



Setting the tone for the game

By Robert Evans, *FIFA Referee (1979–88); FIFA Referee Instructor (1990–92)*.

Once upon a time, in the days when England still knew how to play cricket, and Wales rugby, most sports were nothing but fun. As lads we went out on Saturday afternoon to enjoy a game of soccer, and if we weren't playing we went down to the nearby stadium to watch the local professionals. I watched rugby, and played a little, although not well enough to get in the school team. My sister was a good hockey player, and on Saturday mornings during the winter, I would go out and watch her. Came the summer and it was time for cricket and tennis. And though I can cast my mind back to those times and to small details of wonderful moments as a player or as a spectator, I can't remember any disputes with officials. Refereeing and umpiring at that time didn't seem to be the centre of so much discussion as it is now.

In soccer games, we never disputed what the man-in-black did, and in rugby matches at school, we never crowded around to challenge a decision by whomever showed up to blow the whistle that day. And as for cricket, well, lbw was lbw, even if the umpire at the bowler's end was looking out into the covers! Everybody just accepted decisions and got on with the game.

But in the early sixties, things began to change, and by the seventies, disputes about refereeing and umpiring were everywhere in many sports: soccer, cricket, tennis, rugby. (I can't speak for Australian Rules football because I don't see enough of it, nor for field hockey, because after my sister stopped playing, I haven't watched it.) But for the other games, it appears that challenges, disputes and dissent have become the norm.

The result of this is that in many communities of referees, the officials feel embattled. They develop an 'us-against-them'

attitude, which unfortunately they carry onto the field. It shows on the stern set of their faces as they walk onto the pitch. It appears in referee meetings, where you hear endless stories about what referees did to players who challenged them, or stories about how tough they were in sending bodies off the field, and so on. It is as though we are at war with the players, and we are never going to show weakness. Yet this is not the best thing for the game. What can we do about it?

Perhaps most important of all, we should constantly remind ourselves that *the game is for the players*. This is especially true in amateur sports, which is all that most of us will ever do. It is our duty to ensure that every game is as pleasant as possible for the participants, whether they be children or adults. We do that by protecting them from unscrupulous opponents, by dealing with any difficult situations

with tact, by using humour when appropriate, and by making only judgements that have fairness as their basis. And, if we are smart, we display this attitude *before the match even starts*.

I like to think of any amateur contest — and it doesn't matter what the sport is — as a collaboration between coaches and officials to create the maximum possible enjoyment for the players. The coaches teach and train the players to perform as effectively as possible, and the referees officiate to make sure the players are allowed to play within the laws, and without interference from their opponents. A dictatorial coach who yells and screams is not going to get the best out of the players, and a dictatorial referee who runs around as though he were Napoleon marching across Europe is not going to get the cooperation of the most important participants.

And if I am right about this being a collaboration, why not start it before the game begins? Have a chat with each of the coaches in turn and tell them what you are all about. Let them know what kind of reasonable bloke you are. It has been my experience that you can make your own refereeing an easy thing to enjoy: but first, you must do some work before the kick-off, to show your attitude to the players and coaches. I promise you, it'll be worth your effort.

For after all, if I wanted a difficult job in sports, I'd give up refereeing and offer to go back and teach the Poms cricket, or I'd go back tearfully to Wales and start looking for another outside-half who could lead Wales to moments of glory such as they enjoyed in the seventies. Now there's a task!

Here are a few recommendations for setting the right tone before the game:

- 1. Never make threats**, which do nothing except create unpleasantness. Most players know the laws of the game, and if they don't, this is not the time to teach them. They came to *play*, not to hear a lecture.
- 2. Don't spell out what you expect of players**. They already know, unless they are the tiniest of kids, and with *them* what good does a speech do? Perhaps you ought to ask yourself how you would feel if a captain made you listen to his speech about what the players expect of you!
- 3. Let the players know that refereeing is a pleasure for you**, and that you are looking forward to enjoying the game *with them*.
- 4. Show an interest in the players**. Find out something about their previous matches and refer to them in complimentary ways.
- 5. Get to know names**. Introduce yourself to players and coaches with your first and last name, just as you would with colleagues and friends. After all, you are not their enemy, and they are not yours.
- 6. Smile**, and look as though you are about to have a good time.

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