

## **LAWS, OUTLAWS AND SCOUNDRELS**

### **Disciplinary issues dominate**

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Refereeing standards and player behaviour have predictably taken centre stage during the first week of the new Premiership season. As in previous years, referees – the most senior of whom are now, for the first time, a professional elite – have prepared for the new season by determining what their approach will be in effort to ensure consistency.

And already players, managers, fans and the media are accusing them being inconsistent, of being too strict, of being too lenient, and of ruining games by their officiousness. All of which means referees have probably got it about right.

As they attempt to assert their authority at the outset, referees typically hand out a profusion of yellow and red cards in the first few matches, and this season has been no exception. Already nine players have been sent off in only 16 matches. The guilty men are Ray Parlour of Arsenal (against Middlesbrough), Ugo Ehiogu of Middlesbrough (against Arsenal), Claus Lundekvam of Southampton (against Leeds United), Gary Doherty and Gustavo Poyet (both of Tottenham Hotspur, against Everton), Lee Bowyer and Danny Mills (both of Leeds, against Arsenal), Brian O Neil of Derby County (against Ipswich Town), and Craig Short of Blackburn Rovers, (against Manchester United).

The dismissals of the Tottenham duo and the Leeds pair, by referees David Elleray and Jeff Winter, respectively, aroused most controversy – not least because they meant each game finished with nine men versus eleven. Remarkably, though, neither team lost: Spurs held on for a point at Everton, while Leeds beat Arsenal 2-1 at Highbury.

It was no surprise that Glenn Hoddle, the Tottenham manager, condemned Elleray's actions while defending his players. Doherty, said Hoddle, executed a perfectly clean tackle and was doubly punished by receiving his marching orders and conceding a penalty (from which Duncan Ferguson equalised for Everton). Poyet, according to Hoddle, should only have received a yellow card.

The referee was also under fire for allowing the Tottenham goal scored by Darren Anderton when the ball came to him from Steffen Iversen, who was in an offside position and then strangely disallowing what would have been a spectacular response by Everton's Niclas Alexandersson.

Where Elleray certainly was at fault was in not dismissing Mauricio Taricco for a disgraceful first-half lunge at Everton's Danish midfielder, Thomas Gravesen. Neither Hoddle nor Everton boss Walter Smith could understand that one. Taricco escaped without even a booking, while Gravesen until then the game's most influential player was carried off on a stretcher. He subsequently had 20 stitches in his leg and will be out of action for at least a month. Taricco may yet be charged by the FA with misconduct on the basis of video evidence.

The following evening the spotlight shifted to Highbury, where Arsenal entertained Leeds in a fixture that has recently acquired a reputation for brutality. Yellow cards proliferated in both encounters between these two increasingly bitter rivals last season. Patrick Vieira was belatedly charged with misconduct after the Elland Road clash, while Martin Keown has two charges against him still pending following the return at Highbury in May.

Last week's meeting was therefore always likely to be a powder-keg, and within the first 17 minutes four different Leeds players had been cautioned for their aggressive approach. Bowyer and Mills failed to heed the warning, however, and further misdemeanours late in the game saw first one then the other sent off. Neither player went with good grace, and both face longer suspensions for abusing the referee as they left the pitch.

Amid all the mayhem, Leeds scored through Ian Harte, Arsenal replied through Sylvain Wiltord, and Mark Viduka scored Leeds' winner. Harte's goal, a direct free-kick, caused more controversy. It was cleverly taken while David Seaman was still trying to organise his defensive wall. There was no whistle, but Harte had asked referee Winter if he could take the kick, and Winter told him he could. Arsenal were aggrieved they were unprepared.

Twenty-four hours later, Blackburn manager Graeme Souness was similarly upset when David Beckham's quick thinking enabled Manchester United to rescue a point against an unprepared Rovers defence. Souness complained that the referee Alan Wiley had previously been telling the players to wait for the whistle, but then allowed Beckham to strike the ball before he'd blown.

In the media inquest that followed both these matches, referees explained that the whistle does not need to be blown before a free-kick can be taken.

The advantage therefore lies with the attacking side and defenders cannot afford to lose concentration while forming a wall.

Meanwhile, Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier called Robbie Fowler a scoundrel after the long-running saga of the striker's dispute with coach Phil Thompson was patched-up. Fowler and Thompson had a pre-season bust-up on the training pitch during which ex-Liverpool captain Thompson was angered by the current captain's behaviour and told Fowler he'd been at the club too long and should move on.

Fowler's refusal on principle to apologise and make peace with Thompson cost him his place in the team and even on the bench for the Reds' Charity Shield victory over Manchester United, and also kept him out of the squad for Liverpool's Premiership opener, the 2-1 victory over West Ham.

Houllier made it clear that until Fowler climbed down, he would not be considered for the first team. He also made it clear to a number of interested Premiership rivals, notably Chelsea, that Fowler was not on the transfer list and would not be leaving Anfield.

Fowler eventually swallowed his pride even though he clearly still believes he was right to make the stand he did and was rewarded by making the starting line-up for the second-leg of Liverpool's Champions League pre-qualifier against FC Haka. Typically, the idol of the Kop scored in the Reds' 4-1 victory. Fowler's increasingly uneasy relationship with the Anfield hierarchy has therefore been repaired for the moment. However, Robbie was not picked for the European Super Cup final against Bayern Munich on Friday a game Liverpool won 3-2 with goals from John Arne Riise, Emile Heskey and Michael Owen to claim a British record fifth trophy in sixth months.

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