

One booking, two bookings, three strikes and you're out

I am sure every single one of you know what I am referring to as Graham Poll had to award three yellow cards to Josip Simunic before he sent him off. By the time he had given that third booking, the final whistle had already blown. That performance, by a referee who is considered one of the best in the world, paints a perfect picture of just how bad some of the refereeing in this year's World Cup had been.

As FIFA were hoping that this tournament would set the standard for refereeing, their dreams were slowly crushed as referees who in any other way failed to control their matches, handed out card upon card. Although the mistakes were already happening in the group phase, they became much more apparent in the knock out stages.

Luckily for FIFA, Graham Poll's failure to send off Simunic after his second booking did not lead to further embarrassment as Australia drew with Croatia and advanced into past the group phase. Had they in fact failed to go through to the next stage they could have demanded a replay based on the mistake made by the referee, which in turn would have further underlined how little FIFA's determination to prepare their referees had done them much, if any, good.

In the match between Portugal and Holland, the story was something quite different. In all, the referee handed out 16 yellow and 4 red cards. As English fans were watching in excitement waiting to find out which team England would be facing in the next stage, all eyes were on Valentin Ivanov, as the Russian referee already from the beginning had been making poor decisions. After 59 minutes, Figo received a booking after head butting Van Bommel, something that usually would constitute a direct red card. Had he been sent off, that would have left Holland at the time with eleven against nine players, something that could have completely changed the outcome of the game. As FIFA has publicly, if not surprisingly, acknowledged the referee's decision to only give Figo a yellow card as the correct decision, he perhaps unfairly will still be available to play a part in Portugal's next match against England. A match where England's opponent, if fortune had favoured Holland, would perhaps have been them rather than the somewhat lucky southern Europeans.

One player getting sent off after two minutes, many others being booked for time wasting, handballs being penalised with bookings when in the mid circle, yet ignored when in the box. Players are fighting behind the backs of oblivious referees, other players bullying referees into making decisions favouring their team. Referees are trying so hard to obey by the high expectations of FIFA that they either under or over achieve, neither of which does the game any favours. Confident referees such as Pierluigi Collina or Anders Frisk are forced to retire due to the Italian Football Federation deciding randomly what is and is not a conflict of interest or stupid football fans making death threats at someone who is just doing their job.

When Collina in 2005 accepted a sponsorship deal with Opel, who also sponsor AC Milan, the FIGC decided this was a conflict of interest. Collina's reply was to retire from refereeing a year early saying that the federation no longer had faith in him. Ironically this was shortly after the federation had extended the retirement age from 45 to 46 years of age just to be able to keep Collina in the game for an extra year.

Considering Poll was actually Collina's replacement in the World Cup, this without a doubt added to the pressure the English referee was experiencing.

Anders Frisk had the doubtful pleasure of refereeing Chelsea's 2-1 defeat to Barcelona, where he red carded Didier Drogba, leaving the Chelsea manager and not least the fans thoroughly unhappy. Two weeks later after many death threats made by what were, alleged to be, mainly English Chelsea fans, Frisk retired from football fearing for the lives of himself and his family. We have all had a moment where after losing a match we have put the blame on the referee, misplaced bookings, penalties to the opposition, denying us the penalty we should have had. Thankfully most football fans do not possess the stupidity of those of Chelsea's fans who forced one of the world's best referees to retire due to their own teams' failure to perform.

As the tournament is approaching it's final stages, I hope that the standard of refereeing is raised and that none of the remaining matches are ruined by the incompetence of either FIFA on a power trip or a referee having a nervous break down. As the more competent referees are getting older and retiring, or not being chosen to represent FIFA in tournaments due to the organisation's not so new "lets pick referees from countries where they don't know much about football" attitude (I shall mention no names), the future of the game itself is in danger. As more rules are being pressed upon the players and the referees, the more the players seem to break the rules. The stricter that the referees are getting, the more the players will disobey them and still try to get away with as much as they can. Being a good referee isn't just about knowing when to give that free kick, or hand out that yellow or red card, it is knowing when not to do it. It is to know when to bend the rules for the better of the game, and sticking to one set of rules throughout the match. A world-class referee could do the above in their sleep. Sadly, the referees who don't possess the skills of refereeing in the top flight are the ones who sleep whilst on the job.

This article was written prior to the World Cup Final in July 2006.

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