

Psychological Aspects of High Level Refereeing

- An Overview -

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Introduction (1)

Referees face many requirements, demands, expectations. The referee has to:

- Control and enforce that the match runs according to the rules.
- Show sovereignty, authority, credibility, ...
- Balance the conflicting interests of the teams in a fair way.
- “Disturb” the match as little as possible.

A referee needs and deserves trust, respect and esteem.

Introduction (2)

Basic aspects / factors for meeting these patterns are:

- Profound knowledge and sound application of the rules,
- **psychological Aspects,**
- others aspects (technical, physical, social, ...).

Top Refereeing: Psychological Aspects

The psychological setting:

- The referee's situation.
- The Coaches and players.

The psychological factors and skills for game leadership:

- Mental strength
- Emotional intelligence
- Communication
- Game-oriented rule application
- Teamwork

Psychological situation: Referee (1)

- The referee is in a very exposed position – “in the spot light”, “between all fronts”.
- The referee is under great pressure by
 - the demands / expectations of the teams,
 - the public,
 - (not to forget) himself,
 - (maybe) a referee delegate.
- A video challenge system may help a referee, but can also publicly highlight and prove that he made a mistake.

Psychological situation: Referee (2)

- Positive, appreciative or respectful feedback is rarely given to a referee. Mostly he is only perceived and addressed in a negative context.
- Even if the referee wants to be neutral / objective / calm, he is not free from being “negatively” influenced by emotions (fear, anger, surprise, ...) This can unavoidably grow up during the match by the interaction with the participants.
- A referee has to manage ongoing complicated and conflict-prone interactions with coaches and players.

Psychological situation: Coaches and Players (1)

- Coaches / players are under great pressure; their activities are massively influenced by emotions.
- During the match, coaches often feel “helplessly exposed” to the referees.
- Coaches / players tend to be biased.
They categorize referees (they “pigeonhole them”) which greatly influence their perception of the referee’s actual performance.

Psychological situation: Coaches and Players (2)

- Only the referee has the possibility to end a conflict by sanctioning a coach or player.

The main “weapon” of coaches / players is to put the referee under (even more) pressure.

- Coaches / players instinctively recognize the referee's weaknesses, so they ruthlessly try to exploit them.

Psychological situation: Coaches and Players (3)

- Coaches and players always try to take advantage of a referee. Therefore they “test” him. This behavior starts even before the match.
- Coaches / players “count” and “offset” their (selective) observations and permanently try to influence a referee.
- Players often use a referees to hide their own mistake or to motivate themselves.

Psychological factors influencing game leadership

- Mental strength
- Emotional intelligence
- Communication
- Game-oriented rule application
- Teamwork

Mental Strength of Referee: Skills

Mental strength supports the referee's "natural" authority and helps him to master the strong mental strains given by the framework of his officiating.

Essential skills which improve mental strength are:

- ✓ Motivation, commitment, optimism
- ✓ Self-confidence, self-assurance (but NOT arrogance)
- ✓ Crisis stability, steadiness, calmness
- ✓ Decisiveness, courage, self-efficacy
- ✓ Sense of responsibility
- ✓ Focused concentration, instinct for "big point"

Mental Strength of Referee: Techniques

- Mental strength can be gained, practiced and improved by using various mental training methods.
- Mental techniques (“rituals”) – based on experience - are:
 - Mental imagery (mental rehearsal, positive images)
 - Positive thoughts and positive self-talks
 - Breathing techniques
- A referee can apply special techniques for:
 - Pre-match preparation (can start as post-match preparation)
 - Stress management (positive “eustress” vs. negative “distress”)
 - Overcoming of phases of mental weakness

Emotional Intelligence of Referee: Components

“Emotional intelligence” is a counterpart to “normal intelligence” (IQ, intelligence quotient).

In general, “emotional intelligence” comprises a person’s abilities to:

- Realize and control his own emotions.
- Show empathy, i.e. to understand the emotions of other people, to accept their point of view, to “feel with them”.
- Arrange and deal with relationships with other persons in a “positive” way.

Emotional Intelligence:

Relevance for Refereeing

Emotional intelligence is particularly important to:

- ✓ Maintain neutrality / objectivity as much as possible
- ✓ Control emotions carefully when calling a fault or imposing a sanction
- ✓ “Read” coaches / players (which normally cannot be controlled rationally) properly
- ✓ Be able to find the balance in judging allowed, suitable emotions and misconducts
- ✓ Create and maintain a stable working environment with all participants during the match
- ✓ Manage conflicts in a proper way

Emotional Intelligence: Special Skills

Emotional intelligence comprises a lot of personality traits and abilities.

Special important ("soft") skills for referees are:

- Self-discipline, self-control
- Authenticity
- Willingness and ability to work in a team
- Openness, sensitivity, adaptability
- Sense of justice, objectivity, consistency, predictability
- Conflict ability
- Communication skills

Communication: Significance for Refereeing (1)

- Communication is a fundamental element of game leadership. It implements all relevant interactions between the referee and the match participants (beyond the pure rulings).
- The communication of the referee comprises:
 - The intentional and conscious (verbal or non-verbal) exchange of messages with the participants
 - The messages implicitly and (mostly) unconsciously sent out by his behavior, appearance, body language,
....
 - Principle: “You **cannot not communicate**”!

Communication: Significance for Refereeing (2)

- Inappropriate and / or misunderstood messages can easily lead to irritation, friction, conflict and loss of authority.
- Misunderstandings are caused by inherent problems between the “sender” and the “receiver”:
 - Incorrect interpretations (“decoding”) by the receiver and / or
 - negative emotional factors.

Communication:

Skills (1)

- Soft skills concerning emotional and relationship aspects can promote positive and successful communication before, during and after the match.
- A referee should:
 - Avoid any behavior which could create doubts about his integrity, independence, objectivity and fairness.
 - Communicate with great awareness. His message should be short, simple and precise.
 - Avoid communication with spectators.
 - Listen attentively and with open mind.

Communication:

Skills (2)

- Provocations, threats and aggression obstruct successful communication. A referee should remain calm, respectful and professional.
- Appropriate non-verbal components (voice modulations, additional facial expressions or gestures, ...) may help the receiver to better understand the verbal communication.
- If a referee wants to communicate but is ignored, he should insist on being taken seriously. He should never allow him to be forced into a “defensive” position.
- Especially when giving sanctions and warnings, a referee should act objectively and transparently.

Communication: Body Language (1)

- A referee's body language is a significant part of his communication, much more than verbal communication.
- Beyond being applied consciously, a referee's implicit communication through his body language works inherently and continuously (and is continuously "read" by the other participants!).
- The referee's body language discloses his personality, mental strength, and whether he has (or has not!) essential leadership qualities.

Communication:

Body Language (2)

- Facial expressions (particularly: smiling) and gestures should be used sparingly and in a neutral way. They should be applied well-directed and with a clear message to a concrete communication partner. “Negative” signals should be avoided.
- Facial expressions / gestures are often useful to “calm down” match participants in hectic / emotional situations (minor disciplinary warnings, clarifications, showing understanding, ...).

Game-Oriented Rule Application: Rules and Instructions (1)

The rules / instructions are binding for the referee's decisions and actions.

But they contain some (inherent or deliberate) fuzziness:

- The definition of some decision criteria is not (physically) precise (e.g. "catch" / "delaying").
- Even if decisions are based on precisely defined ("measurable") facts, the referee is dependent on his perception which may be difficult and not reliable («in» / «out» / «8 seconds»).

Game-Oriented Rule Application: Rules and Instructions (2)

- Some instructions even recommend that a referee refrains from applying a rule strictly (e.g. "spectacular actions").
- Some instructions are not strict orders but recommendations only (e.g. movements of the 2nd referee).
- There are match situations which are either not or not explicitly covered by the rules (e.g. sequence of sanctions).

Game-Oriented Rule Application: The Principle (1)

The conclusion for a game-oriented rule application is:

- A referee has a certain degree of latitude when applying rules and instruction.

The principle how game-oriented rule application should be utilized can be found in many “synonymous” formulations and slogans like:

- “the art of refereeing”, “keep the ball flying”,
- “no mechanical or automatic rule application”,
- “situation-related decisions”,
- “feel the game”, “serve the match”, “be clever”.

Game-Oriented Rule Application: The Principle (2)

Game-oriented rule application has a huge psychological impact:

- A referee's "match design" has to convince the participants.
- Particularly, it must confirm referee's credibility and predictability. It should never create the impression of randomness.
- A referee has to be aware that many decisions can affect more than the current situation, possibly the rest of the match (e.g. after "calling a double contact" or a "catch" in an early phase of the match – "staying on course").

Game-Oriented Rule Application: Typical Situations (1)

- According to the “basic techniques”, the 1st referee has to follow a certain standard routine for “collecting information”.
 - But in particular situations it may be helpful not to follow this procedure but to decide immediately after whistling (e.g. ball touching the antenna on the 1st referee’s side).
- In “non-measurable” situations, there might be more than one possible decision.
 - The referee has to find a “clever balance” of such “50/50”-decisions (e.g. “faulty setting by a back-row player” or “reaching beyond the net by a blocker” ?).

Game-Oriented Rule Application: Typical Situations (2)

- Decisions should be strict only if necessary and only if the situation has been noticed by others.
 - It makes no sense “counting centimeters” (e.g. when deciding to call a positional fault).
- It is important to find the right measure at the right time.
 - Warnings / sanctions are a very sensitive matter (e.g. red card at the end of a set or even a match !)
- Some decisions are accepted differently (e.g. “screening” vs. “server touching the end line”).

Teamwork: Potential Problems

- Distributing refereeing tasks to several people, means of course, the advantage of more people working towards a common goal and of improving perception possibilities.
- But it can also cause problems concerning game leadership, e.g.:
 - Coaches and players often suspect that “more people make more mistakes”.
 - There are more “targets” for coaches and players to attack,
 - The 1st referee is not completely independent in the way he conducts the match.
 - The 1st referee may be blamed for “unfortunate” decisions made by others and he will be held jointly accountable.

Teamwork: Skills

The match refereeing corps will be successful as a team if:

- Each member has a good amount of team spirit, reliability within the team, mutual appreciation and confidence.
- All members have permanent eye contact, are in the same “mental zone” and present themselves as one unit.
- Each member carries out his responsibilities, but does not try to “see or do everything”!
- The 1st referee is very careful with overruling his colleagues (particularly line judges); that they are usually in a better position to judge this specific situation.
- The 1st referee “protects” his colleagues consistently...