

Bend FC's Referee Development Program Emerges as Post-Pandemic Success Story

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, youth sports organizations across the country struggled to rebuild operations. For Bend FC, one of the most urgent challenges was a critical shortage of certified soccer referees in Central Oregon.

As play resumed, fewer than 25 certified officials were available to cover a rapidly expanding schedule of matches. The shortage, which had existed for years, was intensified by the pandemic. Local assignors and associations lacked the resources and infrastructure to recruit, train, and retain new referees, leaving many games understaffed or unassigned. Officials were frequently asked to work multiple matches in a day, often alone on fields that required three referees.

"It became clear that the traditional system wasn't enough," said Donnie Emerson, then Bend FC's Operations Manager and now the club's Executive Director. "If we wanted consistent, high-quality officiating, we had to invest in developing referees the same way we invest in players and coaches."

Drawing on his own background as a referee, Emerson led the effort to create an internal referee development system within Bend FC's recreational leagues. The program was designed to align fully with U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) policies and guidelines while establishing a long-term pathway for recruitment, education, mentorship, and retention.

Over the course of a year, Bend FC staff members, coaches, and volunteers earned certifications as USSF referees, assignors, mentors, and instructors. Emerson became a USSF Mentor Plus Instructor and Bend FC Adult League Manager Jessica Passage became the program's Assignor. They formed a unified development team focused on introducing new officials through recreational play before preparing them for competitive and state-level assignments.

To ensure transparency and compliance with conflict-of-interest policies, all development matches were held within the club's recreational system, with Bend FC teams competing against Bend FC teams. This structure allowed for consistent oversight and ethical management. The program was designed to develop first, then guide new referees towards State League and area Platform League Competitive USSF Assignors.

The initiative became known as the Bend FC Referee Group and was developed in partnership with the Oregon Referee Committee.

Through the program, Bend FC began hosting certification clinics, promoting referee education through its marketing channels, and providing access to fields, classrooms, and live-match training environments. New officials received hands-on mentoring during their first games, along with ongoing evaluation and support.

The club also helped referees navigate assigning platforms, offered specialized assistance to parents of officials under 18, and created affordable uniform options in partnership with Capelli Sport. A uniform exchange program and continuous educational resources further lowered barriers to entry.

“This program removed many of the obstacles that prevent people from becoming referees,” Emerson said. “We wanted officials to feel supported from day one.”

Since its launch, the program has certified more than 200 Central Oregonians as referees. Retention rates have remained high, significantly strengthening the region’s officiating pool.

The impact has extended beyond numbers. Bend FC reports improved game environments, reduced negative sideline behavior, stronger relationships between coaches and referees, and higher standards of professionalism across leagues. The program has also created new income opportunities for players, parents, and community members.

At Bend FC, referees are now viewed as essential members of the player development team.

“Officials are teachers of the game,” Emerson said. “When coaches and referees work together respectfully, players learn sportsmanship and accountability. That sets the tone for everything that happens on the field.”

Club leaders emphasize that positive coach–referee relationships play a critical role in shaping youth sports culture. Respectful communication, they say, encourages fair play and reduces conflict.

In addition to competitive and developmental benefits, the program has generated new revenue streams for the club. Bend FC now provides assigning platform services, and consulting support to other organizations in the region.

What began as a grassroots response to a post-pandemic crisis has grown into a sustainable model for referee development, benefiting both Bend FC and the broader Central Oregon soccer community.

Donnie Emerson is the Executive Director of Bend FC, a US Soccer B Licensed Coach, US Soccer Club Technical Leader, a US Soccer Referee Assignor, Referee, Mentor, and Educator.