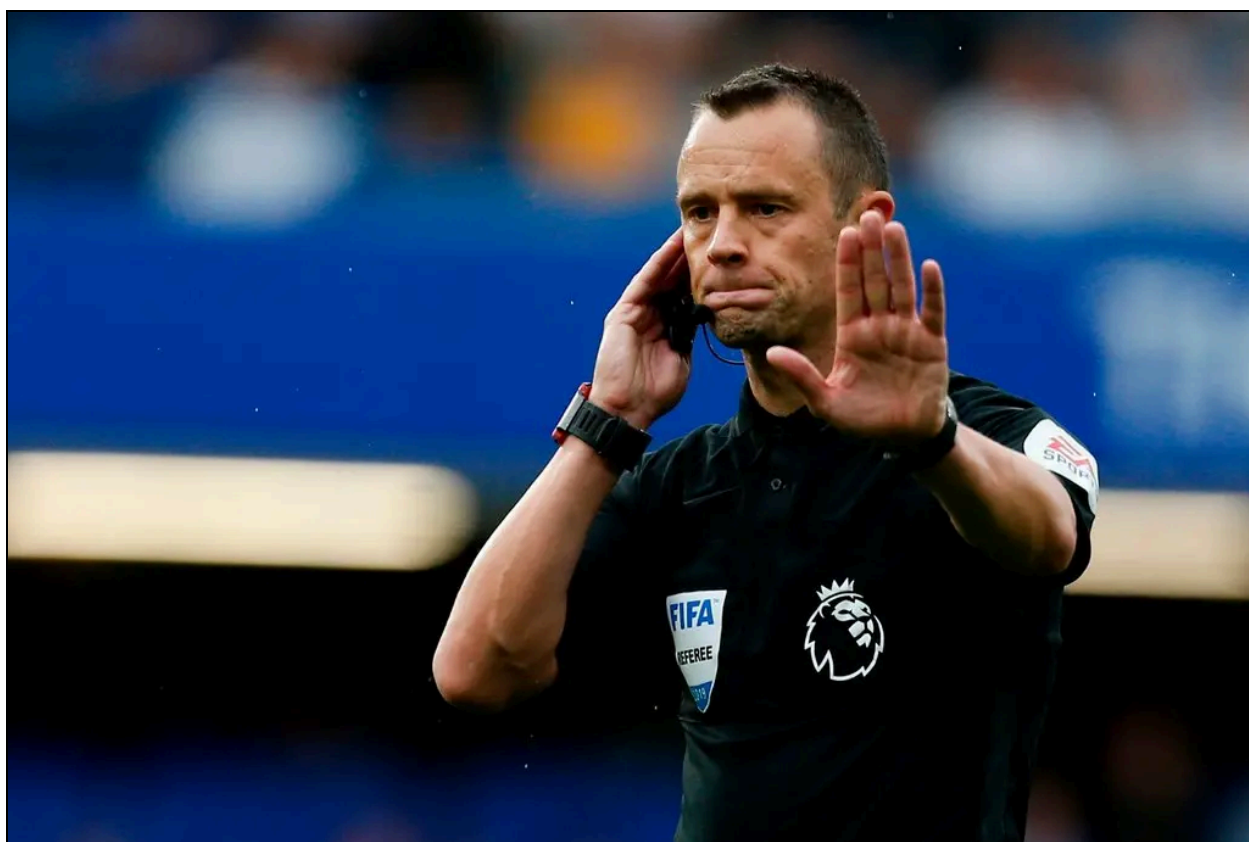


Forum: Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)

Issue #1: Addressing VAR and referee corruption to ensure fairness in football.

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Position: Chairs of The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA)



Premier League referee Stuart Attwell waiting on a VAR review

Ian Kington, *Getty Images*

Introduction

Clearly shown in the world around us, technology's constant development and evolution is manifested through its application in real life. Football, often referred to as "the beautiful game", permeates through borders and unites billions of people worldwide, sparking passion and joy. However, football fans are also united by one common desire: integrity and fairness in the sport. Recent years have been witness of the growing concerns regarding the implementation of technology such as VAR (Video Assistant Referee) and its manipulation, as well as referee corruption.

First introduced during the early 2010s, the VAR's purpose is to ensure decision-making accuracy and promote fairness, sparking both approval and controversy. While many people argue that it accomplishes its aim of minimizing human error, others criticize its potential for manipulation and the prolonged interruptions it causes. Debates and disputes between coaches, players, enthusiasts, and governing bodies such as FIFA are never ending when VAR is discussed.

It is important not to ignore referee corruption as well. Allegations of bribery and "match-fixing" are constantly surfacing, raising questions about how honest the game truly is. Referee manipulation does not only impact individual matches it occurs in, it also extends to the entire league, player careers and lives, and football's reputation as a whole.

Definition of Key Terms

Referee corruption: The action of football officials deliberately attempting to distort or sway the results of a match to favor the corrupted teams.

Match-fixing: Manipulating the result or contingency of a match by relevant sports personnel. For instance, asking a player to purposefully miss a shot or telling a referee to call more fouls against a certain team.

VAR: Video Assistant Referee. A match official that has independent access to match footage and who assists the referee in the event of a controversial decision.

Appeal process: In the context of soccer, appeal processes are the procedures for challenging or contesting referee decisions, often involving video review or other mechanisms to ensure fairness and accuracy.

Home advantage: The benefit that the home team is said to gain over the visiting team.

Sportswashing: Using a sport (soccer) to redirect public attention away from unethical conduct.

General Overview

Controversies following the implementation of VAR

By definition, VAR is a Video Assistant Referee: an official who helps the main referee and ensures that no decision has been wrongfully made. The VAR system was tested around 2013, however, it was initially utilized in the big European leagues during the 2017-2018 seasons. VAR was meant to eliminate

human error in games by addressing issues such as offsides, handballs, and physical altercations. Instead, it has brought controversy and speculation, with many questioning whether it has truly benefited the game. At the time, popular opinion regarding VAR implementation was justified by the need to reduce human error and ensure that referee calls were not swayed by any external parties. Its philosophy was “minimal interference--maximum benefit”. This would work to reduce errors about penalty/no penalty, goal/no goal, direct red card (not 2nd yellow card/caution), and mistaken identity at the time of the referee sending the incorrect player off.

Positive perspectives can be seen as the International Football Association Board (IFAB) described the VAR as a “historic step for greater fairness in football”, with FIFA’s current president Giovanni Infantino describing it as “almost perfect”. To ensure complete neutrality, the Implementation Assistance and Approval Programme (IAAP) was established and agreed to be overseen by FIFA and IFAB. Despite the approval of these well-versed institutions, many argued against its functionality. In fact, during 2018, when it was slowly being launched into the big European leagues, the English Premier League resisted its implementation after clubs voted against introducing VAR for the 2018 season.

Traditionally, football has been known for its human-refereed nature, where decisions are made on the sport by the referee and linesmen, an element of human error and subjective judgments that have been part of the sport's charm and excitement for many fans and club members. The addition of VAR and other advanced technologies represents a departure from these traditions, raising concerns about the potential loss of spontaneity and debate surrounding referee decisions that many fans anticipate after matches. Goal-line technology was only introduced by FIFA in 2012 and it was a significant step forward in embracing technology to assist referees in making crucial decisions. Regardless, the debate continues concerning the extent to which technology should be integrated into the sport, considering its potential

impact on the game's essence and fan experience, a factor that FIFA takes into account exceedingly. The unique selling point of soccer is that it's a free-flowing sport with a high pace and limited stoppages. With VAR's delay, it's arguably turning the football essence into the opposite and something that many fans will soon not want to look forward to in the future.

While many have hailed the Video Assistant Referee as a "historic step" towards fairness in football and deemed it "almost perfect," others have described it as "comical" and "embarrassing." After the Tottenham vs Rochdale match in 2018, criticisms were particularly evident. During this match, concerns arose regarding the long VAR reviews which disrupted the flow of the game and led to inconsistencies in time. Additionally, issues such as defenders holding strikers in the penalty box without punishments further frustrated the fans. There was a notable lack of transparency with fans in the stadium, leaving many unaware and clueless of the VAR decision and what it implied for the rest of the game. This was highlighted when a goal was initially celebrated by fans, only for VAR to subsequently retract it, causing confusion and disappointment among supporters and an overall lingering suspicion over the integration of VAR in football.

Referee corruption

Soccer corruption falls under broader subtopics: the covert dealings involving teams, players, and financial resources behind the scenes, and the overt influence exerted by referees and linesmen on the field. FIFA tournaments have been marred by corruption for decades, but it wasn't until recently, in 2010, that media scrutiny intensified, focusing on FIFA's control over referees and the potential socio-political factors influencing their decisions.

Having the technology in the last decade to observe and document every blindspot, move, and decision performed in the field, players, but more so referees, are subjected to public inspection. A recurring concern revolving

around FIFA officials or the technology that comes with it, is the lack of transparency demonstrated by the exchange of ideas and criteria by VAR and the referee. As a result, many suspect ulterior motives or attempts to withhold crucial information from the viewers that could determine the winner of the match, typically from the side of the referee.

Corrupted referees are manifested in two ways: unconscious bias and conscious bias. Unconscious bias, such as the home bias effect, occurs when referees unknowingly exhibit favoritism bolstered by fans' reactions to the referee's calls during the game, potentially influencing individual match outcomes. Conversely, conscious bias involves intentional corruption or external influence on referees, leading to unfair results.

While unconscious bias may balance out throughout a season due to equal opportunities for teams, conscious bias can significantly impact championship outcomes and challenge FIFA's firm stance against corruption, almost contradicting their prior convictions.

Many blame FIFA's inefficiency in detecting and addressing the rapid spread of match-fixing. Some teams form collusive relationships with referees to manipulate results, distorting the fairness of the competition. Corrupted referees often resort to tactics like awarding questionable free-kicks, penalties, or yellow cards, particularly evident towards the end of matches when neither team is making significant progress and it is only the referee who can determine which team takes the win. These critical moments force FIFA to scrutinize the credibility and judgment of referees, especially in tiebreaker situations like penalty shootouts.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Major party #1: Gianni Infantino (president of FIFA)

Found at the highest rank of the FIFA Council, Gianni Infantino has focused on bringing reforms to FIFA, expanding global participation in flagship competitions, and boosting FIFA's investment in football development, according to the official FIFA website. Time and time again, he has shown he is completely for the use of VAR, claiming that fans having to wait for VAR decisions “adds another layer of adrenaline”, says Paul Maclnnes at *The Guardian*. He is a strong believer that VAR is bringing more justice to the game, making it more clean and helping the referee make correct decisions. Infantino admits it may take the joy away for some, but it gives the joy to others when a decision is changed. As he once said: “You will not hear me say anything negative about VAR. Justice is everything.”

Major party #2: Javier Tebas (president of La Liga)

According to Spanish news magazine *Sport*, Tebas claims VAR has to be improved and one mustn't be oblivious to the controversy it has caused. According to Tebas, VAR is used to make decisions in too many plays and there are still blatant mistakes present. He aims for full transparency in La Liga, and he wants to be able to listen to the VAR audio recordings so everyone can understand the decisions made.

Major party #3: Florentino Pérez (president of Real Madrid FC)

The president of one of the most popular clubs in football history, Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, has publicly claimed he is anti-VAR stance on several occasions. He believes that the powers that control and make decisions regarding VAR are not clear and often the “complete image” is not seen. For him, VAR is constantly generating doubts about Spanish refereeing in all games, as per *Football España*. On the other hand, former Spanish police officer José Manuel Villarejo has openly said “no one dares” to prosecute Pérez for referee bribery because he is untouchable, according to *Goal* magazine. In an interview with Catalan

radio station RAC 1, he alleged that Florentino Pérez paid off match officials, like “all presidents” have done at least once. These rumors were rapidly shut down by Real Madrid in an official statement and Pérez himself took legal action against the ‘false allegations’.

Timeline of Events UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

2013-2014

Refereeing 2.0 project is launched by the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) with hopes to raise the quality of refereeing. This scheme included trials of “Hawk-Eye” goal-line technology, the tracking of the ball to ensure if it crosses the goal-line, the addition of a fifth and sixth official, and the video assistant, according to the KNVB.

September 1, 2016

First VAR appearance in international football in a friendly match between Italy and France. The first “official” use of VAR, however, took place between Ajax and Willem II during a KNVB Cup first-round match on September 21 of that same year.

September 16, 2020

A Memorandum of Understanding is signed between FIFA president Gianni Infantino and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime executive director Ghada Waly to stress their commitment to address the threats posed by crime to sport. Ms Waly, leader of UN's anti-corruption agency, claims the cooperation between UNODC and FIFA will “support sport organizations to pursue anti-corruption action.”

September 22, 2023

Partnership between FIFA and UNODC is extended and MOU is renewed to continue defending football's integrity and aiming to tackle match-fixing, abuse of power, and bribery, as per Ms Waly's words.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Implementation Assistance Approval Programme (IAAP)

FIFA's introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was a model to enhance accuracy, fairness, and to minimize human error in crucial decisions during the game. These decisions may include goals, penalties, and red cards. FIFA established the Implementation Assistance Approval Programme (IAAP) to oversee the VAR system. This program's principle is "minimal interference -- maximum benefit." The goal of the coalition is to standardize the implementation of the VAR system across football competitions worldwide. By creating uniform guidelines through the VAR implementation, there is less room for VAR result manipulation. The program addresses both technical and operational challenges regarding the Video Assistant Referee, to provide a framework for competition organizers and authorities to follow.

In the IAAP, FIFA provides resources and support to competition organizers through the process of implementation, training, and execution. Access to best practices, technical guidelines, and ongoing support by FIFA representatives are offered to organizations who implement the VAR. While the system and programme has been praised for improving decision-making accuracy and reducing human error, it has also faced criticism for causing game delays and potential manipulation.

FIFA's Partnerships with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

FIFA has also sought to combat corruption through strategic partnerships, such as its alliance with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In September 2020, FIFA and UNODC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to address threats such as match-fixing, bribery, and abuse of power within sports. The purpose of a Memorandum of Understanding is to achieve a mutual understanding of the partnership between two parties. The document lays out the expectations and responsibilities and defines how these will work together.

FIFA and the UNODC joined forces to combat the threats posed by crime in sport, promising to protect the integrity of football. UNODC director Ghada Waly deemed FIFA as an ideal partner to help shield football and major sporting events from corruption, claiming that the cooperation between both parties will support governments and sports institutions to take anti-corruption action. Gianni Infantino proudly stated that the MOU is not just a pretty document but a “strong signal for everyone” as it demonstrates his and FIFA’s commitment to take on a zero corruption policy in football. FIFA leveraged the UNODC’s expertise in anti-corruption measures by highlighting a commitment to tackling corruption. Programs such as the FIFA Guardians Program, further reinforces FIFA’s dedication to ethical standards in sports. This program protects young athletes from exploitation and violence. Additionally, it will publicize the benefits of sports for women and girls, aligning with UN resolutions.

Other Stakeholders That are Changing the Game

FIFA is not the only stakeholder that has played a significant role in addressing these issues. The International Football Association Board (IFAB) has been a crucial player in approving and setting guidelines for the use of VAR technology. In addition, the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) launched the Refereeing 2.0 Project in late 2013. This project included trials of goal-like

technologies and other video assistants. This project offers different alternatives to aid game officiation. Finally, there are other transparency initiatives being considered in leagues like La Liga, such as the push for making VAR audio recordings publicly accessible. This initiative would enhance credibility of decisions by providing insight into the behind the scenes of the decision-making process. These measures have been well-received and are essential in building trust among fans and stakeholders.

Possible Solutions

Enhanced Transparency and Communication

There are multiple ways in which this issue can benefit from enhanced transparency and communication. By making the audio recordings of VAR discussions and referee decisions publicly available, FIFA can reduce suspicions of bias or manipulation. In addition, detailed post-match reports that explain controversial decisions during matches can further reassure the public and the football community that there was a just decision-making process. By exemplifying this openness, stakeholders can understand the reasoning behind decisions, thus fostering integrity and fairness in the sport. This way, referees are held accountable in a public manner, reducing opportunities of corruption.

Boost Anti-Corruption Measures

Collaborating with international anti-corruption organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to develop protocols for detecting and preventing corruption can significantly enhance the integrity of football. Protocols like regular audits, undercover investigations, and the analysis of data to uncover suspicious patterns, can positively reduce corruption within the sport. Moreover, fostering an environment where individuals are encouraged to report corrupt practices without fear of retribution is imperative.

There needs to be a zero-tolerance approach to corruption to safeguard the sport's integrity and credibility.

Rigorous Training and Professional Development for Referees

It is crucial to invest in continuous training and development for referees to reduce errors and diminish biases in decision-making. Training programs should not only teach the rules of the game, but should also cover the technical aspects of VAR technology, as well as the ethical considerations of the profession. Some ways to improve all of these areas may include scenario-based training, unconscious bias awareness training, and regular assessments. These methods would allow referees to stay up-to-date with the latest technologies, as well as improve their objectivity. This continuous professional development can help maintain high standards of refereeing in the field.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

The issue of addressing VAR and referee corruption for ensuring fairness in football strongly resonates with the Sustainable Development Goal #16: *Peace, justice, and strong institutions*. This SDG aims to provide justice to all by promoting peaceful societies and building effective institutions. Target 16.5, specifically, focuses on reducing corruption and bribery in all forms, aligning perfectly with this issue's principles. Target 16.6 does so too, as it promises to develop transparent institutions where people don't feel as if they are being lied to and are served with accurate information.

Fair play in football goes beyond the score and game itself, as it is about setting a standard for honesty and integrity. Unbiased VAR processes and reducing referee corruption will enhance trust in sports institutions and promote a positive spirit within the game.

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