

**MLS NEXT**

**REFEREE HANDBOOK**

**AS OF SEPTEMBER 1, 2023**





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# I. Introduction

MLS NEXT was established in 2020, as the most elite youth soccer pathway in North America. Comprised of over 130 clubs and over 600 teams competing across the United States and Canada.

MLS NEXT is sanctioned by MLS as an affiliate of the United States Soccer Federation (U.S. Soccer).

## A. Competition Structure

MLS NEXT is organized two competitions.

- MLS NEXT League
- MLS NEXT Flex

## B. Age Group Structure

MLS NEXT is organized into six different age groups.

- U13, U14, U15, U16, U17, U19



## II. MLS NEXT Match Day Contacts

- 1) MLS NEXT Hotline, Primary Contact
  - (646) 682-5999
  
- 2) Jeffrey Hajek, MLS NEXT Soccer Operations & Administration
  - (518) 744-6722
  - [Jeffrey.hajek@mlssooccer.com](mailto:Jeffrey.hajek@mlssooccer.com)
  
- 3) Emilio Gulati, MLS NEXT Soccer Operations & Administration
  - (347) 819-1997
  - [Emilio.Gulati@MLSsoccer.com](mailto:Emilio.Gulati@MLSsoccer.com)
  
- 4) Dick Triche, Official Management Group National Referee Assignor
  - (832) 295-9601 ext. 101
  - [mlsnextref@officialsmgtgroup.com](mailto:mlsnextref@officialsmgtgroup.com)
  
- 5) Mike Mekelburg, Official Management Group National Referee Assignor
  - (813) 690-3627
  - [mikemeksr@outlook.com](mailto:mikemeksr@outlook.com)



### III. Memo to Match Officials

To: All Match Officials Selected for MLS NEXT match assignments in 2023-24 Season.

From: Officials Management Group

Welcome and Congratulations on having been selected to officiate in MLS NEXT!

It is our distinct pleasure to coordinate and direct officiating services for MLS NEXT and in doing so work directly with MLS NEXT Operations and a system of over 50 National and Local Assignors. It is the goal of OMG to provide you with the necessary information and support to enable you to perform the duties of your assignment in a most professional manner.

Please use this Referee Handbook as a guide to your pre-match preparation and post-match duties and responsibilities as you work MLS NEXT matches this season.

By following the procedure outlined in this manual you will avoid emails or phone calls requesting additional information.

Use **MLS Match Day Contacts** listed on the previous page to resolve your match day issues.

Feel free to contact OMG by e-mail ([mlsnextref@officialsmgtgroup.com](mailto:mlsnextref@officialsmgtgroup.com))

MLS NEXT endeavors to provide opportunities for a match official to develop quality match experience, management skills, professionalism, through developing relationships with the coaches and players. Too often, coaches and players are ignored when there is conflict. Ignoring frustration then leads to aggression.

Additionally, when referees show arrogance, it leads to trouble. Instead, it is recommended referees use command presence and personality to communicate with players and coaches. Actively use reflective listening so they know they have been heard. They don't expect you to agree with them, they just want to be heard. Show respect and you will receive respect in return.

On behalf of MLS NEXT, we wish you all the very best in the achievement of your officiating goals and objectives as we work together through this third season.



## IV. MLS NEXT Pre-Match

### A. Assignments

All MLS NEXT Referee Assignments will be made by National Assignors and Local Assignors.

- Assignments are recommended to be made 4-6 weeks in advance if possible and should be checked and accepted or declined in a timely manner
- Officials need to be aware of the possibility of back-to-back assignments (consecutive home, road or chronological dates or assignments with the same team) if conflicts exist notify your assignor and avoid acceptance of Matches with possible conflicts
- Officials should keep their availability up to date on the Assignr.com assignment web page

### B. Pre-Match Contact

Contacts must be made between all officials' days prior to the Match. Whether by e-mail or by phone; the following items must be discussed:

- Arrival time (1 hour prior to the Match), attire (dress warmups and polo, no warmups, or shorts) and time and place of the pre-match meeting
- Dress Code and Appearance:
  - Referees are always expected to exhibit a professional demeanor, including dress and appearance
  - You may arrive in Match Day attire/uniform
  - Official Referee Uniform is Officials Sports

### C. Match Day Necessities

The following officiating necessities must be brought to the Match by the officials:

- Current IFAB Laws of the game book
- MLS NEXT Referee Handbook
- AR flags (electronic is ok)
- Official Sports Uniforms of various colors
- Current US Soccer Officiating publications
- Hydration
- Whistles
- Cards
- Writing utensil (pen, marker, pencil, game cards, index card paper to record match information)
- **Radio Communication Devices are not permitted by U.S. Soccer Directive for youth matches that include Grassroot officials in the Referee Crew**
- **Vanishing spray is not authorized for use in any MLS NEXT Match**



## D. Home Team Responsibility for Match Day

- Verify with Home Team location of the Qualified Medical Personnel (QMP), Certified Athletic Trainer (ATC), or Health Care Professional (HCP)
  - QMP, ATC, or HCP must be on site minimum 60 minutes prior to kickoff
  - **If QMP, ATC, or HCP is not present, the Match will not start until he/she arrives**
  - If both teams arrive at the field and home team does not provide QMP, ATC, or HCP, the match will not be played, the home team will forfeit the Match and be fined
  - Referee must notify League Contact and this must be noted in the Kitman Labs Match Report Notes while also checking the “Disciplinary Issues” checkbox
  
- Technical Area must have adequate seating for both teams Players and Staff
  - Spectators are not allowed to enter the Field of Play or the Technical Area at any time
  
- Home club must provide adequate hydration for both teams consistent with COVID-19 protocols

## E. Match Day Timeline

- Referee Arrival
  - Referee crew is expected to arrive on site a minimum of 60 minutes prior to scheduled kick-off
  - Referees are expected to comply with all applicable Return to Play Protocols (RTPP)
  
- US Soccer Recognize to Recover Environmental Conditions
  - The above is in reference to environmental related issues that do affect the Match, players, coaches, spectators, and officials. Related issues may include temperatures (including heat and cold), as they apply to Hydration breaks, weather related stoppages, field conditions.
  - For additional information visit: **Recognize to Recover- Lightning and Severe Weather** <http://www.recognizetorecover.org/environmental/>
  - If you have any questions or concerns, you must contact MLS NEXT Match Day Contacts for guidance. Questions concerning water breaks should be determined prior to the kickoff.

MLS NEXT Match Day Timeline	U-13	U-14 & U-15	U-16, U-17 & U-19
Teams and Referees arrive at Field	-60:00	-60:00	-60:00
Referee receives Match Day Roster thru Kitman Labs	-36:00	-36:00	-36:00
Referee Checks-in Players and Staff	-35:00	-35:00	-35:00
Teams Warm Up	-30:00	-30:00	-30:00
Teams and Referees take the Field	-1:00	-1:00	-1:00
First Half Begins	0:00	0:00	0:00
First Half Ends	+35:00*	+40:00	+45:00
	15 Minute Half Time	15 Minute Half Time	15 Minute Half Time
Halftime Ends and Second Half Kickoff	+50:00	+55:00	+60:00
Match Ends	+85:00	+95:00	+105:00





## F. Player Check-in

Kitman Labs is the official platform for MLS NEXT competition management.

*Instructions to be added.*

## G. Kitman Labs

Kitman Labs is the official platform for MLS NEXT competition management.

*Instructions to be added.*

## H. Team Uniforms

- MLS NEXT clubs/teams are expected to respect uniform regulations as set by MLS NEXT and as governed by The Laws of the Game, Law 4, as part of standard practice in the league. If disputes occur, the clubs should contact the MLS Next League Representative
- Home team is required to change if there is a conflict between teams
- Home team wears the light uniforms and Away team wears dark for all single fixtures or first Match of double fixtures
- All uniforms must be numbered with an MLS NEXT Logo patch on the right sleeve
- In second day (Sunday) of a double fixture, the home team wears dark and away team wears light so teams traveling do not need to worry about laundry during the trip
- It is the referee's responsibility to ensure strict compliance with the Laws of the Game, not to resolve uniform disputes between the clubs
- For a review of Law 4, The Players' Equipment, go here <http://www.theifab.com/laws> pg. 58 subpar 3

## I. Match Balls

adidas is the Official Match Ball must be used for all matches

- U13: Size 4 match ball
- U14-U15: Size 5 match ball
- Minimum of 3 Match balls size 4 and 5 supplied by the Home Team will be verified by the Officials
- Balls should be inflated to 12-13 psi for Matches
- **If a team does not provide MLS NEXT Academy adidas Match ball, play the match. Referee will report this in the Notes Section of the MOD11 Match Report.**





## V. MLS NEXT Match

### A. MLS NEXT Age Divisions / Match Duration

MLS NEXT is organized into six different age groups.

- U13, U14, U15, U16, U17, U19

#### Match Duration

- **U13** = 2 x 35-minute halves plus 15-minute half time interval (85-minute match length)
  - Minimum for completed Match 55 minutes (half + 20-minutes)
- **U14-U15** = 2 x 40-minute halves plus 15-minute half time interval (95-minute match length)
  - Minimum for completed Match 60-minutes (half + 20-minutes)
- **U16-U19** = 2 x 45-minute halves plus 15-minute half time interval (105-minute match length)
  - Minimum for completed Match 75-minutes (half + 30-minutes)
- Added time in the match is at the referee's discretion

#### Overtime

- During regular season play there is **NO provision for overtime**. If the score is tied at the end of regulation time, the Match is ended in a tie.

### B. Team Pre-match warmup

- Each team is allowed minimum of 30-minute warm-up prior to kick off

### C. Substitutions

#### Substitution Moments

- Any stoppage of play which the Referee at his/her discretion allows a player substitution, may include but not limited to the following: Throw-in (either team), Goal Kick, Corner Kick, after a Goal, stoppage for Player/Staff Misconduct, stoppage for injury.
  - Halftime does not count as a substitution moment
- U13 & U14 = Unlimited over 3 moments per half, plus HT. No re-entry per half/period.
  - With exception for head injuries
- U15 and above = 7 substitutions over 3 moments per Match, plus HT. No re-entry.
  - With exception for head injuries
  - Teams U15 and older are responsible for supplying substitution passes and recording all information
  - It is the referee's responsibility to confirm all information is correct



#### Substitution Example U13-U14

- 32' Stoppage 1 (1 substitution 3 players) 2 moments remaining
- 34' Injury Stoppage 2 (1 substitution 1 player) 1 moment remains

**Halftime** (1 substitution 2 players)

- 65' Stoppage 1 (1 substitution 1 player) (2 moments remaining in the period/2<sup>nd</sup> half)

#### Substitution Example U15-U19

- 32' Stoppage 1 (1 substitution 1 player) **6 substitutions, 2 moments remaining**
- 34' Injury Stoppage 2 (1 substitution 1 player) **5 substitutions, 1 moment remaining**

**Halftime** (1 substitution 2 players) **3 substitutions, 1 moment remaining**

- 65' Stoppage 3 (1 substitution 2 players) **1 substitution unused, No moments remaining**
  - Even though the team may have players that have not entered the match they have no more substitution moments left, the team may not make another substitution because all 3 moments have been used. (With exception to the Head Injury Substitution as indicated below).

### D. MLS NEXT Head Injury Substitution Policy

A Player who is suspected to have suffered a head injury may be substituted while being evaluated by a QMP (temporary substitution). The substitution for the evaluation of the concussion/head injury will **not** count against the Team's total number of substitution moments in the match.

If the Player is deemed by a QMP to **not have suffered a concussion**, the Player may re-enter the match at any stoppage of play and must replace the temporary substitute; this head injury evaluation substitution will not count as a substitution moment. Furthermore, the temporary substitute will be able to re-enter the match at a later time if not previously substituted out earlier in the match for a non-head related substitution.

If the Player is deemed by the QMP to have suffered a possible concussion and is not cleared to return to play, the temporary substitute will be considered a permanent substitute.

#### Policy Principles

- A “concussion substitution” may be made regardless of the number of substitutes or moments already used
- If all substitutes have been used the “concussion substitute” can be a player who has previously been substituted
- Each team is permitted an unlimited amount of “concussion substitutions”



## VI. Authority to Delay or Postpone a Match

- MLS NEXT League Office is the only Authority to Delay, Cancel or Postpone a scheduled Match.
  - If a situation arises that you as an official need to request to cancel, delay a match you must first get that approval from the Match Day contact for MLS NEXT (Page 3)
  - Do not postpone a Match or depart from a venue before contacting a MLS NEXT Representative.

### A. Match Day Emergencies

- **Missing Crew member on Match Day**
  - Officials that are delayed if able should contact their other crew members, their respective assignor, and the MLS NEXT Match Day contact
  - If a Crew member is missing from the crew and has not contacted any one on the crew, the referee or senior AR should contact their respective assignor and then MLS NEXT Match Day contact
- **Weather**
  - Match delays due to weather must be reported by the Referee who is responsible for contacting the MLS NEXT Match Day contact.
- **Injured player(s)**
  - Injuries that occur during the Match involving a player(s) should be left to the QMP to manage and if need be contact further emergencies services as required.
  - If the injury is severe and needs further assistance the MLS NEXT Match Day contact must be alerted.
  - Referee must report all severe injuries in the notes section of the Match Report
- **Spectators or Outside Interference**
  - Match delays due to spectators or outside interference must be recorded in the notes section of the Match report and reported to the MLS NEXT Match Day contact.
- **If personal safety is at risk contact 911.**

### B. Improper Field Conditions

- There can be **NO CONES** used in place of any lines during an MLS NEXT Match, under any circumstance.
- If you are at a facility during the pre-Match routines and notice any cones being used in place of lines (even if it's just a partial use on one area of the field), please take the following steps:
  - Speak to the Home Club head coach/director/facility manager and inform them that the Match will not be played unless/until they can fully line the field.
    - If they can get the field fully lined or move the Match to a different fully lined field at the same complex in a reasonable amount of time (defined as kicking off the match within 15 minutes of the original KO time), then the match(es) can be played as scheduled.
  - If the Home Club informs you that they cannot get a fully lined field, you should call the MLS NEXT Match Day contact to inform them of the issue, and a member of the MLS NEXT Staff will inform you immediately how to proceed.



- At that time, the representative will tell the Staff and the Referee(s) that the Referee Crew is being dismissed for the day and the Match will not be played due to the Home Club not securing a venue that meets MLS NEXT Academy Standards.

## VII. Post Match Duties and Responsibilities

### Match Reporting

It is the assigned Referee's responsibility to complete and ensure the Match Report is submitted in a timely manner. It is the Referee Crew's Responsibility to ensure the Match Report is accurate: score, cautions, sendoffs, injuries, weather, and any important added Match information that requires League Admin attention.

- If you have any issues with the Kitman Labs Match Report including delay in submitting the Report, you must contact MLS NEXT Match Day contact
- It is recommended the Referee Crew review the finalized Match Report before it is submitted for accuracy. The entire crew has access to the Kitman Labs Match Report.
- Kitman Labs Match Report is the official Match Reporting platform for all MLS NEXT Matches (no supplemental reporting required for MLS NEXT Staff).
- **Yellow Cards (cautions) and Red Cards are tracked and must be submitted in the Match Report.**
  - **MLS NEXT implements Yellow Card Accumulation rules requiring timely and accurate Match Reporting**
- It is recommended the Referee enter the score and discipline in the Kitman Labs Match Report before leaving the field
- The Final Submission of the Match Report must be submitted no later than 10:30 PM on match day. This includes evening Matches that kick off after 6:00 PM.
- Check the Discipline Issue Check-Box for egregious discipline issues or anything requiring MLS NEXT Staff attention.
- All injuries should be included in the Notes Section regardless of the Player returning to play or not.

### PLEASE NOTE

Match Reports should be submitted immediately after the match and are **REQUIRED** to be fully submitted the same day. Failure to complete the Match Report in a timely manner compromises MLS NEXT competition integrity. If you are proven to not submit Match Reports in a timely manner, you MAY be limited to AR1 & AR2 assignments within MLS NEXT. Additionally, Match Reporting is included in referee evaluations and will be a factor in future opportunities.



## VIII. Officials Fees and Travel Policy:

MLS NEXT will be processing Referee fees through Assignr.com product, available for you to review and manage using your current access to the website.

The GOPay system will allow faster more efficient match fee payments with enhanced reporting and tracking feature.

With GOPay, you have the following payment options:

- Receive match fee payment directly to your bank account via Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) at no charge.
- There are no provisions (process) to distribute match fee payments by mailing paper checks

ALL MLS NEXT Officials must set up a payment method/GOPay account on MLS Youth Academy - Assigning: Player Development LLC (MLS Youth Academy) [Group 1755] to receive payment.

All Match fees will be processed using GOPay.

You must submit a Tax Payer Identification Form (W-9) and MLS NEXT Waiver to [pkelley@officialsmgtgroup.com](mailto:pkelley@officialsmgtgroup.com) to receive payments for services. Those documents can be downloaded from MLS NEXT Gameofficials home page.

### U15-U19 Match Fees

- Referee Match fee per match assigned: \$100.00
- Assistant Referee Match fee per Match assigned: \$60.00

### U13-U14 Match Fees

- Referee Match fee per Match assigned: \$75.00
- Assistant Referee Match fee per Match assigned: \$50.00

### Match Cancellation Payment Policy

- This matter will be addressed on an individual basis, considering the timing and the reason for the cancellation as submitted to the league
- For fixtures canceled when referees are onsite, the first match's full fee will be paid

### Referee Travel

Will be managed on Match-by-Match basis and will only be approved when requested advance.

- Local officials are not available for specific home team locations and or time and travel would be required by Referee(s) to cover the Match(s) as scheduled.
- Travel for multiple officials will be "carpool" of Referee crew if more than one official has to travel.
  - The driver would only be approved for payment of travel stipend.





Travel payments will be included in the Go Pay when they have been approved and will be noted in the Assignr.com game notes section.