

Subject: Soccer America Confidential: Attitude of 'getting the call right' will someday supersede that of 'getting on with it'

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Attitude of 'getting the call right' will someday supersede that of 'getting on with it'

By Ridge Mahoney

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At its annual general meeting next month, the International Football Association Board is expected to green-light extensive trials of video replay and trigger a firestorm of debate.

The game whose proponents take pride in its flow and rhythm is in danger of taking a step down the slippery slope of technology, and into controversy and turmoil triggered by images viewed by cameras and perhaps not the game officials. The implementation of widespread video replay is not imminent, yet it may be inevitable.

Critics of video -- and they are strident and plentiful -- cite delays and disruption of play as unwelcome intrusions on the game cherished for its flow and rhythm. They view the use of video, while limited, as going too far in an attempt to rectify the human errors inevitable when just a few pairs of eyes must monitor 22 players on a field that covers much more than an acre.

Dependence on technology, they contend, will undermine the authority of referees, who already are severely stretched in the cauldrons they try to control. And the expansion of replay to review offside calls and other decisions would inevitably follow the limited uses originally adopted.

But the critics, right though they may be in theory, are fighting against another flow, that of money and power and pressure. Players are bigger and faster and stronger and shrewder than ever and ordinary humans are falling further and further behind, so after increasing the number of officials on the field, sports such as hockey and basketball and football have turned to technology. Even that most staid and traditional sport, baseball, uses video for home-run decisions and foul-line calls and tag plays and force plays and isn't far away from extensive tests of a hologram-sensor system to determine balls and strikes.

If the IFAB does sanction extensive tests as a prelude to possible inclusion in the rule book, MLS will eagerly lead the way.



League commissioner **Don Garber** has publicly approved the use of video replays and the league has conducted experiments to help referees and their assistants refine their decisions in certain instances: red cards, penalty kicks, goals and cases of mistaken identity.

Soccer exists in a new world. The vast sums and exposure of other big-time sports have pushed them into the video age, where every close decision and razor-thin call are scrutinized minutely from myriad angles and slowed down to a speed that would bore a snail. Four years after approving goal-line technology, FIFA is feeling heat to go further, much further.

The NFL instituted replay 30 years ago. Its use has been refined and expanded and tweaked many times and occasionally can't resolve a dispute, but it's here to stay. That most staid and traditional of sports, baseball, took the plunge in 2014; every MLB game is reviewed in New York by officials who communicate with the game umpires. Both leagues primarily use a coach's challenge process to initiate a review until the final stages of a game, at which time the officials or umpires assume that responsibility.

Other major sports use video replay to varying degrees. Rugby, like soccer, is a game of minimal stoppages played on a huge field. In major competitions, the referee on the field communicates with a Television Match Official (TMO), who watches the game from a suite or van equipped with monitors. Unlike the NFL, there is no coaches' challenge process in rugby: the two officials are in constant contact and either one can initiate the use of a video review in certain situations.

Also unlike the NFL, where the head referee views the video on the field and changes a decision if necessary, in rugby the television official renders the final decision if he sees sufficient evidence to do so. If an obstructed view or other factor creates doubt as to whether a try was legally scored -- the ball must be grounded by an attacking player on or beyond the try line --- he doesn't make a call and instead signals for a video review. And the two codes of the game, rugby union and rugby league, have different parameters regarding what can be reviewed.

Some proponents of video replay in soccer advocate the challenge system, others prefer an overseer method by which errors can be corrected. In past decades, interpretations regarding many situations involving fouls, handling, offside, passes to the goalkeeper, etc., have been modified, but always referees have been bound to a code of decisiveness. The best ones not only get the vast majority of calls correct but they do so emphatically.

Incorporating video replay into the rule book will take time and no doubt cause problems and complications as to how games are officiated. The best referees would adjust to a video system but the prospect of plays being rewound and reviewed is anathema to many fans as well as those concerned about eroding of the match officials' authority. Concerns about delays were raised when replay encroached upon other sports and soccer, beloved for its continuous passages of play, is not ideally suited for shutdowns dictated by tight calls.

Video replay in soccer is much more complex and risky than an earlier foray into technology. Four years ago, following a long period of testing and experimentation and re-testing, FIFA approved the use of goal-line technology. Its first use in a major soccer competition, at the 2014 World Cup, confirmed its value, but as of now, only the English Premier League uses it regularly. And GLT, like the systems used in tennis, is based on imaging, not video. The ball and the lines are clearly visible. There is no human interpretation involved.

Garber also suggested MLS might use GLT upon its approval by FIFA but, citing the rarity of cases and prohibitive costs, he announced three years ago the Board of Governors had backed off that stance. Video replay has established a much firmer footing among team and league officials. They, like their counterparts in many parts of the world, see too many refereeing decisions that could be overturned by review of video, and someday the attitude of "getting the call right" will supersede that of "getting on with it."

The IFAB convenes its meeting March 5. MLS starts its 21st season March 6. The game here and around the world is bound for dramatic change.

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