

## REFEREES UNDER FIRE

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Leeds United's full-back Ian Harte after being kicked by Manchester United goalkeeper Fabien Barthez in the Elland Road incident that resulted in Barthez only being cautioned and conceding a penalty, which he saved.

Referees are coming under intense scrutiny and receiving considerable criticism for decisions which players, managers, fans and the media claim are influencing the outcome of too many high-profile matches. The decisions which arouse most controversy fall into two categories: those concerning the punishment of players for foul or unsporting play; and those relating to whether or not a goal is allowed to stand.

The latter raise issues about how helpful technical aids might be to referees, while the former highlight the long-standing problem of a perceived inconsistency among the officials.

In recent weeks there have been several instances of both types of decision:

- In the Leeds v Manchester United game, Fabien Barthez kicked out at Ian Harte and conceded a penalty but only a yellow card, staying on the pitch to save the penalty. The referee said he saw the whole incident, in which case it is difficult to understand why Barthez was not sent off.
- In the same match, Wes Brown put the ball into his own net. The Manchester United defenders clearly thought it was a goal, but a referee's assistant (linesman) put his flag up and the score was ruled out.
- Arsenal's Patrick Vieira was the victim of a shocking, potential leg-breaker of a tackle by Robert Prokas of Carlisle United. The referee said he thought it was a fair tackle from where he stood, so Prokas

went unpunished, and Vieira, despite a shattered and bloodied shin-guard, did not even get a free-kick.

- The same player was charged with misconduct and subsequently punished with a ban and fine for kicking Leeds United's Olivier Dacourt in the head. The referee, who booked eight other players in the game, was well-positioned but didn't see the incident.
- Danny Tiatto of Manchester City had what looked like a perfectly good goal ruled out at Middlesbrough, having run with the ball half the length of the pitch before finishing in fine style, because a Manchester City team-mate was adjudged to be standing in an offside position.
- Manchester City also had goal disallowed when Spurs captain Sol Campbell collided with his own goalkeeper Neil Sullivan, allowing Darren Huckerby to hook the ball in the net; the referee mistakenly decided a City player had committed an offence and ruled out the effort.
- Dan Petrescu of Southampton handled the ball in his penalty area against Manchester City but was not penalised. He scored the only goal of the game as Saints won 1-0.
- An Andy Cole handball against Sunderland also went unpunished, and moments later Cole scored the only goal of the game. Sunderland's Michael Gray was sent off for protesting about the handball.
- Liverpool were awarded a penalty against Sunderland despite the fact that Stanislav Varga brought down Gary McAllister outside the area. Jari Litmanen scored Liverpool's equaliser from the spot in the 1-1 draw.
- Sunderland were also denied victory when a last minute goal against Aston Villa was disallowed. Villa goalkeeper David James was impeded by his own team-mate as he went for a cross, leaving Jody Craddock to head the ball to Danny Dichio, who hooked it into the net. The well-positioned referee awarded Villa a free-kick, believing Craddock had fouled James.

Of course, referees have made mistakes since football began. They are only human, and have to make instant judgements on incidents which they see only once, in real time. Nor are they helped by the sly antics of some players. But when important games are won and lost by decisions which are proven to be the wrong ones when scrutinised by slow-motion TV action replays, people get upset.

Previously, mistakes were less obvious because the technology did not exist. The officials still don't have the benefit of strategically placed camera angles or instant TV replays, but the rest of us do. Since the technology cannot be un-invented, there is an increasingly persuasive argument that referees should have immediate access to TV evidence when a controversial incident occurs.

This could either enhance or undermine the role of the referee, depending upon your point of view.

However, another improvement might be to allow, encourage or insist that referees explain to the media immediately after a game exactly why they made a particular decision. At the moment, they remain silent while managers, players and pundits criticise their judgements and blame them for defeats.

Referees have an increasingly difficult job, but it is worth remembering that they are usually completely honest and impartial, that they are doing the best they can, and that without them there would be no football matches. They need help from technology, the authorities, their assistants (the linesmen who too often fail either to spot incidents or bring them to the referee's attention) and of course the players, who are becoming too ready to cheat by diving, feigning injury, tugging opponents' shirts, appealing for decisions and arguing against them.

They also need to be more accountable to us all.

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