

Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

November 7, 2004 Sunday Weston Edition

SECTION: COMMUNITY NEWS; Pg. 1

HEADLINE: YOUTH SOCCER ORGANIZATION BANS SIDELINE CHEERING FOR A DAY TO QUELL FAN RAGE AND BOOST PLAYER TEAMWORK.

BYLINE: Yvonne Carey Special Correspondent,

Soccer fields at Broward County Regional Park at Weston bustled with activity the day before Halloween -- but were almost as silent as a cemetery.

That's because the American Youth Soccer Organization designated Oct. 30 as the region's first Silent Saturday, during which parents and coaches buttoned their lips so young players could unleash their talents.

"We wanted the kids to think on their own," said Richard Schwartz, commissioner for the AYSO Weston region. The AYSO gave out about 300 T-shirts to "exemplary supporters," Schwartz said.

Silent Saturday -- or "enforced silence in youth sports" as it was referred to in the national soccer convention that Schwartz attended this summer -- is a response to fan rage (to try to stop parents from spreading negativity, which can lead to fighting) or confusion on the field for the young players, Schwartz said.

Weston parents were advised about the day in a series of e-mails relayed by division directors and coaches to players' parents. Coaches, assistant coaches and spectators for games on Oct. 30 were encouraged to refrain from whistling, yelling, cheering or making any other noise directed at players.

Positive hand gestures, such as a thumbs-up or a quiet clap after quarters also were acceptable.

Occasionally a whoop was heard from parents, such as Southwest Ranches resident Tori Kidd, who said he "did not receive the memo."

"I didn't hear about it. I don't think I read about it anywhere," Kidd said, at a game for children 5 and younger. "At this age, we cheer for both teams anyway."

Some parents, newcomers to games played in AYSO's younger divisions, said

Silent Saturday caused stress between parents who were being quiet and those who either chose not to participate or didn't understand the plan because they were not English speakers.

"The kids thrive on encouragement from their parents. And how are people supposed to follow rules they can't understand?" said Susana Briceno.

However, Paul Degenkolb relished the thought of watching his daughter, who plays in the under-12 division, interact with her teammates. He was fine with holding a sign made for him by the team, known as the Roadrunners.

The sign read: Go Roadrunners! Beep! Beep!

"Instead of doing what parents or coaches say, this time they do it on their own," Degenkolb said.

Schwartz said there may be another Silent Saturday next year, although he said he has received requests to schedule games with the enforced silence more often -- "like every weekend."

Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

November 5, 2004 Friday Broward Metro Edition

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. 26A

HEADLINE: SPEAK UP FOR 'SILENT' GAMES

The city of Weston made a bit of history last Saturday. The community hosted South Florida's first "Silent Saturday," an event that gave parents and adult fans of youth soccer a chance to act their age.

The event was a success. Silence, and a rare show of civility, reigned over the matches. The youngsters had a chance to concentrate on and actually enjoy the game, without worrying that their decisions on the field would produce an outburst from the sidelines.

It can be difficult being an adult during an American Youth Soccer Organization game. Performance counts and emotions run high. A bad call or unwanted jeer, or, worse, an irksome cheer, can be a bummer for both parents and players on the field.

Unfortunately, such incidents sometimes result in brawls between headstrong adults who more often than not end up embarrassing the very youngsters they're trying to support. Pity the poor players who find themselves burdened with unruly adults. They came to play soccer, not baby-sit the spectators.

The Silent Saturday program is the soccer organization's attempt at a timeout. Field marshals are present to encourage the parents to keep quiet. The idea is to let the kids enjoy the game. It grew out of frustration with feuding parents in other parts of the country. It's worked in Oakland, Calif.; Bloomington, Ill.; Topeka, Kan., and Kansas City, Mo. Last week was South Florida's turn to zip it.

So, it's come down to this: Normally mature suburban adults were forced to be quiet so that young enthusiasts could enjoy the sport. Silent Saturday may have been a one-time event locally, but it worked, and an encore should be considered. Do it for the children.

The New York Times

November 5, 2004 Friday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section F; Column 1; Escapes; RITUALS; Pg. 1

HEADLINE: No Yelling, No Cheering. Shhhhh! It's Silent Saturday.

BYLINE: By ROBERT ANDREW POWELL

DATELINE: WESTON, Fla.

"NICOLAS, attack!"

Pauline Gomez pantomimes encouragement. Her arms extend at her side, her fingers stretching for the ground in jazz hands.

"That's it, Johnny! Very good job, Johnny!"

Her lips and cheeks stretch to scream, but she holds her voice back. What emerges is passionately expressed, yet quiet enough for a public library. At the Weston soccer complex this morning, cheering on her son's team, a whisper is all she's allowed.

"I know it's Silent Saturday," she says. "My husband says, 'I don't know how you're going to do it.' But I will somehow."

Silent Saturday is the name given to the day on which the coaches of youth sports are asked not to coach. Parents are asked not to cheer or to guide their progeny in any way. There is no shouting, no yelling, no threatening the officials or swearing at fathers from the opposing team. With the sidelines silenced, there is no pressure. The children are free to have fun.

At least that's the idea.

Mrs. Gomez, Venezuelan-born and raised in soccer-mad Brazil and now the team mother for a union of 6-year-old boys named the Blazin' Bass, is not inclined to silence. Nor are the hundreds of other parents struggling through Weston's first attempt to implement what has become a low-level national trend the last few years.

Weston, the team's home, is an upscale suburb west of Fort Lauderdale, almost to the Everglades. It's an amalgamation of gated communities and golf courses. Orange tile roofs protect the houses of professional athletes, corporate vice presidents and their families. Weston has so many families with so many soccer-playing kids -- nearly 2,500 boys and girls are registered with the league -- that on Saturdays the complex's 16 fields hold back-to-back games for 12 hours.

The Bass are playing on Field 6A, wearing their customary blue uniforms. Their opponents, the Seadragons, wear red. When the ball is blown into play, the players on both teams follow it around as iron filings would trail a magnet. Small bodies collide and separate like electrons as the ball scoots randomly up and down the field.

"Go with it, Colin, go upfield. There you go, Colin," Bill MacFalls, a coach, says almost under his breath. Today, he has been asked to limit his instruction to simple positioning. He quietly calls out to another player, who is gazing at the green hedges that ring the complex's wide field. The player never notices as a Seadragon wobbles past him to put the ball in the net.

"Who scored a goal?" asks Joshua, No. 8 for the Bass.

"The red team, says Mr. MacFalls. "What color are we, red or blue?"

"Blue?"

"Correct."

The players break at the end of the first 10-minute quarter. Mr. MacFalls

turns to a volunteer assistant. "It's dead out here, isn't it?" he says. "It's really kind of quiet today. The kids, I think, they react to their parents, I guess."

Those parents, accustomed to stalking up and down the sideline, sit in rows of nylon camp chairs. Armrests hold cups of Dunkin' Donuts coffee and already slushy servings of frozen lemonade. Barred from cheering on their sons and daughters, they talk on cellphones.

On the fringe of an adjacent field, two young boys tie their shoes, hissing battleship explosions as they tug each loop of lace. Two fathers stand with their arms folded, feet shoulder width apart. Vince Altino is a lawyer. Robert Cedenio is also a lawyer. While their namesake sons scurry between two nets, the fathers argue a position in which they are in complete accord.

VINCE: How is this not censorship? It's not like I'm yelling, "Fire!" in a crowded theater. It's support. Why is that deemed to be an impediment to coaching at this age?

ROBERT: "I don't see them having less fun because their parents are on the other side of the field running along with them.

VINCE: I feel I should be able to come out here and yell and support his team. Why in this country should I not be able to do that? It doesn't impede anything. My teaching my kids how to run? How is that an impediment?

ROBERT: I think it's a sort of suppression.

VINCE: I'm not going to have somebody in charge of a community league tell me I can't root for my son's team. Not in the U.S. of A. And I'm not going to be silent about it.

SILENT SATURDAY first gained national attention five years ago. The administrators of a girls soccer league in suburban Cleveland, fed up with increasingly engaged parents, issued a one-day ban on all coaching, including that from parents. For scheduling purposes, the day was labeled Silent Sunday.

"For the first couple of years we had parents all over us," says Carl Pavlovich, vice president of the Northern Ohio Girls Soccer League. "They were saying we were Hitler, we were dictators, we were violating their First Amendment rights."

In time, league officials softened the rules, and parents learned to accept them. With less coaching, the quality of the play on the field has improved, Mr. Pavlovich says.

The attention granted to Silent Sunday in Ohio spawned similar demonstrations nationwide. Soccer leagues from San Francisco to Parsippany, N.J., have tried it out. In Naples, Fla., a straight shot across the Everglades from Weston, parents were told they'd draw fines every time they opened their mouths.

"We got parents coming up to us, saying, 'Here's \$35, \$45. I know I'm going to say something,' " said Randy Bills, an official with the Optimist Club of Naples, which runs the program. "But the kids seem to really like it, and it does raise a little money for the program. I think everyone should do it at least once."

Science fairs and piano recitals feature cultures of quiet respect, says Jim Thompson, the director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, a youth sports research center at Stanford. In contrast, the raucous culture of professional sports has drifted down to the youth level, he says.

Mr. Thompson works with some 400 youth leagues around the country. He is not totally sold on the Silent Saturday concept. A soccer program he works with in Scarsdale, N.Y., recently opted for a "positive play day," when, instead of staying quiet, parents are asked to cheer only good play.

"I just think it's not the most effective way," Mr. Thompson says of Silent Saturdays. "I think it's effective for that particular day: parents are quiet, kids do enjoy themselves more than when there's yelling, but it doesn't teach parents the kind of things we want them to know."

Silent Saturday came to Weston by way of Richard Schwartz, the league's director. He acknowledges that there haven't been many instances of boorish parental behavior in Weston. There certainly is no Weston equivalent of the Massachusetts hockey father who beat a rival father to death. Mr. Schwartz says he still felt compelled to address the potential problem.

"There's got to be a safe zone," Mr. Schwartz says, standing under a canopy at the soccer complex, where he is handing out "I Support Silent Saturday" T-shirts. "There's got to be some area where the competition is not something we as parents thrust upon them. There's plenty of time for them to be competitive. They have their whole lives ahead of them."

Mr. Schwartz is a 40-year-old certified public accountant. He has two children, ages 10 and 8. Running the soccer league takes up as much as 50 hours a week, all volunteer work. After his decision to implement Silent Saturday, which was ratified by his board of directors, Mr. Schwartz began receiving e-mail from parents. A few were less than thrilled.

"You've no right to take away constructive coaching and the joy of a parent

whose son is finally mastering the sport," wrote one mother. "If you make someone feel bad as long as it's not mean to other coaches or players . . . than that is too bad. In the real world -- maybe not in your politically correct world, but in the real business world where most of these children go -- they will have to deal with others getting stars and them not. Get a grip."

Mr. Schwartz ran the e-mail author's name against his list of registered parents and players, to see what the age of her child was.

"I was hoping against hope that when I looked up the child it would have been an 18-year-old boy," Mr. Schwartz says. "Then I saw it was a 6-year-old. I started to feel really sorry of the state of youth sports. "

Back on Field 6A, the Bass are in danger of defeat. With the ball in play, three Bass players break off into a spontaneous group discussion, oblivious to the red-jerseyed player advancing on their goal. Another score for the Seadragons.

Mrs. Gomez, the team mom, puts her hand over her mouth.

"I grew up in Rio so you can imagine how I feel about soccer, yes?" she says. Her son, Nicolas, is six and a half years old. He was late to the game today because he misplaced his shin guards.

"They want to play, they need to be kids," says Mrs. Gomez, "but Pele used to say he learned how to be who he is in life because his parents taught him at 4 years old to play soccer."

When the game ends, it is believed the final score is 5 to 0 in favor of the Seadragons; none of the Bass know for sure. Billy MacFalls, the son of the coach, grabs a Gatorade bottle with his initials inked on the cap.

"I didn't think it was that good," he says of Silent Saturday. "When everybody screams and tells me stuff it makes me play better."

Mrs. Gomez gathers up the empty Gatorade bottles. From a portable cooler she pulls out a stash of Rice Krispies Treats. Finally liberated from the rules, she raises her voice for the first time this morning.

"This O.K. guys?" she says, handing out the treats. "We'll do it better next week. Don't be disappointed."