — in any language."

These are explicitly named as Level 4 examples in U.S. Soccer Policy 531-9

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Using racial or ethnic slurs against a referee is the highest-penalized non-physical abuse in Policy 531-9. It attacks the person's identity and dignity. This applies equally whether the slur is spoken on the field, shouted from the sideline, or said under one's breath.

✓ Better Approach: There is no excuse, no heat-of-the-moment defense, and no joke framing that applies here. If these words come to mind, you need to step away from youth sports.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12-24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

HOMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE AT THE REFEREE

Level 4 Abuse — Discriminatory Language Based on Sexual Orientation

"Using slurs, epithets, or degrading language targeting the referee's real or perceived sexual orientation."

Explicitly covered under Policy 531-9 Level 4: Offensive or Discriminatory Act

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Homophobic language directed at a referee constitutes a Level 4 discriminatory act under Policy 531-9. It carries a 10-game minimum suspension plus 12–24 months. U.S. Soccer's policy is unambiguous: soccer is for everyone, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has no place in the game.

✓ Better Approach: LGBTQ+ referees — including many teenagers — are already underrepresented in officiating. Discriminatory language is one of the primary reasons they leave. You are part of the problem or part of the solution.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12–24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

SEXIST LANGUAGE AND GENDER-BASED ATTACKS

Level 4 Abuse — Harmful or Sexist Stereotypes

"Comments implying a female referee 'doesn't understand the game,' or that a male referee is weak or incompetent in gendered terms."

Gender-based attacks are explicitly listed as Level 4 examples in Policy 531-9

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Invoking gender stereotypes to undermine a referee's authority is a Level 4 discriminatory act. This includes comments about female referees' supposed lack of knowledge, or using gendered insults against male or non-binary officials. The policy covers any discriminatory language based on gender identity.

✓ Better Approach: Women's officiating is growing rapidly at every level of the game. Comments that question competence on the basis of gender are not 'observations' — they are discrimination, and they cost 10 games plus up to two years.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12-24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

ATTACKS BASED ON RELIGION OR NATIONAL ORIGIN

Level 4 Abuse — Discriminatory Language Based on Religion or Nationality

"Targeting a referee's accent, country of origin, religious dress, or beliefs to mock or discredit them."

Policy 531-9 covers nationality, social origin, language, and religion as protected characteristics

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Policy 531-9 explicitly names nationality, social origin, language, and religion as protected characteristics. Mocking a referee's accent, targeting their religious appearance, or using their country of origin as an insult is a Level 4 discriminatory act — regardless of whether it's framed as humor.

✓ Better Approach: The U.S. youth soccer referee community is diverse — reflecting the communities these referees come from. That diversity is a strength. Attacking it is not passion; it is discrimination.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12–24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

OFFENSIVE OR DISCRIMINATORY GESTURES

Level 4 Abuse — Non-Verbal Discriminatory Acts

"Using hand signs, body gestures, or physical expressions that carry discriminatory meaning toward the referee."

Policy 531-9 covers discriminatory 'acts' — not just spoken words

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Level 4 abuse includes discriminatory acts, not just words. Offensive gestures with racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious connotations directed at a referee carry the same 10-game minimum suspension as spoken slurs. Policy 531-9 evaluates the meaning and intent, not just the medium.

✓ Better Approach: If you wouldn't say it out loud in a formal setting, a gesture communicating the same thing is no different. Officials, other parents, and children on the field all see your behavior.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12-24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

LANGUAGE TARGETING DISABILITY

Level 4 Abuse — Discriminatory Language Based on Disability

"Using slurs or mocking a referee's physical or cognitive characteristics as a way to discredit their decisions."

Disability is an explicitly protected characteristic under Policy 531-9

✗ Why This Is Level 4 Abuse

Policy 531-9 explicitly protects referees from discrimination based on disability. Using ableist language — whether referencing visual, cognitive, or physical characteristics as insults — is a Level 4 discriminatory act. This includes casual 'jokes' about the referee being 'blind' or 'stupid' when framed in a discriminatory rather than merely frustrated way.

✓ Better Approach: There is a clear difference between a frustrated 'bad call!' and a remark that targets a person's disability. One is venting. The other is discrimination. Policy 531-9 — and your league — know the difference.

PENALTY

10 GAMES

+ 12-24 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

LEVEL 4 PENALTY STRUCTURE

The most severe non-physical penalties in the entire policy — and they compound.

1st

First Offense

10-game minimum suspension

+ 12–24 months ban.

No grace period.

2nd

Second Offense

Double punishment.

10 games → 20 games.

Time ban extended accordingly.

3rd

Third Offense

Automatic lifetime ban from all
U.S. Soccer-affiliated activity
— as participant or spectator.

 **Offenses against minor referees (under 18) carry TRIPLE the penalty automatically.**

SOCCER IS FOR EVERYONE.

Discriminatory abuse doesn't just hurt one person — it tells an entire community they don't belong.



It Drives Referees Out

Referees who experience discrimination stop officiating — often permanently. Every referee lost is matches that cannot happen.



It Harms Children Watching

Young players from the same background as the targeted referee receive a powerful message: this game may not be for you.



Game's Mission

U.S. Soccer's stated mission is to make soccer accessible to all. Discriminatory sideline behavior actively works against that mission.



It May Violate the Law

Depending on the jurisdiction and circumstances, discriminatory conduct in public settings may violate civil rights law beyond the scope of Policy 531-9.

HOW TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Level 4 abuse is never a split-second reaction — it reflects deeper attitudes that can be changed.



If It Targets Who They Are, Don't Say It

Frustration about a call is understandable. Saying something about the referee's race, gender, religion, or orientation is never okay — ever.



Speak Up When You Hear It

If another spectator makes a discriminatory comment, say something. Silence signals acceptance. 'That's not okay here' is enough.



Report It Through Proper Channels

Witnessed a discriminatory act? Report it to your league in writing. The penalty framework only works when abuse is reported.



Model Inclusion for Your Children

Children absorb the values adults model. When you welcome and respect all referees, your child learns that soccer truly is for everyone.



Thank Referees of All Backgrounds

A simple 'good game' to a referee who looks different from you signals that they are welcome in youth soccer — because they are.



Take It Seriously Off the Field Too

If you or someone you know holds discriminatory views, it doesn't stay on the sideline. Addressing bias is an ongoing personal commitment.

**Let's keep the
beautiful game
beautiful for everyone.**

Remember:

The Ref is Human!

