

Psychological Aspects of High Level Refereeing - An Overview -

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(with thanks to Dr Fred Kroger and Dr Jan Rek)

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Introduction

"He who would govern others must first be the master of himself" from Phillip Massinger (1583-1640)

"The man with the whistle has the final say - in extreme cases deciding the outcome of entire tournaments" From Pierluigi Collina

Pierluigi Collina also notes that a referee wins the respect of the players through:

- Analysis of the situation, Intuition, Experience, Emotion

Introduction

- Referees face many requirements / demands / expectations.
- Typical examples: The referee is 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 (just) way,
 - “disturb” the match as little as possible,
 - deserve trust and respect,
 - ...

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Introduction

- Basic aspects/factors for meeting these patterns:
- Profound knowledge and sound application of the rules,
- **psychological aspects,**
- Others
 - Technical
 - Physical
 - Social
 - etc

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Psychological Aspects of Top Refereeing

- The psychological setting
 - The referee's situation
 - Coaches and players
- The psychological factors and skills (for **game leadership**)
 - Mental strength
 - Emotional intelligence
 - Communication
 - Game-oriented rule application
 - Teamwork

Referee Situation

- 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 (cf. above), by the public, by him/herself, possibly by a Referee Delegate).
- If a video challenge system is used this may publicly prove the referee’s mistakes.
- Positive, appreciative, respectful feedback to the referee is very seldom. Mostly he/she is perceived only in a negative context and commented/addressed accordingly.

Referee Situation

- Mostly he/she is perceived only in a negative context and commented/addressed accordingly.
- Even if the referee wants to be neutral / objective / calm, he/she is not free from being “negatively” influenced by emotions (fear, anger, surprise, ...)
- These grow up during the match by the interaction with the participants (or due to other subjective factors).
- The referee has to manage ongoing complicated and conflict-prone interactions with coaches and players.

Coaches and Players

- 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 “pigeonhole” referees and to build prejudices which influence their perception of the referee’s actual performance.
- The referee has the possibility to end up conflicts and “power struggles” with coaches/players “one-sidedly” by sanctions. The main “weapon” of coaches/players is to put the referee under (even more) pressure.

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Coaches and Players

- Coaches/players have a fine “instinct” for weaknesses of referees and they ruthlessly try to take advantage of them.
- Coaches/players “test” and “use” the referee; they “count” and “offset” their (selective) observations and permanently try to influence him/her.
- Players often use referees to hide their own faults or to “push up” themselves.

Mental Strength: Skills

- Mental strength supports the referee's "natural" authority and helps him/her to master the strong mental strains given by the framework of his/her officiating.
- Essential skills are:
 - Motivation, commitment, optimism,
 - self-confidence, self-assurance, crisis stability, steadiness, calmness,
 - decisiveness, courage, self-efficacy,
 - sense of responsibility,
 - focussed concentration, "big point" feeling.

Mental Strength: Techniques

- Mental strength can be gained / practiced / improved by various general mental training methods.
- Special techniques can be applied by the referee directly in connection with a match - mainly in the following areas:
 - Pre-start preparation,
 - stress management,
 - overcoming of phases of mental weakness.

Mental Strength: Techniques

- These techniques are:
 - Mental imagery
 - mental rehearsal
 - positive images etc
 - positive thoughts and positive self-talks,
 - breathing techniques.

Emotional Intelligence

- Emotional intelligence (EQ, emotional quotient) is a counterpart to “normal” intelligence (IQ, intelligence quotient).
- In general, it comprises a person’s abilities
- to realize and control his/her own emotions
- to show empathy, i.e.: to understand the emotions of other people, to accept their point of view, to “feel with them”,
- to arrange and deal with relationships with other persons in a “positive” way.

EI: Relevance

For a referee, EI is particularly important

- to maintain their neutrality / objectivity
- to control his/her emotions carefully when calling a fault or imposing a sanction,
- to “read” coaches/players (which normally cannot be controlled rationally) properly,
- to be able to find the balance in judging allowed, suitable emotions and misconducts,
- to create and maintain a stable working environment with all participants during the match,
- to manage conflicts in a proper way.

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EI: Special Skills

Emotional intelligence comprises a lot of personality traits and abilities.

Special important (“soft”) skills for referees are:

- Self-discipline, self-control,
- authenticity,
- openness, sensitivity, adaptability,
- sense of justice, objectivity, consistency, predictability,
- conflict ability,
- communication skills

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Communication

Communication is a fundamental element of game leadership. It implements all relevant interactions between the referee and the match participants (beyond his/her 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 to the environment by his/her behaviour, appearance, body language, ...

Game Orientation

The rules/instructions are binding for the referee's decisions and actions. But: They contain some (inherent or deliberate) fuzziness, e.g. the definition of some decision criteria is not (physically) precise.

- Even if decisions are based on precisely defined “measurable” facts, the referee is dependent on his/her perception which may be difficult and unreliable.
- Instructions may not be strict orders but recommendations.
- Some instructions even recommend to refrain from a strict rule application.
- There exist match situations which are not explicitly covered by the rules.

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Principle

The conclusion is: The referee has a certain degree of latitude, of “design freedom” when applying the rules/instructions.

The principle how this should be utilized (“let the ball fly”) can be found in many “synonymous” formulations / slogans / devices like:

- Game-oriented rule application,
- non-mechanical rule application,
- situation-related decisions,
- art of refereeing,
- “feel the game”, “be clever”, “serve the match”,
-

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Principle

- Game-oriented rule application has a big psychological impact:
- The referee's "match design" is to "convince" the participants.
- Particularly, it must maintain the referee's credibility and predictability and should not create the impression of randomness.

Examples

- According to the “basic techniques”, the 1st referee is to follow a certain standard routine of collecting information.
- In “non-measurable” or not precisely perceptible situations decisions may be not uniquely defined. The referee should find a “clever” balancing of such “50/50”-decisions.
- Positional faults (and the like): It makes no sense to “count the centimetres”.
- Some decisions are of different acceptance or are even “anticipated” by the teams.
- Warnings/sanctions are a very sensitive matter. It is important to find the right measure at the right time

Possible Problems

The distribution of refereeing tasks on several persons provides – besides the advantages of just more people working on the common goal

...and improving the perception possibilities – also special aspects and problems concerning game leadership, e.g.:

- Coaches/players often suspect that “more people make more mistakes”
- There are more “attacking targets” for coaches/players.
- The 1st referee is not completely “free” in conducting the match. “Unfortunate” decisions may be “imposed” on him/her, and he/she will be taken into joint liability

Skills

For a successful joint game leadership of the entire referees team it is necessary that

- each member has a good amount of team spirit, reliability within the team, mutual appreciation and confidence,
- all members are in permanent eye contact, in the same “mental zone”, and present themselves as “unit”,
- each member takes over his/her responsibilities but does not try to “see/do everything”,
- the 1st referee is very careful with overruling his/her colleagues (particularly line judges),
- the 1st referee “protects” his/her colleagues consequently

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Professionalism

Passing your knowledge is a harmony of

- Expertise
- Personality

Doing this effectively is a function of the professionalism of the referee.

Personality is a function of the social skills the referee has including such areas as commitment, empathy, equality, authenticity, reliability, predictability.

The expertise is about the knowledge, the ability to communicate, clarity, perception, flexibility, leadership and readiness to learn.

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Communicating the message

Every message has the same content, even if it has no words:

- Factual content (i.e. what is being informed) - the referee making decisions and then relaying them - what do I need to convey in the message
- Self-disclosure (i.e. what is this showing about me) - what do I want the message to show about me?
- Relationship (i.e. what is the relationship between the actors and what am I thinking of you) - What evaluation of the other do I want to give?
- Appeal (i.e. what I want you to do) - what does the message mean and what does it ask you to do? What is the outcome I want to get?

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Communicating the message

The receiver has the same aspects:

- Factual content - what can I learn from the message?
- Self -disclosure - what can I learn about the sender?
- Relationship - what does the sender think about me?
- Appeal - what does the sender want me to do ?

Comprehension and clarity

Comprehensibility

In order to improve the communication there are a few elements that help the referee in doing this:

- 1. Simplicity - the more complicated the communication may be the more difficult it is for the sender and the receiver
- 2. Arrangement / Order - the arrangement and order should be clear in order to gain the compliance
- 3. Shortness / Precision - keeping the message brief and precise will help the receiver get the appeal
- 4. Additional stimuli - for example personality, but this is the result of many other factors. But elements can be controlled and coached to make the job easier and improve comprehension

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Clarity and Authority

- Uniform, the badge and emblems... these express the authority of the organisation and also the rules of the game.
- Sanctions and control - and the physical symbols of these, for example the cards
- Upper position - the 1st referee is supported by their position on the court above the play and in giving clear signals
- Whistle - an indication of the strength of the referee
- Teamwork - how the members of the team interact with each other and show the cooperation and agreement
- Gestures and Facial Expression
- Body language - The way we hold ourselves - be game fit

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Top Level Referees

- Modern high-level referees must be well prepared
 - rule knowledge
 - in game understanding
 - in understanding how to use modern refereeing techniques.
- They need a common sense and a feeling for the spirit of the rules.
- They must possess good organisation skills, first class match preparation,
- The ability to self-evaluate their own performances.

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Top Level Referees

- They must have a strong physical and psychological strength.
 - Be firm but not arrogant
 - Be fair but not officious
- Gain a basic knowledge and understanding of human nature, e.g. in giving sanctions and understanding the actions and emotions of the players / coaches.
- Call all the faults regardless of the pressure coming from the spectators, score, whom it will hurt or how it will impact on future relationships within the participants
- The referee's reputation must be beyond reproach, and they must be role models

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Self Evaluation

- After the match the referee should be able to answer the following questions
 - Did the better team on the court win the game?
 - Did the referee conduct the game wisely? Did the referee direct the game using the all of the knowledge and understanding of rule interpretation they have and use their experience in the interactions with the teams to avoid any difficult situations
 - Did the game take place without any major incidents?

The quality of the referee is determined by their ability

- Their capacity to adapt to the actual game and
- Their capacity to let the game flow in a spontaneous manner

Conclusion

- There are many psychological aspects in high level refereeing.
- The psychological requirements are the essential challenge for the high level referee.