

Misconduct of Spanish grassroots soccer coaches through referees' reports: Variability by match format, age category, sex, and severity

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe and analyse the disciplinary sanctions received by grassroots soccer coaches in the Valencian Community (Spain) over five seasons. Specific objectives included determining the influence of format (8-a-side or 11-a-side), age (U7, U9, U11, U13, U15, and U18), sex category (male or female), and sanction severity (mild [one to four matches] or serious [five matches to a full season]). A study was conducted based on referees' records from 275,844 games played in 1401 league competitions during five subsequent seasons between 2014 and 2019 in Valencia (Spain). A total of 3563 sanctions were recorded by matchday referees, with the majority being minor offences (92.93%) and most being imposed on 11-a-side soccer coaches (87%). The most frequent reasons for sanctions pertained to protests to referees (28%); dismissal due to double reprimands (26.40%); contemptuous and inconsiderate attitudes towards referees, including insults and threats (19.53%); and direct sending-offs (8.84%). Significantly more mild sanctions were found than serious ones, with more sanctions emerging in the 11-a-side soccer than in the 8-a-side soccer and the men's category compared to the women's category. Finally, we found significantly more sanctions in the U18 men's category compared to all other younger age categories and in the U15 men's category compared to the U7, U9 and U9-U11 female categories ($p < .05$).

Keywords

Association football, disciplinary sanctions, unsporting behaviours, youth sport

Introduction

Coaches play a pivotal role in grassroots soccer, which transcends the task of perfecting the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological skills of the players under their charge.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, coaches are involved in a hugely complex pedagogical, social, cultural, and ethical process.^{1,2} Coaches are the adults tasked by parents and society to guide young players and promote their development and growth.³ Through the activities they plan and deliver, alongside their behaviour, they can establish a teaching–learning setting that enables young soccer players to reach their full potential as persons.⁴ When coaches establish pleasant environments for training and competition, they can positively impact the enjoyment, self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, physical and psychological well-being, and perceived ability of their players.^{5–7} In a similar sense, coaches can promote

teamwork, group responsibility and striving for collective well-being, social recognition, equal opportunities, development of a critical and constructive attitude and, even, belonging to a safe, peaceful, and respectful social group.⁸ Some authors have even argued that coaches may

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play an important role in the retention of young players, preventing them from dropping out or prematurely changing their sport.^{9–11} Nevertheless, coaches can also generate unpleasant experiences and undesired learnings in young soccer players when they misbehave. When sports engagement is focussed on the search for victory at all costs, fair play (including respect for the rules and referees and relationships with rivals) and desirable learning, such as solidarity, social integration and positive moral development get relegated to second place to make room for unsporting behaviours.^{10,12,13}

Literature review

The coaches have been identified as one of the main agents of socialisation for young sportspeople.^{8,14–17} One studied socialisation factor has been the influence of coaches' behaviours on the moral development of players, especially because of their key role in shaping the ethical atmosphere of a team.^{3,18–20} Whether it is deliberate or unintentional, and whether it takes a formal or informal approach, moral education is inherently embedded in the context of sports. Most contributions to moral development have been focussed on the sportsmanship side of coaches' behaviours or the positive face, relegating the unsportsmanlike conduct, the negative face, to a secondary research interest.¹⁹

However, coaches' unsporting behaviours are common in grassroots soccer when they constantly question and criticise decisions made by referees, attempting to take on the role of referee from the bench.^{8,21} Some authors³ have indeed found that up to 48% of youth reported coaches engaging in angry arguments with officials. Another example is seen in coaches making corrections by criticising, showing anger and disappointment and, even, ridiculing their players.^{3,22,23} In this vein, Walters et al.²³ found, after analysing 2169 comments made by coaches at children's team sports games, that up to 20% of the negative comments were associated with unsupported emotional corrections, criticism, reprimands, and comments of sarcasm or ridicule. Strand,²⁴ on the other hand, indicated that at least 30% of coaches engaged in actions such as teasing a player, causing embarrassment to a player in a group setting, and using name-calling without hurtful intent. Some coaches can even be found who give unfair treatment to players and trainers from the opposition team, make exaggerated gestures out of frustration following a defeat or find themselves engaged in another large array of behaviours of dubious pedagogical value.⁸ This type of unsporting behaviour has a notable impact on different educational, ethical and emotional aspects of players' lives. On the one hand, engagement in the aforementioned actions, alongside permissiveness towards certain tactics and tricks, promotes anti-social behaviour in players, such as cheating, professional fouling, legitimisation of negative acts, lack of

respect for other involved individuals and violent behaviour.^{25–27} For instance, Guivernau and Duda²⁸ showed that players' decisions to engage in inappropriate acts when facing moral choices were mainly influenced by their perceptions of their coach's norms on cheating and aggression. Similarly, Delrue et al.²⁶ observed that when players perceived their coach hindering them during the game (e.g. blaming for mistakes, expressing disappointment), they tended to adopt a similar attitude, leading to the display of comparable antisocial behaviours (e.g. criticism, verbal abuse) towards teammates and the referee. On the contrary, as Bolter and Weiss¹² pointed out, when coaches conduct themselves appropriately, teach and reinforce sportsmanlike behaviours, and do not prioritise victory over being a good sportsman, this is associated with how players behave towards teammates and opponents. In other words, coaches' efforts to uphold the concept of fair play are transmitted to players through the interactions they share and have with other agents present in the competitive setting, helping youth achieve positive developmental outcomes.²⁷

On the other hand, it has been shown that such behaviour can lead to distraction, lack of motivation, doubt, issues within the team and, even, dropout intentions.²⁹ In fact, Møllerlækken et al.³⁰ recently reported that negative coaching behaviour (e.g. high control/low autonomy) was a significant cause of youth soccer dropout, especially among girls. This may be attributed, following Fraser-Thomas et al.,³¹ to the fact that excessive control and negative feedback could lead children to feel disheartened about their performance.

The coaches' unsportsmanlike conduct or misconduct has been studied through different data collection instruments. In this regard, scales and surveys have frequently been employed, where players,¹² parents,³ and coaches themselves²⁴ report the perceived frequency of various inappropriate coaching behaviours. Conversely, some authors have opted for data collection by observing real competition situations. For instance, this includes the use of direct observation tools such as the Observation Instrument at Sports Events²³ or the analysis of referee reports, which can provide an overview of coaches' unsportsmanlike behaviour observed by referees in genuine competition scenarios.^{32–34}

Building on this approach, Gimeno et al.³³ reported that the most frequent unsporting behaviours perpetrated by coaches recorded in reports registered by referees were make comments or complaints to the referee. A later research study³⁵ produced similar outcomes, highlighting that protests directed by coaches towards officials were one of the most witnessed anti-sporting behaviours at grassroots soccer matches.

Along similar lines, work conducted by Olmedilla et al.^{34,36} showed that the most frequent anti-social behaviour seen in coaches, as revealed through the sanctions

given out by referees, was related to lack of respect and aggression. Examples of this lack of respect came in the form of disrespectful comments towards opponents or refereeing officials, exaggerated gestures or movements and insults considered to be light-hearted. It should be emphasised that these types of behaviours were more common amongst coaches who were involved in 11-a-side soccer, especially in the U18 and U15 categories. In contrast, coaches in charge of teams comprising players younger than 12 years old received fewer sanctions.^{34,36} Lozano et al.³² reported similar outcomes after counting the number of sanctions received by match day delegates (who were also exercising the role of coach) in different categories of grassroots soccer, with the number of sanctions increasing in older age group categories (U11 = 9.3%; U13 = 15.6%; U15 = 31.2; U18 = 43.9%).

Although previous studies that have relied on the referee's minutes to obtain data that provide valuable information on unsporting behaviour in grassroots soccer, they have several limitations that are addressed by the present study. First, the studies cited earlier considered the overall number of sanctions per playing category and not the number of sanctions per coach. Secondly, previous research focussed on records of men's soccer matches, omitting data on prevalence and motives for sanctions among soccer coaches in female competitions. Thirdly, all studies exclude the youngest categories (7, 8 and 9 years old) and, therefore, there is a lack of knowledge about both the number and motives behind coaches' sanctions in the categories examined. Fourthly, there is a lack of studies that directly establish and analyse the severity of sanctions, beyond certain unsporting behaviour highlighted by the media, as pointed out by Vamplew.³⁷ It is, therefore, vital to quantify and characterise sanctions in terms of severity, match format, age category and sex of competition. Finally, the studies reviewed used relatively small samples and focussed on a specific season, whereas the present paper deals with data collected from the totality of the matches played over several seasons.

This study aimed to enhance empirical knowledge about unsporting behaviour in Spanish grassroots soccer coaches (ages 6–18) by analysing the disciplinary sanctions they received in the Valencian Community (Spain) over five seasons. We selected the Valencian Community due to its significance in terms of the number of federative licences. Our study is specifically centred on children and young people, as this age group is particularly susceptible to the influence of coaching behaviours. The specific objectives included determining the total number of sanctions, type of sanction severity and motives of sanction, as well as the variation of sanctions according to the format (8-a-side or 11-a-side), age category (U7, U9, U11, U13, U15, and U18), sex category (male or female), and sanction severity (mild [one to four matches] or serious [five matches to a full season]). It was hypothesised that the 11-a-side

soccer, older and male categories received more sanctions than the 8-a-side soccer, younger and female categories (*Hypothesis 1*). It was also hypothesised that more motives for sanction were due to unsporting behaviours against referees than against any other sporting agent (*Hypothesis 2*). Additionally, it was hypothesised that 11-a-side soccer, older and male categories received more severe sanctions than 8-a-side soccer, younger and female categories (*Hypothesis 3*).

Method

Sample

The study sample consisted of a total of 275,844 referee reports from 1401 competitive league matches played during all seasons between the 2014–2015 and 2018–2019 seasons in the Valencian Community (Spain). This sample was chosen for convenience since the main author of this study was linked as a soccer referee with the soccer referees' federation of that community, thereby overcoming institutional barriers to access data. It represents the total number of official match reports of all official matches played in leagues at the regional level in the Valencian Community. Friendly and cup matches were excluded as they were outside the regular competition system. Therefore, it is a representative sample of the referees' reports of the grassroots official matches corresponding to the five seasons from 2014–2015 to 2018–2019 developed in the Valencian Community (Spain).

A total of 20,386 teams participated in these matches (Supplementary Material), belonging to different 8-a-side and 11-a-side soccer leagues, encompassing both male and female categories. In this study, male 8-a-side soccer includes age groups U7 (6–7 years old), U9 (8–9 years old), and U11 (10–11 years old), while male 11-a-side soccer includes age groups U13 (12–13 years), U15 (14–15 years), and U18 (16, 17, and 18 years). On the other hand, female soccer employs specific age groupings due to the limited number of teams. It is crucial to clarify that these age categories, specifically the female U9 and U11 (8-a-side soccer) and the female U13 and U15 (11-a-side soccer), are officially unified. This categorisation is not a subjective decision made by the authors but rather a standardised practice established by governing bodies in the Valencian Community.

Most of the competitions ($N = 1372$) and teams ($N = 20073$) pertained to male soccer, with fewer leagues ($N = 29$) and teams ($N = 313$) being available for women. There were more 8-a-side ($N = 11529$) than 11-a-side soccer teams ($N = 8857$). An estimated total of 20,386 coaches were involved in the study. The personal and professional characteristics of coaches were not taken into consideration due to the inability to request such information from the Soccer Federation. However, to provide the

reader with a Spanish context, it should be noted that unlike in other countries, coaches are typically not volunteers or parents who work without compensation. A lack of victories or parental complaints could lead to their dismissal in certain soccer clubs that prioritise players' performance.³⁸ They are usually young males between 21 and 30 years old, receiving minimal and unofficially regulated remuneration, with zero to 5 years of soccer coaching experience. Their formal education in pedagogy and sports is limited.^{39,40} Although a decade-old regulation requires all teams to have a certified coach, it was only recently addressed. In certain cases, particularly when a coach is expelled in youth categories, the team's delegate or, exceptionally, a parent may temporarily assume the coaching role during that match, at the discretion of the referee.

Data sources and procedure

This quantitative study is part of a wider project titled 'School Sports, Fair Play, and Social Justice: An Analysis of the Competition System in the Valencian Community and a Proposal for Transformation'. The initial phase of this project, in which this article is situated, involved identifying problematic aspects across various youth sports. For the purposes of this paper, this study was focussed on grassroots soccer. The materials and procedures used in this work were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Valencia.

Contact and data collection. Contact was made with the Valencian Soccer Federation for complete, rapid, and secure access to data relating to sanctions issued by the Tournaments Committee. Data lists generally include sanctions derived from referees' records of the cards brandished to coaches and later recorded in match reports. This entails a minimum of a one-match suspension for involved coaches. Sanctions result from direct red cards, two yellow cards during a single match or the accumulation of yellow cards over several matches. In the present study, lists of sanctions imposed on coaches in men's and women's leagues by the Valencia Tournaments Committee of the Soccer Federation during all seasons between the 2014–2015 and 2018–2019 seasons were used. Its accuracy was confirmed through approval from the Competition Committee after addressing appeals from the clubs.

Categorisation of data. The federation provided lists through five Excel documents, one for each season, that included a vast amount of data that adequately organised and analysed provided relevant information about coaches' non-compliance with the rules. With these considerations in mind, a data mining process was conducted, which consisted of extracting useful and important data from typically unstructured information that can be retrieved from different databases or the Internet.⁴¹

The first task was to consolidate the data into a single file and purge data that were irrelevant to the study, as it did not address the research questions. In this regard, futsal data and information about cup matches were removed. Additionally, the details of the names of the teams and cities were deleted, as well as the personal data of the sanctioned coaches (first and last names, national identity card numbers and the team to which the coaches belong). Later, the research team categorised the data according to the following variables: format (8-a-side or 11-a-side soccer), coaching category (from U7 to U18), level and type of competition (male or female), type of sanction (mild, serious and severe) and characteristics of the sanction imposed (number of matches or days of sanction). Classification followed stipulations of the Disciplinary Code of the Soccer Federation of the Valencia Community, by Law 2/2011, of March 22, on Sport and Physical Activity in the Valencia Community, which regulates sanctions in sport in the Valencian Community. According to this law, minor sanctions are defined as those entailing temporary disqualification for a duration of one to four matches. Serious sanctions are characterised by penalties spanning five matches to one full season, and very serious sanctions involve either permanent disqualification from the federation license or temporary suspension for a period ranging from one to five seasons.

Data analysis

Data was uploaded to Version 3.6.0 of the statistical program R to run the necessary analyses. First, descriptive statistics were calculated using the R base functions and the ggplot2 library for variables of interest. In the case of variables about coach sanctions received in different seasons, measures of central tendency (mean), dispersion (minimum, maximum and standard deviation) and shape (skewness and kurtosis) were calculated. When examining the frequency of sanctions, we calculated the counts by recording how often each specific type of penalty occurred in the dataset. The most common motives for sanctions were also graphically represented.

Multifactor analysis of variance ($2 \times 8 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA) was then performed. This analysis permitted the determination of the influence of and interaction between playing format, sex and age category and sanction severity (independent variables) about sanctions (dependent variable). Factorial ANOVA had two goals. The first was to determine the main effects of the different variables and examine whether a significant interaction ($p < 0.05$) existed. Significant main effects were found for all examined variables. Next, multiple comparison procedures were performed using Tukey's HSD post hoc test, allowing for the examination of differences between means.

Results

Sanctions, severity and reasons for sanctions

Throughout the five examined seasons, a total of 3563 sanctions delivered to grassroots soccer coaches were recorded. Of these, 87% ($N=3102$) were handed out to coaches of 11-a-side soccer, whilst the remaining 13% ($N=461$) were given to 8-a-side soccer coaches. Of the sanctions, 99.95% were directed towards male soccer coaches. Considering the number of sanctions per coach, 0.06 sanctions were found per coach in the female soccer, compared to 0.18 sanctions in the male soccer (200% more).

In terms of severity, 93% of the sanctions were mild, and 7% were serious. Only one severe sanction was found (0.03%), which occurred in the male U18 category (for not complying with already imposed sanctions). No serious sanctions were found in female soccer competitions. Table 1 presents a more detailed description of these outcomes.

Grassroots soccer coaches were sanctioned for 25 different reasons. The least serious sanctions imposed a ban from sitting in the dugout during a match, whilst the most serious imposed a ban reaching up to 730 days. Most sanctions were given due to unsporting behaviour towards referees, both mild and serious. As shown in Figure 1, the most common mild sanctions were: vociferous and insistent protests towards refereeing officials (28%); expulsion for a double reprimand (26.4%); demeaning attitudes and disrespect towards refereeing officials, including insults and threats (19.53%); and direct expulsion (8.84%). The most common serious sanctions imposed on coaches resulted from serious insults and serious offence (4%) and coercion and threats (0.62%), both directed towards referees and match officials.

Differences in the number of sanctions received by coaches according to examined variables

The 2 (sex category) $\times$ 8 (age category) $\times$ 2 (match format) $\times$ 2 (sanction severity) ANOVA was performed on mild and

serious sanctions. The small number of severe sanctions reported prevented statistical tests on this type of sanction. The outcomes can be observed in Table 2.

ANOVA revealed significant main effects for all of the examined explanatory variables: sex category ($F(1,63)=10.204$; $p=0.005$; $\eta^2=0.000$), match format ($F(1,63)=556.346$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.000$), age category ($F(5,59)=83.277$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.164$) and sanction severity ($F(1,63)=695.009$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.294$). Next, outcomes are presented for the pairwise comparisons conducted using the Tukey method. This enabled the identification of the existence of significant differences between pairs of means.

Main effects resulting from pairwise comparisons

Match format, sex category and sanction severity. Table 3 indicates that coaches in the 11-a-side soccer received significantly more sanctions than those in the 8-a-side soccer. Additionally, coaches in male leagues received significantly more sanctions than in female leagues. Furthermore, there were significantly more mild sanctions than serious ones.

Age category. Table 4 shows that coaches working with the U18 category received a significantly higher number of sanctions than coaches working in all the other examined categories. Likewise, a significantly larger number of sanctions were found for coaches working with the U15 category relative to the U7, U9 and U9-U11 (F) categories. No significant differences were found for all other examined age categories.

Interaction effects. Significant outcomes also emerged regarding the interaction effects between match format and sanction severity ($F(1,63)=375.627$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.000$) and age category and sanction severity ($F(4,60)=66.821$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.110$).

In Figure 2, it can be seen that the majority of sanctions received by coaches were mild, whilst the 11-a-side soccer format corresponded to the highest number of both mild and serious sanctions imposed on coaches.

Table 1. Overall description of sanctions received by coaches.

Grassroots soccer	Category	Coaches	Total number of sanctions	Sanctions per coach	Sanctions according to severity	
					Mild	Serious
2014–2019 8S	♀ U7	2481	46	0.02	93.48% (43)	6.52% (3)
		4206	148	0.03	93.92% (139)	6.08% (9)
		4679	262	0.05	93.51% (245)	6.49% (17)
	♂ U9–U11 (F)	163	5	0.03	100% (5)	0% (0)
		3375	597	0.18	94.14% (562)	5.86% (35)
	IIS ♀	2875	914	0.32	93.59% (855)	6.41% (59)
		2457	1577	0.64	91.96% (1449)	8.04% (128)
		150	13	0.09	100% (13)	0% (0)

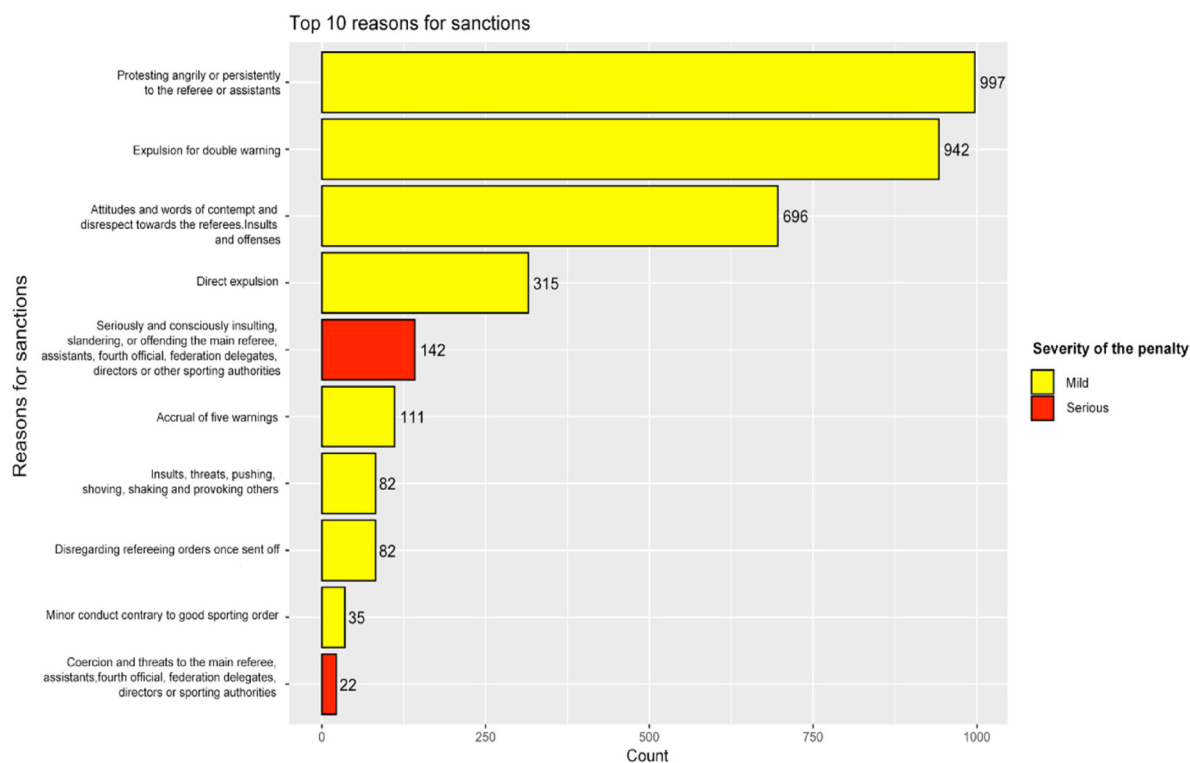


Figure 1. Top 10 motives of sanctions imposed on coaches as a function of severity.

Table 2. ANOVA for the dependent variable about sanctions received by coaches.

	Sum of squares	df	Squared mean	F	P	η^2
Sex category	0.007	1	0.007	10.204	0.005	0.000
Match format	0.398	1	0.398	556.346	<0.001	0.000
Match format $\times$ sanction severity	0.269	1	0.269	375.627	<0.001	0.000
Age category	0.298	5	0.059	83.277	<0.001	0.164
Age category $\times$ sanction severity	0.191	4	0.048	66.821	<0.001	0.110
Sanction severity	0.497	1	0.497	695.009	<0.001	0.294

Note. Statistically significant outcomes are indicated in bold.

Finally, evidence is presented in Figure 3 that the 11-a-side format of male soccer (U18, U15 and U13) is related to the highest number of mild and serious sanctions imposed on coaches. In contrast, the 8-a-side male soccer, 8-a-side female soccer and 11-a-side female soccer formats were associated with only an anecdotal number of sanctions.

Discussion

Despite the potential negative impact of the unsporting behaviour of coaches on the development of children and adolescents, few studies have sought to characterise and quantify the presence of such acts in grassroots soccer. The present work examined the number of sanctions received by coaches and the reasons for which they were

imposed, in addition to the differential effects of various explanatory variables (match format, age category, sex and sanction severity) on the receipt of sanctions.

Firstly, the present research reveals that coaches of the 11-a-side soccer receive seven times more disciplinary sanctions than those of the 8-a-side soccer, with this being the case in both male and female soccer. Specifically, the present study revealed significant differences between the number of sanctions imposed on coaches in the U18 category and all other categories, with coaches of the U15 category also receiving more sanctions than other categories of 8-a-side soccer (U7, U9 and U9-U11 F). Present findings are consistent with those reported by Olmedilla et al.^{34,36} and Lozano et al.,³² who also revealed a greater number of sanctions in U18 and U15. Two potential explanations can be given which may

Table 3. Pairwise comparison (Tukey's HSD test) about match format, sex category and sanction severity.

Contrast	Estimation	Standard error	P
11-a-side soccer - 8-a-side soccer	0.491	0.029	<0.001
Male-female	0.474	0.035	<0.001
Serious-mild	-0.059	0.007	<0.001

Note 1. The estimate for each pair is the average difference between the two categories (the first minus the second). A negative estimate means that the average number of sanctions is higher in the second pair than in the first. Note 2. Statistically significant outcomes are indicated in bold.

Table 4. Pairwise comparison about age category examined via Tukey's HSD test (coaches).

Contrast	Estimation	Standard error	P
U9-U11 (F)-U11	-0.089	0.069	0.893
U9-U11	-0.019	0.047	0.999
U15-U11	0.130	0.045	0.097
U13-U15 (F)-U11	-0.013	0.062	0.999
U13-U11	0.060	0.045	0.879
U18-U11	0.292	0.045	<0.001
U7-U11	-0.043	0.048	0.984
U9-U9-U11 (F)	0.070	0.700	0.970
U15-U9-U11 (F)	0.219	0.069	0.045
U13-U15 (F)-U9-U11 (F)	0.076	0.078	0.974
U13-U9-U11 (F)	0.149	0.069	0.379
U18-U9-U11 (F)	0.382	0.069	<0.001
U7-U9-U11 (F)	0.046	0.070	0.998
U15-U9	0.149	0.047	0.044
U13-U15 (F)-U9	0.006	0.063	0.999
U13-U9	0.079	0.047	0.680
U18-U9	0.311	0.047	<0.001
U7-U9	-0.024	0.049	0.999
U13-U15 (F)-U15	-0.143	0.062	0.298
U13-U15	-0.070	0.045	0.775
U18-U15	0.162	0.045	0.016
U7-U15	-0.173	0.048	0.015
U13-U13-U15 (F)	0.073	0.062	0.930
U18-U13-U15 (F)	0.305	0.062	<0.001
U7-U13-U15 (F)	-0.030	0.064	0.999
U18-U13	0.232	0.045	<0.001
U7-U13	-0.104	0.048	0.396
U7-U18	-0.336	0.048	<0.001

Note 1. The estimate for each pair is the average difference between the two categories (the first minus the second). A negative estimate means that the average number of sanctions is higher in the second pair than in the first. Note 2. F = female (U9-U11 and U13-U15 = consolidated female categories). Note 3. Statistically significant outcomes are indicated in bold.

help to understand the differences found. The first pertains to the greater emphasis placed on winning by coaches working with these age groups. As occurs in the

professional setting, 11-a-side soccer coaches may feel pressured to win competitions and tournaments.^{32,34} On one hand, this may be due to the possible concern for achieving results in the pursuit of ascending to higher levels as Lozano et al.³² and Olmedilla et al.^{34,36} indicated in their studies with grassroots coaches. On the other hand, because failure to win could lead to demotion within the club or termination of the coach's contract, as identified by del Pozo in Spanish youth soccer.³⁸ The second aspect to consider is that, for many years, it was not strictly necessary in some Spanish regions for 8-a-side soccer coaches to have an official coaching licence to deliver the function of coach in the dugout. This implies that certain adults have been able to act as coaches on the bench, and due to the absence of an official licence, any unsporting behaviour exhibited by them would not be officially sanctioned by the referees. This is because referees record sanctions electronically and can only assign them to those individuals who are registered in the system, that is, those who have an official licence. The influence of this should not be taken lightly, as it could lead to an underrepresentation of unsporting behaviours in these categories, even if they are few. Thus, the large differences found as a function of the playing format must be interpreted with caution.

Secondly, outcomes from conducted analyses revealed that coaches in male competitions received more mild and serious sanctions than coaches in female leagues. While sex differences in coaching behaviours in youth sports remain largely unexplored,⁴² this result supports the idea of some emerging research that suggests potential variations in coaches' behaviour based on the sex of the players they are guiding. Kroshus et al.⁴³ found in their study about concussion safety in US Collegiate Sport, that male coaches of female teams tended to endorse safer attitudes and beliefs and typically communicated more assertively in support of concussion safety than female coaches of female teams and male coaches of male teams. Gosai et al.'s⁴⁴ findings highlighted that coaches adopted a "gender lens" in their coaching, as seen in practices such as structuring longer sessions for females and displaying diverse coaching behaviours, including increased reinforcement for female athletes, depending on the sex composition of their teams. Thus, this finding suggests that male grassroots soccer requires more urgent intervention to tackle this issue.

Thirdly, the present research reveals that most sanctions received by grassroots soccer coaches in Valencia are mild. Such findings are also supported, although not directly, by the outcomes of other research works.³³⁻³⁶ An especially supported finding is that the most commonly imposed mild sanctions are for an angry and insistent protest towards refereeing officials, expulsion for double reprimand, disrespectful and demeaning attitudes towards refereeing officials (including insults and threats) and direct expulsions. The most common sanctions against coaches

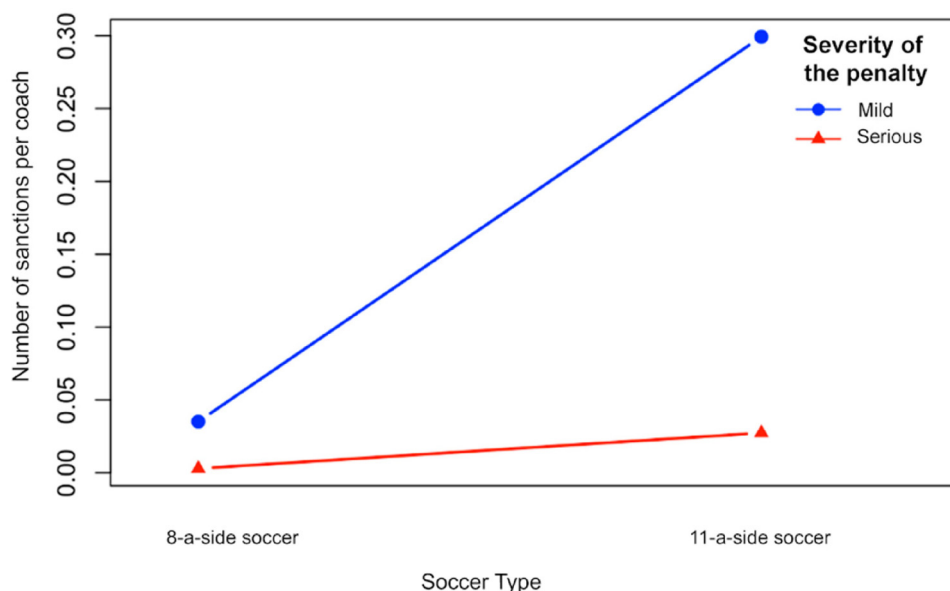


Figure 2. Interaction effect about match format $\times$ sanction severity (sanctions per coach).

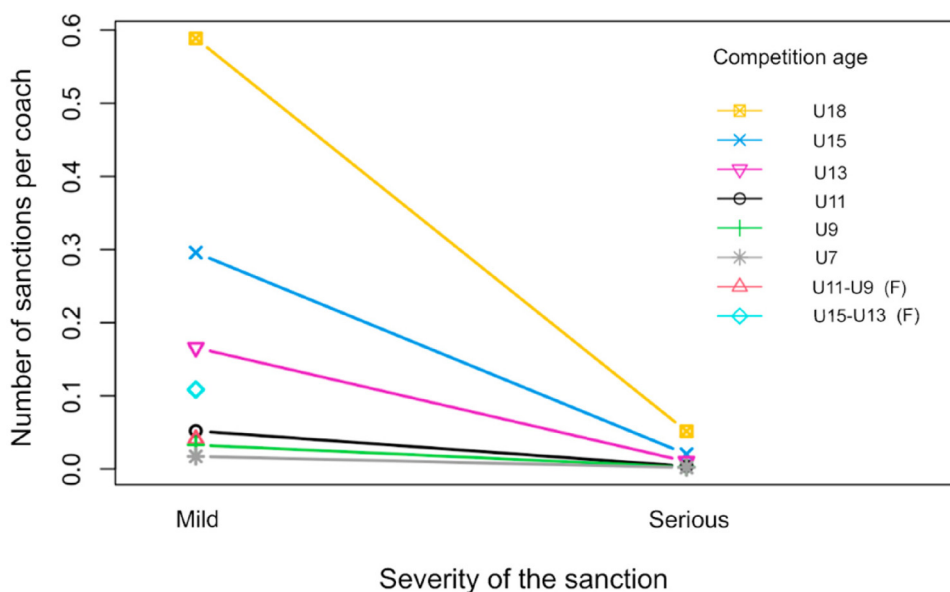


Figure 3. Interaction effect about match format $\times$ age category (sanctions per coach).

are for insults, serious offences, and threats directed at referees and match officials. Overall, the outcomes of the present study show that the majority of sanctions received by coaches are the result of unsporting actions directed towards refereeing officials. These findings agree with those reported in previously conducted research^{33–36,45} Gimeno et al.,³³ for example, highlighted that comments or complaints made to refereeing officials represent the most common unsporting behaviours engaged in by coaches. Similarly, Olmedilla et al.^{34,36} outline that the most common anti-social behaviours engaged in by sports

coaches are related to showing a lack of respect towards sports coaches and opponents, exaggerated gestures and movements, insults considered to be light-hearted and other types of aggression. Likewise, Sáenz et al.³⁵ and del Águila⁴⁵ confirmed these aforementioned findings by revealing that one of the most often witnessed unsporting behaviours in grassroots soccer matches pertained to coach protests towards refereeing officials.

This approach of confrontation adopted by coaches, in which victory appears to be prioritised over being a good sportsperson, could permeate young people with undesirable

values.⁸ As various studies have pointed out, coaches play a key role in shaping the ethical atmosphere of a team,^{3,18,19} and their negative coaching behaviour could influence players' decisions to engage in similar inappropriate acts (e.g. criticism, verbal abuse) towards the referee and the teammates.^{26,28} In this context, coaches are urged to mirror fair play and react responsibly to refereeing mistakes,⁴⁶ which is indeed associated with how players behave on the playing field.¹²

Further, the present study corroborates the presence of other unsporting behaviours engaged in by grassroots soccer coaches, such as insulting, threatening, pushing, grabbing and threatening other agents, ignoring referee instructions after being expelled and other mild acts that are contrary to good sporting demeanour. Such actions are added to the unsporting behaviours mentioned in other research studies.^{3,8,10,21,22,26}

All in all, the findings of the current study give cause for concern and suggest that efforts to curb the coaches' unsporting behaviours might primarily target male 11-a-side soccer competitions, with a specific emphasis on coaches working with U15 and U18 categories. It is crucial to address the issue of coach behaviour, particularly towards referees, as they are frequently subjected to disrespectful conduct. Establishing a zero-tolerance policy towards the unsporting behaviour of grassroots soccer coaches is essential given their significant role as social influencers impacting the psychological development of young players.^{6,7} As emphasised by Dawson et al.,⁴⁷ there is no implicitly or explicitly tolerable 'less-serious' form of abuse. Being a coach must be considered a great privilege but, also, a huge responsibility. Those working with children and adolescents serve as educators and must exemplify fair play while promoting pro-social behaviour.

Coaches engaging in anti-social behaviour and, especially, those who do so repeatedly, lack the necessary qualities to fulfil the pedagogical, cultural, social, and moral aspects of being a grassroots soccer coach. This means that coaching education should encourage coaches to more carefully consider the developmental needs of the players under their supervision and sportspersonship, as has been previously advocated by others.^{12,23,48} This requires the Spanish Ministry of Education and Sports⁴⁹ to include specific modules addressing educational and moral aspects in their coach training qualifications. These courses are limited to content on physical, technical, and tactical aspects, as well as knowledge of the sports rules in the current curriculum. Therefore, it is advisable to follow the model of UEFA,⁵⁰ which incorporates modules such as 'Philosophy, values, and beliefs' and 'Motivational climate' into the curriculum of their coaching courses. If the current training programmes fail to directly address the promotion of sportsmanship and the rejection of unsportsmanlike behaviours on the field, they remain incomplete and inadequate for grassroots soccer. Moreover, it would

be inconsistent to expect coaches to perform tasks for which they have not been adequately trained, even at a basic level.

Simultaneously, sporting bodies could make effective use of referee reports to detect and impose severe penalties on coaches who persist in unsporting behaviour, even, expelling them from competition. In Spain, referees electronically record match reports, which facilitates their storage and analysis. Whilst this data is made public on the website, its use is merely informative. With a simple software improvement, currently non-existent, an automated system could be established to alert upon reaching a certain number of sanctions by the same coach (or player or club). In doing so, the software itself would identify and monitor coaches who are recurrently sanctioned, enabling direct and decisive action against the most problematic ones. This proposal is inexpensive and could be implemented globally. Other recent initiatives from local grassroots football leagues are currently testing to prevent unsporting behaviours, based on sanctions to the whole team when a coach is expelled, but we consider the coaching education as a primary and basic field to address sport-personship in grassroots soccer.

Limitations and future research

Although the large sample used could be considered one of the strong points of the present study, alongside its longitudinal design through the collection of data from five subsequent competitive seasons, findings must be interpreted considering some limitations. The first limitation pertains to the data collection approach used. Lists of those sanctioned due to engaging in behaviours that are not compliant with fair play as perceived by matchday referees were compiled from matchday reports. Despite providing highly interesting descriptive statistics, limiting analysis of unsporting behaviour to include only that deemed pertinent by referees excludes other unsporting behaviours that may go unnoticed by referees or fall outside of their remit (p. e.g. exerting an excessive amount of pressure on players from their team), or that they may leave out because they adapt the expected standards to the age of participants.^{21,22} Nonetheless, it must be remembered that referees are deemed to be the sporting figures with the most evaluative rigour. Another limitation pertains to the exclusion of the U18 category of women's soccer. This may have affected present findings given that a higher number of sanctions could be expected in this category.

Future research should consider not only these aspects but also potential differences among coaches (e.g. sex, expertise level, personal traits), the contexts in which sanctions occur and the underlying causes to improve and obtain a complete picture of the coaches' sanctions in grassroots soccer. Furthermore, future studies could attend to the long-term impact of coach misconduct on grassroots soccer,

including potential changes in player engagement, public perception of the sport and trends in coaching practices. Understanding the broader social and cultural implications of coaching behaviour in grassroots soccer, particularly across age and sex cohorts, is important not only for the field itself but also for fostering a society that values sportsmanship, integrity, and ethical behaviour. Coaching behaviours may reflect cultural norms and values related to sportsmanship and ethical conduct.

Conclusions

The present study revealed that most of the sanctions in grassroots soccer competitions in the Valencian Community (Spain) are mild (one to four matches). Most sanctions are directed at coaches in the male 11-a-side soccer (U13, U15 and U18), with a predominance in the U18 and U15 categories. Serious sanctions against coaches were non-existent in women's soccer and infrequent in male grassroots soccer, occurring mainly in the U18 male category.

Furthermore, most sanctions imposed on coaches stemmed from unsporting conduct specifically directed at refereeing officials. The most common motives behind these sanctions include protesting towards referees, being dismissed for a double reprimand, demeaning and disrespectful attitudes towards referees (including insults and threats), and direct dismissal.

Taken together, data gathered in the present study are useful for diagnosing coaches' unsporting behaviours in grassroots soccer through referees' reports. This information with the most common motives behind sanctions will assist soccer educators and managers, as well as sports policymakers with the detection of negative behaviours that require more urgent intervention. In this way, present findings will serve for training programmes directed towards sports coaches.

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Conflict of interest

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Data repository

The data obtained and analysed in this study can be consulted in the following dataset: <https://doi.org/10.17632/4t7dthmr4.1>.

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