



To: U.S. Soccer Referees  
State Referee Administrators  
State Directors of Instruction  
State Directors of Assessment

From: U.S. Soccer Referee Education Resource Center

Subject: **Using offensive, insulting, or abusive language and/or gestures**

Date: September 30, 2020

Players language, including gestures and other forms of communication, can take many forms:

- Passing information along to teammates or urging special efforts during play – *this is completely acceptable*. Referee action: no action needed.
- Momentary emotional outburst – *borderline acceptable, perhaps a trifling offense only*. Match official action: a stern look or verbal admonishment.
- Dissent or unsporting behavior – *unacceptable misconduct*. Match official action: caution and display the yellow card.
- Offensive, insulting, or abusive language and/or gestures – *more serious misconduct*. Match official action: send off and display the red card. This includes race, gender, color, sexual orientation, and national origin. *There is **Zero Tolerance** when words of a discriminatory nature are used, regardless of any other factors such as game difficulty, how loud the words are spoken and the impact on others.*

Match officials must intelligently apply common sense, **feel for the spirit of the game**, and knowledge of the way in which player language can affect management of the match in order to distinguish effectively among these forms.

Regardless of age or competitive level, players become excited as their personal or team fortunes rise or fall, and it is not uncommon for language to be used in the heat of the moment. Such outbursts, while possibly vivid, are typically brief, undirected, and often quickly regretted. The referee must understand the complex emotions of players in relation to the match and discount appropriately language which does no lasting harm to those who might have heard or seen the outburst. Of course, the player might well be warned in various ways (a brief word, direct eye contact) regarding his/her behavior.



When the words or gestures directly challenge the authority of the referee or assistant referees, actively dispute an official's decision, or are likely to be taken up by a widening circle of other players, the referee must determine if this dissent can be halted through the more formal action of cautioning the player and displaying the yellow card. The objective of the caution for dissent or unsporting behavior (in the case of language, which is not dissent, but which falls short of deserving a red card), is to protect the referee's ability to continue to manage the game.

Language or gestures can also be "offensive, insulting or abusive" with the result that the player involved is required to leave the field and is shown a red card. The *main principle* in recognizing offensive, insulting, or abusive language is that the referee must protect the safety and enjoyment of the participants as well as the fairness of the play. Accordingly, language that is generally accepted by players, does not produce adverse or aggressive reactions, and is generally tolerated by them should less likely result in a red card being shown.

The referee might choose to talk to warn or caution players whose undesirable language occurs in a short, emotional outburst and send off a player whose language is a sustained, calculated, and aggressive verbal assault.

Three critical criteria to be used in evaluating whether language needs to be handled as misconduct warranting a red card are:

- The specific words and/or gestures used. Some words are inherently more offensive than others and are more likely to provoke aggressive reactions. Words that focus on religious, ethnic, racial, or sexual characteristics generally fall in this category and often require a fast, strong response by the referee.
- The audibility or visibility of the language. Language which might call for a more limited response if said quietly and/or to a restricted audience might require a send-off if performed more publicly.
- Specifically targeted language. Language that is clearly directed at opponents, technical area personnel and match officials is more likely to spark a reprisal and will usually require a stronger response by the referee.

Match officials must take care not to inject purely personal opinions as to the nature of the language when determining a course of action. The primary focus of the referee must be on the effective management of the match and the players in the context of the overall **Feel for the spirit of the game.**

*Updated September 2020*