

From The Ref's Room - Language

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LANGUAGE

I have been asked why it is so hard for referees to be consistent with their interpretation of “foul language”? In the first instance it would help if everyone was consistent in their understanding of the topic as well. Foul language has nothing to do with the Laws of the Game any longer.



The Laws state: A player will be sent off if in the “opinion of the referee” a player uses offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures. It is also important to note that it can be directed at another player, a teammate, one of the officials or anyone in fact.

This has always and will always be a grey area because of the wording. Please appreciate the phrase... “in the opinion of the referee” and it is from his/her vantage point and not from where you or anyone else might be sitting. The fact you or anyone can or cannot hear what is said and/or are offended by it, is not part of the criteria. It does not automatically follow that the referee has heard it or in fact if he/she has been offended by it or believes it to fit the conditions of the law requiring a sanction. It is more about the context that the language is used rather than simply the dialogue.

The wording of the Laws was changed to accommodate a change in modern society. The phrase “Foul language” was removed to address this change. Words that were at one time automatically red cards are now part of everyday language and whether some people like this or not, much of the current generation accepts it as the norm to a certain extent. Referees are not the moral custodians of society, they are simply there to control football matches in the modern era and we need to appreciate that unlike previous generations, language is now far more predominant in matches at all levels and we must have a different tolerance for it, just as society has become more tolerant.

Referees are encouraged however not ignore language but to deal with it in some way. However, at the end of the day it will be whether the referee you have at whatever level deems it “offensive, insulting or abusive”. In Youth football there is a lower tolerance to how much language is acceptable. As I said earlier if the Law was more definitive we would perhaps not have to keep discussing the topic.

We can argue individual perception until the cows come home so to speak but as the ‘neutral’ observer, we have to trust that referees will get it right more often than they will get it wrong. Players only need to be reminded to think about what they are saying and therefore avoid giving the referee a reason to have to make a decision in the first place.

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