

CHICAGO — The taunts from the parents and the coaches always got to him. They rained like showers of sparks from the sidelines: Get your fat body down the field. You're blind. You're just doing this for the money.

Then there was the autumn afternoon that Jovan Lazarevic has played over and over in his mind. A high school soccer game had just ended. The losing coach and two angry fathers followed Mr. Lazarevic, a 6-foot-2 referee and a former military policeman, to his car. "You cost me the game," the coach shouted. "My kid is heartbroken because of you," one of the fathers wailed. Mr. Lazarevic got into his car without changing out of his uniform and drove straight home, cleats on the gas pedal and an eye on the rearview mirror.

Last summer, Mr. Lazarevic, who had worked for 18 years as a referee in basketball, soccer and baseball in suburban Chicago, hung up his whistle.

"When people started saying personal things about me, about what I was as a person, I decided it was time to get out," he said. "When I was in high school, there was a greater respect for the officials, for the people around you, for the game. These days, all anyone thinks about is themselves instead of the game."

Mr. Lazarevic, a 32-year-old middle school science teacher who now coaches several sports, is among thousands of referees who have left high school and youth sports in recent years because of poor sportsmanship on the part of spectators, said Bob Still, a spokesman for the National Association of Sports Officials.

But that is only one of many results of what players, coaches, scholars and sports psychologists say is a rising tide of misbehavior at high school and youth sports, especially among adult spectators. Some call it "sideline rage." From hockey arenas in Maine to soccer fields in New Mexico, parents and amateur coaches are yelling and jeering — even spitting and brawling — as never before, experts say.

That in turn has led to a wellspring of new rules, workshops and state legislation aimed at curbing misconduct. In the suburbs of Cleveland, more than 250 girls soccer teams will be playing in near silence today, with coaches and parents prohibited from yelling inappropriately while players are on the field.

In El Paso, parents have to sit through a three-and-a-half-hour class on appropriate fan behavior before their children can play in city-sponsored youth sports. In Mission Viejo, Calif., near San Diego, a youth soccer league no longer records standings during the regular season for teams whose players are 8 to 11 years old.

Even lawmakers are addressing the problem. More than two dozen state legislatures have approved or are debating bills that stiffen penalties for attacks on referees.

"This shows the degree to which we've gotten out of control," said Thomas Tutko, a clinical sports psychologist and professor emeritus at San Jose State University in San Jose, Calif. "Many parents have lost sight of the purpose of sports. They're asking, 'Is my kid going to get a scholarship? Is my kid going to win?'"

Some scholars attribute the rise in sideline misbehavior to a general moral decay in American society. Others say that more people are emulating the belligerent behavior of some professional and college sports figures.

Whatever the reason, there is no disputing the statistics.

Reports from the 2,200 chapters of the National Alliance for Youth Sports show that about 15 percent of youth games involve some sort of verbal or physical abuse from parents or coaches, compared with 5 percent just five years ago, said Fred Engh, the president of the group, which is based in West Palm Beach, Fla.

Last year, an estimated 30 million children played on youth league teams, and 6.5 million teenagers competed in high school sports.

The most common reason given by referees for quitting is antagonism from coaches and parents, according to a survey completed in March by the National Association of Sports Officials, which recently began offering free assault insurance to its 18,500 members.

The same survey showed that 90 percent of high school sports associations said that a shortage of referees is causing problems in putting on games.

Last month, New Mexico became the 15th state to enact a law increasing penalties for attacks on referees. On April 25, the Illinois Legislature passed a bill mandating a minimum fine of \$1,000 for battery against sports officials. Nine other states are considering similar measures.

Most poor sportsmanship involves name-calling or other verbal attacks, but one infamous incident resulted in a death last July. Two fathers got into an argument at their sons' hockey practice in Reading, Mass., and one, Thomas Junta, is accused of beating the other, Michael Costa, to death. Prosecutors charged Mr. Junta with manslaughter, and he is awaiting trial, having pleaded not guilty.

In March, the coach of a junior high school volleyball team in Rockford, Ill., was accused of trying to bring a meat cleaver into a school after she argued with a referee who had disqualified her team from a game. The coach, Toni Gay, was charged with unlawful use of a weapon on school property and disorderly conduct; she was also dismissed by the school.

In some cases, adults have brought their anger from the playing field into the courtroom. In Miami-Dade County, the parents of girls softball players from Palmetto High School went to court last year to force a replay of a tournament game in which Palmetto had lost to Southridge High School.

They argued that two of Palmetto's best players had been improperly kept off the official team roster because of a computer error. A circuit court judge agreed, ordering a replay. Palmetto went on to defeat Southridge and six other opponents to win the state title.

But the experience has torn apart friendships and left both sides bitter; the Florida High School Activities Association decided to put an asterisk next to Palmetto's name in the record book to mark that it had earned its championship title "due to court injunction."

"When I was playing sports as a kid, there didn't have to be an end product," said Dan Doyle, executive director of the Institute for International Sport, based in Kingston, R.I. "You were playing for the joy of it. But the way things have been set up, there's this sense of advancement now."

But there is also a growing awareness that misbehavior by fans and coaches has become a problem, he said, and "there is much, much more being done today on issues related to sportsmanship than a decade ago."

One example is the workshops being run by the parents' division of the National Association for Youth Sports. The first was held in Jupiter, Fla., early last year. About 2,500 parents of youth league athletes were required to sit through a one-hour session and sign a pledge of good conduct before their children could play.

More than 300 cities are holding or planning to hold similar workshops, Mr. Engh said. In El Paso, the mayor

asked parks officials to come up with a way to curb sideline violence after more than 30 parents began fighting at a football game in September 1999. One father stabbed another between the eyes with a down marker, and about 10 people were arrested. The city started its three-and-a-half-hour workshops the following year. More than 12,000 parents have participated.

"You can see a change from two years ago," Mayor Carlos Ramirez said. "Parents tended to be very aggressive. They were insulting. Now they are still going to cheer their kids, but they'll do it in a way that's very positive."

In 1999, the Positive Coaching Alliance, based in Palo Alto, Calif., began holding workshops around the country. Coaches are taught how to compete with dignity. More than 200 workshops have been held, drawing about 10,000 coaches, Jim Thompson, the alliance's president, said.

Several youth soccer leagues are playing at least one game a season in near silence; coaches and parents are instructed to keep their yelling to a minimum.

The Heartland Soccer League in the suburbs of Kansas City, Mo., adopted the practice, as did the Northwest Rio Grande Soccer League in the Albuquerque area. Encouragement from the sidelines was allowed, but those who yelled at referees, told their children how to play or criticized others were fined \$5.

The idea first came from the Northern Ohio Girls Soccer League, based in the suburbs of Cleveland. In 1999, two officials from the league, which has 255 teams, decided to put an end to sideline rowdiness. The league held its first Silent Sunday that October.

Since then, it has played one game per season under those rules, with the next one to take place today.

"My players would probably say they wish every Sunday was Silent Sunday, and I wouldn't have any problem with that myself," said Mike Cahill, a coach in Strongsville, Ohio.

"In a way, it's a sad commentary. Really, the next step is to eliminate the fans altogether and just let the kids play the game.