



# **EPIC Program Referee Manual**

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
AYSO's Six Philosophies.....	2
EPIC Program Philosophy .....	4
EPIC Matches .....	8
Conduct of Referees and Assistant Referees.....	10
Laws of the Game Digest for EPIC Program Referees .....	11
Thank You .....	13
Notes .....	15



# Introduction

The American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) welcomes you to its Everyone Plays In our Community (EPIC) Program! This program was formerly known as the Very Important Player (VIP) Program. What awaits you are opportunities and experiences you probably never dreamed possible when you first became an AYSO referee. Many referees develop preferences for a particular division or gender as they find a niche they like. We hope you will respond to the unpredictability, the unbridled passion, and the unexpected joy of officiating EPIC games and make the EPIC Program one of your special niches.

This EPIC Program Referee Handbook is intended to be used by AYSO referees who have taken and passed the Basic Referee Course and Safe Haven Certification. If you have not done this, please do not attempt to referee or use this booklet until you do so. This is vital to the success of the program. If you are an experienced referee, this handbook should help you to begin to understand the official's special role in EPIC play.

Nowhere in AYSO or soccer worldwide will you be closer to the spirit of the game than in EPIC soccer. The “fun, fair, safe” components (explained under “EPIC Program Philosophy”) are the centerpiece of our involvement, and teaching self-worth, group consciousness, cooperation, personal achievement, and self-control is nowhere more manifest than here. If you sometimes wonder where the game's spirit went, look no further – you will find it at an EPIC game. You may also find yourself competing with other referees for the privilege of being able to recapture this spirit again and again.

Welcome to the world of possibilities: where the joy of participation, the camaraderie of teamwork, and the thrill of playing soccer are no longer just dreams, but realities. Welcome to the world of EPIC soccer: where goals are celebrated no matter who scores, where referees are hugged and smile through the whole game, and where parents cry in joy as they cheer the players on. Come join us...beautiful players playing the beautiful game!

# AYSO's Six Philosophies

AYSO is proud of our six core philosophies:

## **Everyone Plays®**

Our program's goal is for kids to play soccer—so we mandate that every player on every team must play at least half of every game.

In AYSO, it is recognized that children learn skills, teamwork, and sportsmanship, and develop confidence by playing, not by watching. This is nowhere more true than with individuals with disabilities, who are more often spectators than players. Thus, with EPIC soccer, the philosophy yields added meaning to Everyone Plays®!

## **Balanced Teams**

Each year we form new teams as evenly balanced as possible— because it is fair and more fun when teams of equal ability play.

Balancing EPIC teams can be a bit more complicated, given the likelihood of great variety in age, size, and ability levels on one team. Whenever possible, at least two “divisions” are created based on these criteria and the original intent and ultimate results are the same.

## **Open Registration**

Our program is open to all children between 4 and 18 years of age (in EPIC there is no upper age limit) who want to register and play soccer. Interest and enthusiasm are the only criteria for playing.

There are no tryouts or cuts in AYSO. The challenge for the EPIC Program is ensuring that this message reaches the parents of individuals with special needs. While many parents of non-disabled players come to expect this philosophy, parents of special needs players tend to expect less. They need to know they are welcome—that there is a place for everyone in AYSO.

## **Positive Coaching**

Encouragement of player effort provides for greater enjoyment by the players and ultimately leads to better-skilled and better-motivated players.

Positive coaching is especially important when working with EPIC players. They may not understand all that a coach says, but a positive attitude and a smiling face are read loud and clear.

### **Good Sportsmanship**

We strive to create a positive environment based on mutual respect rather than a win-at-all-costs attitude, and our program is designed to instill good sportsmanship in every facet of AYSO.

EPIC games exemplify sporting behavior in action, where joy is derived from participation.

### **Player Development**

We believe that all players should be able to develop their soccer skills and knowledge to the best of their abilities, both individually and as members of a team, to maximize their enjoyment of the game.

EPIC soccer is all about enjoyment through personal growth in both skill development and participation with others. EPIC is a perfect blend of individual successes and teamwork.

# EPIC Program Philosophy

## **EPIC Mission Statement**

The mission of the AYSO EPIC Program is to provide a quality soccer experience for individuals whose physical or mental disabilities make it difficult for them to successfully participate on mainstream soccer teams. Through participation on EPIC teams, players enjoy the benefits of the AYSO philosophies as they play soccer at their level and within the context of the “spirit of the game.” This means that EPIC volunteers must be extra flexible, positive, and understanding to ensure success for the players.

## **Fun**

The simple act of participation is usually the primary ingredient for fun for EPIC players. The opportunity to be involved is far more important than the ability to perform, although many players perform at a very capable level. A positive, reinforcing environment is vital to the player’s enjoyment of the game. As in all of AYSO, the success of the “AYSO Team” of coaches, referees, and parents ensures the presence of that most vital ingredient—fun!

## **Fair**

Fairness is an issue that is closely tied to the individual as well as to the group. A player’s motives are much harder to read when trying to determine intent; therefore, judging a player’s action is frequently a cooperative effort based on the referee’s knowledge of the Laws, his or her familiarity with EPIC players, interaction with the EPIC buddies and input from the coach. A brief pre-game conference with the EPIC coach is recommended to agree on some basic strategies that players are already familiar with. The EPIC Program Referee needs to take cues from the coach at times, so these interactions flow smoothly.

## **Safe**

One of the defining issues with EPIC players is that many cannot participate safely on a mainstream team due to physical, mental, or emotional challenges. They may lack the mobility, stamina, comprehension, or emotional maturity needed for safe participation with typical players. These issues do not disappear during an EPIC game but are taken into account as necessary adjustments are made to ensure the safety and fullest possible participation of all players. Therefore, all EPIC volunteers are charged with being resourceful, creative, and flexible—the referee included!

## **Understanding EPIC Players**

Refereeing EPIC players requires all the things normally required for good officiating: knowledge of the Laws of the Game and the AYSO Rules & Regulations, pre-game preparation, awareness of player abilities, positive relationships with coaches and players, and so forth. However, typical EPIC teams defy the conventional age and gender divisions



that are the norm in youth soccer. EPIC teams generally start small and grow slowly, so there may only be enough players to divide into two groups and play each other.

Teams are almost always co-ed and are likely to encompass a wide spectrum of ages, sizes, disabilities, and capabilities. Special emphasis needs to be placed on understanding this phenomenon and what to expect from EPIC players. Here are some frequently observed characteristics that will help the referee to work successfully within that wide range.

### **General Physical Differences**

- May lag behind their age group peers in certain fundamental movement skills, e.g., running and kicking.
- May demonstrate an inability to control movements or slow down their pace. For example, a player may display too much force when trying to dribble using light touches on the ball.
- Mobility and range of movements may be limited and vary. One player may have a slight difficulty gait while another player requires an assistive device such as a walker.
- May not perform skills smoothly and efficiently; may use extra movements and unnecessary body parts, causing movement to appear clumsy.
- May show inconsistency in skill performance that vacillates from practice to practice.
- May tire easily and have little energy. Players may not have led an active lifestyle and have poor muscle tone.
- May be hyperactive and have excess energy that is difficult to control and causes a short attention span.
- May have difficulty generalizing skills learned in one setting to another. For example, the player cannot transfer the skill of dribbling in practice to a game situation.

### **General Cognitive Differences**

- May have better receptive language (ability to understand) than expressive language (ability to speak or gesture).
- May need more time to process information such as verbal instructions.
- May have difficulty staying focused on the activity or skill.
- May demonstrate poor motor planning: inability to initiate a movement and put the correct parts into a proper sequence.
- May have difficulty carrying out a two or three-step direction.
- May learn only through direct instruction; incidental learning is difficult.

- May understand language literally. Rather than ask “Are you beat?” the coach should ask a tired player “Do you need to rest?”

### **General Social/Emotional Differences**

- May exhibit extreme mood shifts ranging from happy to depressed all during one practice or game.
- May lag behind peers in social/emotional development.
- May have unusual fears.
- May be resistant to change, requiring a structured and consistent setting each time.
- May have poor interactive social skills, like taking turns.
- May have difficulty making friends because of behaviors that seem strange to other children.
- May have difficulty recognizing the behaviors of others and the message they are sending (facial expressions, body language, tone of voice).

### **Dealing With Specific Behaviors & Conditions**

- **Tactile defensiveness:** The player does not like to be touched. Do not initiate touching the player. Allow the player to make the first move.
- **Abnormal fears:** Don’t push the player to try and eliminate the fear. Encourage, but don’t force participation.
- **Violating personal space:** Some players don’t respect personal “boundaries” and constantly hug people or come too close. If this behavior bothers others, use buddies to help re-direct them and/or give verbal prompts as they approach players who resist being touched.
- **Sensory overload:** Players with cerebral palsy or autism may show physical signs of too much stimulation with facial grimacing, vocalizations, or spasmodic/ritualistic movements. The player may need to take a break from the activity for a while.
- **Tantrums, acting out:** If the player is out of control and posing a threat to himself/herself or others, a time-out is necessary until self-control is evident again. Ask the parents to help.
- **Seizure or other medical emergencies:** Don’t try to handle this yourself! Ask the parent or parent designee to help.

Not all of these apply at all times to all EPIC players, but the referee needs to be perceptive and flexible with EPIC participants. Most of these players simply want to play and have fun and are not concerned with cheating or defying authority despite some individual emotional

challenges. The referee needs to accept some unusual behaviors that might otherwise be seen as inappropriate. What appears to be a deliberate act may be an automatic response to a change in routine or too much stimulation.

Here, again, the referee must look to the knowledge and experience of the EPIC coach, at least until s/he has had enough exposure to EPIC players to be able to make some of these finer distinctions. Above all, protect the spirit of the game and, when appropriate, err on the side of humanity rather than the law. Remember AYSO Rule and Regulation 1 D 5, and interfere as little as possible. This will serve the players best.

### **Mental vs. Physical Disabilities**

Although EPIC teams are open to players with any disability, most of the players who register on an EPIC team have some degree of mental disability. This is because players who are only physically disabled have many of the same expectations and mental capabilities as non-disabled players and want to be treated accordingly. They often do not feel that they fit in with EPIC players. Every effort should be made to integrate these players on mainstream teams, as much as safety allows.

# EPIC Matches

The conduct of this or any other match depends on the referee's competence. It is anticipated that the EPIC Program Referee is a registered volunteer with AYSO, supports the AYSO philosophies, is physically fit, has proper referee attire and equipment, takes every assignment seriously, and has completed the appropriate training and certification.

Anyone who is not trained is ill-equipped to deal with the fundamentals of soccer officiating and should be discouraged from EPIC Program Refereeing until he or she has been competently trained.

Untrained volunteers may be able to demonstrate a knack for working these games, but they undermine the long-term objectives of the program because they will lack a fundamental understanding of the role of the soccer referee; they will be ignorant of the many subtleties of the history, spirit, and intent of the Laws; and they will be inconsistent with the training and interpretations of other referees, which could foster confusion and unhappiness on the part of the EPIC players.

Following are important prompters and information for game officials during pre-game, halftime, and post-game activities.

## **Pre-game**

- Be certain coaches have Player Registration Forms for EPIC players and Youth Volunteer Application copies for underage buddies.
- Check with the coach to determine the length of the game and the amount and duration of breaks needed.
- Check the field thoroughly, especially for things that would cause the players to stumble and fall.
- Inspect the nets and goals. Note: EPIC games are often played on unconventional fields with portable goals.
- Inspect the players' equipment. Make sure braces, walkers, etc., are padded. Check to see that each player using a wheelchair is accompanied by a buddy on the field. Headgear and helmets are allowed.
- If not yourself, know who has a cell phone and will be present the entire time.
- Allow extra time for warm-up if needed. This is extremely important.
- Do not give lengthy instructions, as many players will not understand them. "Be careful and have fun" should be enough.

- Conduct a normal coin toss if possible, or use another agreed-upon method.
- Stand away from the players when you whistle for play to start and reinforce it with a verbal prompt like “Okay, go!”

### **Halftime**

- When signaling for halftime, stand away from players when you whistle.
- Reinforce with a verbal prompt if necessary.
- Be certain every player has access to water.
- Allow no players to remain on the field or to come onto the field unattended. Ask for help from the coach(es) rather than policing this alone.
- Allow extra time if necessary.
- Do not have the teams change sides when the game restarts. It is too confusing for the players.
- Stand away from players when you whistle for play to start and reinforce it with a verbal prompt.

### **Postgame**

- When signaling for time to expire, stand away from players when you whistle. Reinforce it with a verbal prompt.
- Monitor the handshake ceremony. Make sure everyone has a chance to participate: players, coaches, buddies, even parents, and (yes!) officials. This is a time for affirmation and praise for all.

# Conduct of Referees

## **Officiating the Game**

- Make signals sharp and crisp, but not surprising or threatening. Reinforce hand and flag signals with simple verbal commands to help the players learn what they mean.
- Most EPIC players will respond positively to a whistle and quickly learn its importance for starting and stopping play, but remember not to whistle loudly near a player and to add verbal prompts.
- Expect players to play up to their potential. Coaches can help with this. For example, the coach will know which players can perform a regulation throw-in, requiring those players to repeat a throw-in that was not done correctly.
- Fouls and misconduct can occur during EPIC games, and should not be ignored. Enforce the Laws fairly with a good dose of common sense.
- Smile more than you are accustomed to—this is a joyful experience! However, still take the match seriously.

## **Interactions with EPIC Players**

- Avoid confrontational postures. EPIC players will read your body language long before they comprehend your verbal message.
- Use their first name if you know it, and try to elicit a response: a nod, a “yes,” a willing handshake.
- Do not force players to make eye contact with you or force a response. Consult with the coach if there are misbehaviors that need addressing.
- Stand off to the side, rather than directly in front of them, when talking to the players. Bend or kneel to their eye level rather than looming over them.
- Do not initiate touching the players; some are tactile defensive. Some may wish to hug you; just make sure it is in full view of other people and that it is initiated by the player.
- Do not wave or gesture wildly; this is confusing and threatening.
- Keep your voice calm and low. Talking loudly doesn’t improve their ability to understand you.
- Be liberal in your joy. Help both teams to enjoy fine moments of play. Be encouraging to both teams in the low moments of their endeavors, and help them to find happiness and excitement in the moment.

# Laws of the Game Digest

## for EPIC Program Referees

### **The Field of Play**

Fields will likely be downsized as local needs dictate. The EPIC Coach Manual recommends 6U-sized fields for younger players (4-12) and 8U-sized fields for players ages 13 and over. Goal- lines, touch lines, a halfway line, and a center circle are minimum markings. Other markings are helpful but their absence will not inhibit the playing of the game.

### **The Ball**

A size 5 ball is recommended even for younger players because it is larger and easier to target.

### **Number of Players**

Teams should always be short-sided, especially since the presence of coaches and buddies will add to the total number of bodies on the field. There is no “magic” number as many EPIC groups simply divide the total number of players in half and play each other. Smaller numbers are always preferable. So, if there are 20 total players it’s better to make four teams of five rather than two teams of 10.

### **Players’ Equipment**

All the requirements, including shin guards, are still in place. Exceptions should be made for players using braces, crutches, walkers, and other similar devices. These items need to be padded. Allow headgear and helmets.

### **Referees**

No changes.

### **Other Match Officials**

No changes.

### **Duration of the Match**

Four ten-minute quarters are recommended, with at least a five-minute halftime and short rests at the quarters. Older, more experienced players may play longer. Check with the EPIC coach to determine the game’s duration.

### **The Start and Restart of Play**

No changes.

### **Ball In and Out of Play**

Most EPIC players do not understand the finer points of this Law. Be flexible.

### **Method of Scoring**

No changes.

### **Offside**

Offside is irrelevant to EPIC play.

### **Fouls and Misconduct**

The penal fouls, non-penal fouls, and misconduct still apply. However, the judging of intent is very difficult in EPIC play, and most often an apparent penal foul is really an unintentional but dangerous act. As in similar cases, dangerous play is the most likely call in EPIC games. Pre-emptive refereeing and cooperation with buddies and coaches will virtually eliminate the need to caution or send off in the usual manner. However, tantrums or other potentially threatening outbursts must not be ignored. In these cases, signal the coach and/or parents to intervene and help the player off the field for a “time out” until self-control is evident again.

### **Free Kicks**

Award direct free kicks only.

### **Penalty Kick**

In keeping with other changes, the penalty kick is usually not used in EPIC play. Use your judgment with older, more experienced teams.

### **Throw-In**

Players are usually allowed more than one chance to throw the ball correctly. Those who are able should be held to a higher standard than players who cannot even raise their arms over their heads. Again, be flexible and take cues from the coach.

### **Goal Kick**

If the field is downsized and the proper markings are adjusted accordingly, this poses no problem. If markings are missing, help to place the ball and then use your body as the marker for the outside of the penalty area (about 14-15 yards from the goal line).

### **Corner Kick**

If the corner is not marked, help place the ball then proceed normally.



# Thank You

Thank you for participating in AYSO's EPIC Program and welcome to the world of EPIC soccer: where goals are celebrated no matter who scores, where referees are hugged and smile through the whole game, and where parents cry in joy as they cheer the players on. Come join us.....beautiful players playing the beautiful game.

If you have any questions or concerns that you or your fellow EPIC Program Referees or administrators would like assistance with, please contact the AYSO National Office:

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