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Every weekend, across fields and parks, something pretty special happens before the first whistle even blows – parents, caregivers, older siblings, and community members put their hands up to referee games so our tamariki and rangatahi can play.

That commitment deserves a massive shout-out.

These referees aren't there for recognition, rewards, or perfect performances. They step in because they care about kids having the chance to play, learn, and enjoy their sport. Many are juggling roles – parent on the sideline one minute, referee in the middle the next – often with limited training, no assistants, and plenty happening all at once.

And the players notice. Ask young players what they think of referees and you'll often hear the same message: they're doing their best.

Kids know referees are human. They understand mistakes happen. What matters most to them is that someone is there to keep the game moving, safe, and fair.

Referees make quick decisions under pressure. There's no replay, no pause button, no perfect angle. Just a split second to judge what they saw and keep the game flowing. They do this while watching for safety, managing restarts, encouraging fair play, and helping create an environment where kids can enjoy themselves.

When adults show referees respect – even when we don't agree with a call – we send a powerful message to our children. We show them what sportsmanship looks like in action. We teach them that disagreement doesn't require disrespect, and frustration doesn't excuse poor behaviour.

That lesson sticks far longer than any result on the scoreboard.

It's also worth remembering a simple truth: without a referee, we don't have a game. No referee means no kickoff, no competition, no chance for kids to learn teamwork, resilience, or joy through sport. Supporting and respecting referees helps ensure there are people willing to step into that role week after week.

So next time the whistle goes against your team, take a breath. Remember the person in the middle is doing their best – just like the kids on the field. Your calm response, your encouragement, your respect might seem small in the moment, but to a young player watching from the pitch, it's a powerful example of what sport is really about.