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Comment

Could technology resurrect the dignity of the FIFA World Cup refereeing?☆



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A B S T R A C T

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The 2014 FIFA World Cup is over and was in most senses a success. However, the reality is that from the perspective of fairness, the 2014 World Cup was off to a remarkably bad start. Like many major football events in the past, this World Cup was plagued by controversial refereeing.

In this article, I will speculate about the role that technology may play in enhancing the great game of football. I will also draw some comparison between the rules of this sport and the rules of law. This will be done mainly from a legal philosophical perspective.

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1. Introduction

The 2014 FIFA¹ World Cup is over. It provided a month of entertainment involving 64 matches, with an average of 2.7 goals per game (up from 2.3 in 2010) and, I think most people would agree, unusually positive attacking football. New stars made their debut on the world stage and old favourites continued to impress. Against such a backdrop, it may seem overly critical to give anything but praise. However, the reality is that from the perspective of fairness, the 2014 World Cup was off to a remarkably bad start.

The opening game included at least two highly questionable decisions by the referee. First, the very generous penalty

kick awarded in Brazil's favour, and then Croatia had a goal disallowed on equally weak grounds.

The second game saw Mexico miss out on two goals due to controversial decisions by the referees, and in the game between Spain and the Netherlands, it was again the case that a penalty kick was awarded on very weak grounds.

The variable quality of the refereeing continued throughout the tournament with great controversies arising, for example, when Brazil was defeated by The Netherlands in the game for third place. The first goal was a result of a penalty kick that probably should not have been awarded as the offense seemed to take place outside the penalty area, and the second goal came after what looked like an offside situation.

☆ This Comment is an expanded version of an article – ‘Technology vs discretion: how to save World Cup refereeing dignity’ – that appeared on 19 June 2014 on *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/technology-vs-discretion-how-to-save-world-cup-refereeing-dignity-28059>). I am indebted to Deputy Editor Belinda Smith for the editorial work on that article. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution made by those who have aided me with their comments on the original article and willingness to discuss the topic of football refereeing in general. You are too numerous to be mentioned by name, but you know who you are.

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¹ Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

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In light of instances such as these, it is perhaps not surprising that the performance of the referees has been met with, on occasions, strong and unusually universal criticism. Commenting on the penalty situation that saw Brazil equalise in the opening game, Peter Fröjdfeldt – a former UEFA² referee – observed: ‘He [Nishimura, the referee] was well placed and he looked very convinced when he blew the whistle. But I do not think he is equally convinced when he gets to see the situation again.’³

In this, I think we can perceive a hint at where we will find the solution to the problem plaguing this World Cup as it has in the past as well. The solution is, of course, the adoption of technologies such as replay footage for the referees.

In this paper I will speculate about the role that technology may play in enhancing the great game of football. I will also draw some comparison between the rules of this sport and the rules of law. This will be done mainly from a legal philosophical perspective.

2. Technology to the rescue

Before discussing options for introducing further technical ‘advances’, it is prudent to point out that this World Cup saw the successful introduction of two technical innovations. This was the first World Cup at which the referees were using temporary paint to draw lines marking the position of the ball and players at set pieces. It was also the first World Cup at which goal line technology was adopted. I suspect few observers would argue that either of these technologies interfered with the game. Indeed, I think most would agree that these technologies actually helped improve the game. For example, already in the first round match between France and Honduras we witnessed the positive effect of the goal line technology.

Taking this to its logical extension – that is, the use of technology to ensure correct decisions by the referees – we may well picture a future where referees are aided by technology to a much greater extent than today.

One possible addition to the referees’ tool belt is the recently launched Google Glass, or a similar product from some other provider – FIFA Glass perhaps? This may not be what all those fans commonly heard chanting that the referee needs glasses may have referred to, but it may be part of a future solution to the difficult task facing the referees.

Such a tool could perhaps be used to indicate offside situations in real-time, and could be used to provide the referees with instant multi-angle replays of controversial occurrences during the game.

An independent video referee is another alternative that has the advantage of having been used for some time in other sports such as in the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia.

Opponents of technology in sports have presented a range of arguments. I will now seek to address some of the more potent arguments they present.

² ? Union of European Football Associations.

³ ‘Det gagnar inte domargänget’ Aftonbladet (Stockholm, 13 June 2014) <<http://www.aftonbladet.se/sportbladet/fotboll/landslagsfotboll/vm2014/article19051353.ab>> accessed 14 July 2014.

3. ‘It is only a game, it’s not about money’

One of the first arguments normally raised by the anti-technology league is that football is just a game, and being just a game the imperfections in refereeing matter not.

It is a truism that football is a game. But, as far as this World Cup goes, it is a game in which:

- US\$576 million in prize money will be distributed to participating nations whenever they get eliminated;
- US\$35 million will be given as prize money to the winning team’s soccer federation; and
- US\$9.69 billion is the estimated total value of the 786 players in the World Cup tournament.⁴

To be clear, I am not suggesting that any of this is good (or necessarily bad), but I am saying that where so much is at stake e.g. for the players and the football federations of individual countries, it may (unfortunately) be too late for an ‘it’s not about money’ attitude. Thus, even if one accepts the imperfections in refereeing for the game as such, it may be a different question whether we can accept the implications those imperfections have for the distribution of large sums of money.

To this may be added that football, like many other sports, is plagued by corruption related to criminal syndicates seeking to manipulate game results. This is a fascinating area with obvious legal aspects to it, but I will not pursue them here. It suffices to note that, where technology provides transparency and limits the discretion of the referee, it may help to stamp out referee-based result manipulation.

Idealists will argue that shaping the rules and conduct of the game to cater for the conduct of the gambling-related industry is to sacrifice the game on the altar of capitalism. On the other hand, one may perhaps equally see it as means to shield the game from corrupting by outside pressures?

4. The ‘control of the soul’

Opponents of the use of technologies such as cameras will say that such technologies take away the soul of the game: that mistakes are part and parcel of football refereeing and that the refereeing team is part of the game, not separate from it.

But let us think back to the game between England and Germany in the 2010 World Cup. Frank Lampard’s shot hits the cross bar and bounces downwards. The whole ball is clearly over the line, but the refereeing team rules no goal. I wonder how many Englishmen took a sigh of relief when seeing the ‘soul of the game’ being preserved on that occasion.

Similarly, consider the game between Italy and Australia at the 2006 World Cup. Italy was very generously awarded a

⁴ See further: Sara Sjolín, ‘Who has the most expensive World Cup squad?’ (MarketWatch, 10 June 2014) <<http://blogs.marketwatch.com/themargin/2014/06/10/who-has-the-most-expensive-world-cup-squad/>> accessed 14 July 2014 and Georg Szalai, ‘2014 World Cup: How Much Will Winning Team Get? And 10 Other Key Stats’ (The Hollywood Reporter, 12 June 2014) <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/2014-world-cup-11-stats-711336>> accessed 14 July 2014.

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