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COMMENTARY



The future of officiating: analysing the impact of COVID-19 on referees in world football

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected life around the world. As countries react to the pandemic through various measures impacting upon the civil liberty of citizens, football has not been immune to these interventions. Football around the globe has been interrupted, from professional leagues to grassroots and youth football, whilst attempts to restart the game have been problematic and complicated. Amongst all of the attempts across the world to restart professional leagues or identify when any level of football might be restarted are the referees, essential to any resumption of football. This commentary considers the role of referees in any restoration of football at professional, grassroots and youth level, the challenges and opportunities that might present themselves to FIFA, UEFA and other confederations and the national Football Associations (FA), as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact football globally.

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt around the world. All sectors including education, retail, banking, and sport have been affected, with the financial impact evident in economies across the globe. Sport at all levels has been reacting to the implications of COVID-19, whether that is grassroots sport or elite sport, the implications of the pandemic have been wide reaching and damaging to the sector. This impact has been felt in all sport, but arguably even more so in football (soccer), with the financial implications of a temporary interruption in the elite game concerning for players, clubs, leagues and referees. Given the amount of income that is derived from sponsorship and television rights,¹ leagues are trying to restart as quickly as possible in the professional game, and at grassroots level there is little guidance regarding when any type of football might be restarted and what this might look like.²

Central to all of these decisions are the referees. At the elite level referees face challenges around issues such as quarantine, time away from families and loved ones, a lack of ongoing contact with other referees and worries around reduced income and financial status. At grassroots level referee development is stagnant, recruitment is paused, and retention could present increased challenges following relaxation of lockdown and social distancing guidelines. There are different considerations for referee managers at the professional and grassroots level of football. Despite the issues presented by COVID-19, the situation also presents a number of opportunities for governing bodies, leagues and organizations who are involved in refereeing around the world. For example, a potential realignment of stakeholder relationships could be a positive outcome from the pandemic. We know that abuse, support networks, the disciplinary process and other issues related to

the recruitment and retention of referees have been prevalent for a considerable period of time,³ with little evidence of these issues being resolved.⁴ However, the situation presented as a result of COVID-19 could be utilized to reset the relationship between players, coaches and referees, through a reengagement and refocus of the different stakeholder groups.

This commentary considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on referees in both professional and grassroots football. The challenges and potential opportunities that this situation presents globally for referees and policymakers are discussed through an examination of the current landscape in football and the potential issues associated with restarting leagues and competitions at all levels of the game.

The current situation

A number of proposals, as well as issues, have been raised concerning restarting the professional game in leagues around the world, as well as England. In the professional game the introduction of halves which are less than 45 minutes has been raised as an idea, as has the concept of allowing more substitutions, given the lack of game time that players have had since the start of the pandemic.⁵ Concerns regarding player welfare have been raised by the respective club doctors of English Premier League teams. Doctors have identified issues such as the specific medical protocols, testing, player welfare and confusion over the action to be taken if a player tests positive for COVID-19,⁶ with some pointing to the rapidity of players testing positive in Germany shortly after training for professional teams was recommenced.⁷

Some of these concerns also extend to referees. Professional referees or referees that officiate full time in the premier leagues around the world, would also require many of the same considerations as the players. The on-field referees, the assistant referees and the fourth official operate in teams and the operation and management of these teams would require further thought.⁸ Referees can function with different assistant referees, and in different groups throughout the season, but this would bring with it the potential for increased chances of infection, as referees and assistant referees moved around the country, depending on the stadiums that have been selected. However, not changing personnel or moving referee groups between different stadia to prevent any potential spread of the virus could mean that players are refereed by the same group of officials more often, leading to issues with overfamiliarity between the referees and the players. Referees and the Video Assistant Referees (VAR) would all require regular testing and a controlled environment, similar to the players. As with players, referees would be required to be away from home for a prolonged period of time, something which could negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing.⁹ Therefore, regular access to a psychologist or a team of psychologists during this phase would be essential.

Challenges for elite referees

There are different challenges associated with officiating in environments with a lack of supporters. We could see decision-making improve, as there is a lack of influence over the decisions of the referee from the supporters in the stadium, a variable which has been considered previously in the literature.¹⁰ It is hard to see supporters returning to stadiums in the near future, due to the requirement to maintain social distancing.¹¹ Therefore, it is possible that referees operating in the top leagues around the world will be asked to officiate in an environment without supporters.

As such and depending on how individual leagues in different countries choose to restart, we could see home advantage decreasing still further, depending on whether neutral venues are used.¹² Home advantage has been shown to decrease in the English football leagues since 1945, and it could be anticipated that the removal of supporters would potentially reduce this advantage still further for the home team.¹³ If neutral venues are utilized, questions will be posed around how teams and referees adapt to the very different environments in which they are asked to perform. It is a

significant change for players and referees and there could be both positive and negative impacts upon performance and also the wider spectacle. For example, would leagues and the matches therein remain as competitive as they would if played in front of supporters? This represents a wider concern regarding the authenticity of any league and the product that is televised to supporters around the world.

The return to action of professional football is imperative given the sponsorships and television rights deals that exist in leagues across the world.¹⁴ However, for referees further down the professional leagues, they are paid on a match by match basis. Unlike players, not all referees are contracted and paid a monthly salary; therefore, if they do not officiate fixtures, they do not receive any financial remuneration. This income might be particularly important to these referees, indeed it might be their highest form of income as they have reduced hours in their employment in order to pursue refereeing as a career.¹⁵ This uncertainty and reduced income and the associated stress that this can bring can lead to mental health and wellbeing concerns.¹⁶ This is a matter which governing bodies and referee organizations will need to address if the temporary cessation of football continues for an extended period of time.

Behaviour change in football

Historically the relationship between coaches, players and referees can be fractious.¹⁷ However, with a lack of atmosphere in the stadiums due to an absence of crowd noise, it is possible that players and coaches will be acutely aware that any sound they make or conversation they have will be potentially broadcast by the pitchside microphones, including any form of abusive language towards the match official. This could mean that both players and coaches adapt their behaviour due to the more sterile environment in which they are performing. All of which provides possible beneficial impacts, not only in the top leagues across the world and professional football but also in grassroots football once the mass participation game restarts. There is evidence to suggest that referees at lower levels of football perceive a link between the negative behaviour of players towards referees in the professional football, and the negative behaviour of players in grassroots football.¹⁸ In short, there is a perception that the elite game and grassroots football are inextricably linked. A reduction in negative behaviour in the elite leagues around the world could mean some rebalancing of the wider relationships between referees, players and coaches at lower levels of the game as well.

This potential change in relationship would permit further academic examination of the abuse towards referees, and whether initiatives could be introduced that would assist in reducing this abuse further, thereby positively affecting recruitment and retention rates in grassroots officiating. Verbal and physical abuse is a significant contributory factor towards referee discontinuation, and any reduction in this abuse would assist national FAs in their mission to recruit and retain more referees in grassroots football.¹⁹ However, there is also the potential for other platforms for abuse to emerge further, such as online abuse through social media networks,²⁰ a subject not covered in academic research.²¹ Referees have been identified as an outgroup in football, with very different aims and objectives for matches than the players, coaches and spectators.²² They are present to uphold the laws of the game and have little interest in which team wins or loses. This outlook is very different to the players, coaches and spectators who are invested in the outcome of the match for whichever team they play, coach or support. It is these divergent interests which often create tension and subsequent abuse towards referees.²³ The danger with any verbal or physical abuse to which a referee is subjected is whether this experience will contribute towards a decision to leave the game altogether.

Grassroots referees

During the enforced break of football, referees at varying levels of the game across the world might decide that their mental health and well-being have positively increased since they have not been refereeing. The reduced exposure to verbal and physical abuse might lead referees to acknowledge

that they have not missed the game and do not want to return. This would present large-scale organizational and management issues for football institutions around the world. Moreover, in years to come it would produce significant challenges to the game at higher levels as fewer referees formed the development pathways, meaning that referees with the potential to progress to the higher levels of the game are scarcer as overall numbers are reduced. This would put additional pressures on the development pathways and a necessity to maximize the talent pool available. This makes a positive and inclusive operational environment for referees at grassroots level more important than ever, in order to attract and retain referees.

Respect marshals in grassroots and youth football, introduced originally as part of the Respect Programme,²⁴ become even more important to help promote positive playing environments, and also an essential ally to the referee at these levels of football. The area around the pitch will require careful monitoring when grassroots football begins to return. This will involve the control of the spectators at the pitchside and also the monitoring of the behaviour and conduct of the coaches, particularly if social distancing is still required when grassroots football resumes. This challenging environment will produce additional pressure for referees, who often operate in isolation at most levels of the grassroots game.²⁵ This will, in turn, provide additional training and development requirements for referees and the organization and distribution of this training will be something that national FAs and referee associations will need to manage.

These additional requirements and increased pressure, as well as a relatively alien environment for referees at grassroots level, will mean that the formal and informal support networks around these referees become even more essential than in 'normal' times. Formal support networks tend to be those that are structured and arranged through the governing body or referee associations, such as training courses, mentoring programmes and links to Referee Development Officers.²⁶ Informal support networks are those that are organized by the referees themselves, that are organic and not manufactured by any governing body intervention.²⁷ Both form part of the wider support network and provide essential structures for referees to operate within. However, this updated and new environment will ultimately make it even more challenging for any new referees, particularly young referees who might feel more isolated than usual. Clearly, any issues such as these would be a threat to any retention of new referees and would place increased emphasis on the support networks around these referees, including any leagues and clubs to which referees are connected.

Referees are effectively volunteers at most levels of football, receiving only expenses for their time and travel commitments, and motivating these referees will be essential if any sort of structured, competitive football is to be restarted. Also important in terms of this motivation is how referees are treated by the clubs that they visit. Changing facilities will have to be revised in order to ensure that social distancing is maintained. Referees often officiate at locations which have a large number of fixtures occurring at the same time. This means that there are many teams, players and referees all in one place, including the changing facilities. These changing facilities are invariably used by many players and by a number of referees, in the changing facilities area provided for match officials. Clearly, this provides a number of challenges in terms of sanitization and prevention of any transmission of the COVID-19 virus. If referees, and players, are to feel safe and secure in this environment, then the management of these large and multiple playing areas and their associated facilities requires careful consideration.

Conclusion and opportunities

There are considerable challenges for referees in this COVID-19 world and beyond, both in the elite game and at grassroots level, which this commentary has explored. In the professional game concerns exist around the ability of elite referees to operate and perform as they usually would in empty stadiums, the associated implications of quarantine environments and elongated time away from family. Furthermore, there are considerations regarding potential changes in the behaviour of players, the financial implications once we move beyond the relative security of the top referees in any one

country and into the lower leagues of professional football, as well as potential changes to the structure of the professional game, how referees operate in their teams and how they move around the country.

In the grassroots game, this commentary has identified potential issues following any easing of lockdown measures and the gradual resumption of football around the world, with which referees, FIFA, UEFA, national FAs and regional referee organizations and societies should be concerned. From the impact of the interruption of any abuse that referees might have been experiencing due to the enforced absence of football, the support that will need to be in place and heightened to a status that has not formally existed, to the consideration of the environment and facilities in which referees are expected to operate and perform. There are a considerable number of challenges that exist on a global scale that will have to be tackled if grassroots football is to return and operate effectively, given the restrictions that will continue to be in place over the coming months and years.

Nevertheless, amongst all of these challenges, there are also significant opportunities for those in positions of governance, and for referees themselves. Across both the elite and grassroots game, a change in the relationships between players, coaches and referees could be cultivated by governing bodies. This change in behaviour towards referees could be initiated through the behind-closed-doors fixtures which will take place in countries around the world, and, due to the lack of supporters and therefore crowd generated atmosphere, will permit coaches and players to be heard on camera. Therefore, this situation could be used to promote more congenial relationships between coaches, players and referees and any change of this type would, in turn, positively impact behaviour at lower levels of football.²⁸ Players at grassroots and youth level are influenced by the behaviour of players in the professional leagues around the world, and any positive change in behaviour in professional football would have the potential to influence positively behaviour at different levels, and therefore should be embraced and encouraged by governing bodies.

If we can redress some of the balance in terms of the abuse that referees receive, we could conceivably see an upturn in the recruitment and retention statistics over a period of time. An issue which FIFA, UEFA and national FAs have long been wrestling with. In addition to a reduction in abuse towards referees, there should be an aim to increase the formal support networks around these match officials, particularly young referees. The changing environment necessitated following the outbreak of COVID-19 will provide challenges for new and experienced referees, as has been discussed in this commentary, but this setting will also provide the opportunity for governing bodies to reconsider the support that is available for referees, and to refocus their efforts in this regard, particularly given the importance attached to support networks by referees.²⁹

COVID-19 has temporarily changed the way of life for billions of people and will have long-lasting impacts upon both professional and mass participation sport. Football has and will continue to be affected by the pandemic and there are considerable issues that exist in the short, medium and long term. These challenges also exist for referees at varying levels of practice, in countries across the world, but there also exist opportunities. These opportunities can be working towards changing attitudes and behaviour towards referees from the professional game down to the grassroots level, there can be revisions of support systems and consideration of the management and provision of facilities for referees and there can be a movement towards additional consideration of training and development opportunities which will be required in a post COVID-19 landscape. There will be continued reorganization of the way football is played, watched and consumed. This commentary suggests that these revisions and considerations should be extended to referees across the globe.

Notes

1. Plumley, Wilson and Ramchandani, 'Towards a Model for Measuring Holistic Performance of Professional Football Clubs'.
2. Parnell et al., 'COVID-19, Networks and Sport'.
3. Cleland, O'Gorman and Bond, 'The English Football Association's Respect Campaign'; Kellett & Shilbury, 'Umpire participation'; Ridinger, 'Contributors and Constraints to Involvement with Youth Sports

- Officiating'; Tingle, Warner and Sartore-Baldwin, 'The Experience of Former Women Officials'; and Warner, Tingle and Kellett, 'Officiating Attrition'.
4. Ridinger et al., 'Development of the Referee Retention Scale'; Ridinger et al., 'Why Referees Stay in the Game'; Webb, 'Knight of the Whistle'; and Webb, Cleland and O'Gorman, 'The Distribution of Power through a Media Campaign'.
 5. BBC Sport, 'Premier League'.
 6. Ornstein, 'Club Medics tell Premier League Return isn't Safe...'
 7. Richardson, 'Bundesliga Reveals 10 Positive Coronavirus Tests'.
 8. Webb, *Elite soccer referees*.
 9. Webb and Gorczynski, 'The Welfare, Wellbeing and Mental Health of Sports Match Officials'; and Webb et al., *Referees, Match Officials and Abuse*.
 10. Balmer et al., 'Influence of Crowd Noise'; Downward and Jones, 'Effects of Crowd Size on Referee decisions'; and Nevill, Balmer and Williams, 'The Influence of Crowd Noise and Experience'.
 11. Roan, 'Coronavirus Pandemic'.
 12. Nevill, Webb and Watts, 'Improved Training of Football Referees'; and Webb et al., 'The Impact of Referee Training'.
 13. Nevill, Balmer and Williams, 'The Influence of Crowd Noise'; Nevill et al., 'Improved training of football Referees'; and Unkelbach and Memmert, 'Crowd Noise as a Cue in Referee Decisions'.
 14. Giulianottii and Robertson, *Globalization and football*.
 15. Webb, *Elite soccer referees*.
 16. Webb and Gorczynski, 'The Welfare, Wellbeing and Mental Health of Sports Match Officials'.
 17. Webb, 'Knight of the whistle'; and Webb, *Elite soccer referees*.
 18. Webb, Rayner and Thelwell, 'An Examination of Match Official's Perceptions of Support'; and Webb et al., 'Referees, Match Officials and Abuse'.
 19. Cleland, O'Gorman and Webb, 'Respect?'.
 20. Kavanagh and Jones, 'Understanding Cyber- Enabled Abuse in Sport'; and Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks, 'Towards Typologies of Virtual Maltreatment'.
 21. Webb, 'Sports Match Official Research'.
 22. Webb et al., 'An Analysis of Soccer Referee Experiences'.
 23. Ibid.
 24. The FA, 'The FA's Vision'.
 25. Webb et al., *Referees, Match Officials and Abuse*.
 26. Cleland et al., 'Respect?'.
 27. Ridinger et al., 'Development of the referee retention scale'; and Ridinger et al., 'Why referees stay in the game'.
 28. See note 25.
 29. Ridinger et al., 'Development of the Referee Retention Scale'; and Ridinger et al., 'Why Referees Stay in the Game'.

Disclosure statement

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