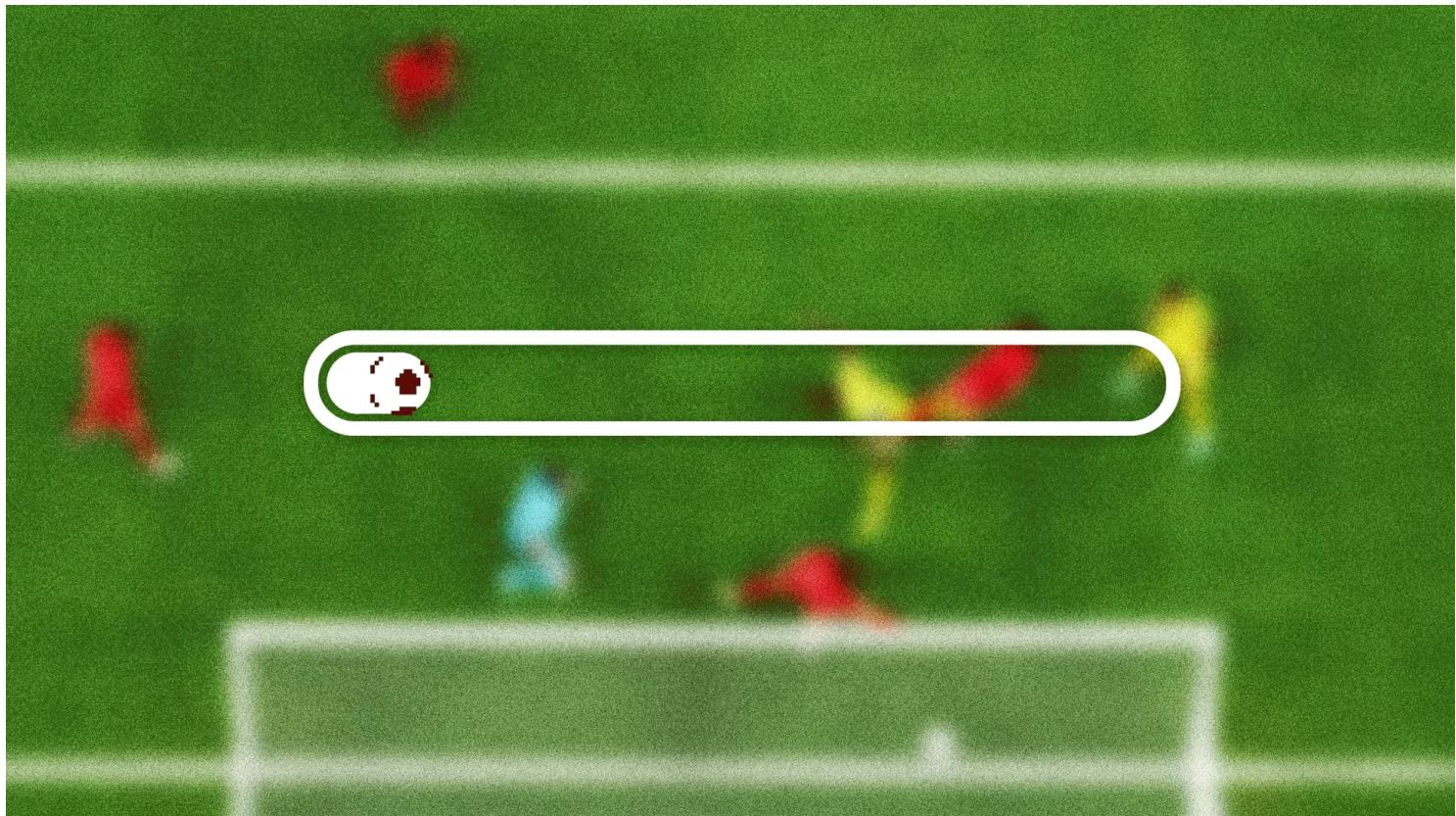


TECHNOLOGY

What Has Technology Done to Soccer?

Perfect referees are a soccer fan's nightmare.

By Jacob Stern



Katie Martin / The Atlantic; Getty

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Well, that didn't take long.

Less than two minutes into Sunday's World Cup opening match, between Ecuador and the host country, Qatar, the Ecuadorians won a free kick just beyond half field. Their left back lofted a dangerous ball toward goal, Qatar's keeper came sprinting off his line to punch the ball away, and one of Ecuador's center backs leaped to challenge for it with his head. From there, pandemonium: Several players collided; the ball shot straight up in the air. Caught in no man's land, the keeper flailed at it and missed. The center back then flung himself into the air and executed a sort of flying roundhouse kick to guide the ball to Enner Valencia, Ecuador's all-time leading scorer, who was waiting to nod it home.

Gooooaaaal! The Ecuadorian fan section exploded. The players knelt in a circle, raised their heads to the sky, and thanked God. The tournament was truly under way! ... except that it wasn't.

If you're a soccer fan, you know what came next, though you might have hoped it wouldn't come so soon. The goal, it turned out, was actually under review. For what? No one knew yet. All television audiences were shown was the inscrutable face of the referee as he took instructions from his assistants back in the replay room. After the celebrations had ended, and the TV broadcast had replayed the goal from four different angles, and the commentators had analyzed the whole sequence of play, the ref ruled out the apparent goal for offside. No gooooaaaal.

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This did not make fans happy. Ecuadorians in attendance rubbed their fingers together in the “pay me” gesture, seemingly to suggest that the Qatars had bribed the referee. Online, accusations of corruption flew left and right. Conspiracists had a field day. Some people simply expressed confusion about the call, or disbelief. Others pointed out, sanctimoniously, that the ruling was, in a technical sense, the right decision. But in a broader, more meaningful sense, it was not. If anything, it crystallized everything that is wrong with Video Assistant Referee, soccer's still relatively new and still highly controversial instant-replay system. The sport has lost sight of the whole point of officiating—and of sports.

Compared with major American sports, soccer was late to the party on video review. The NFL adopted it way back in 1986, the NBA did so in the early 2000s, and the MLB followed suit a few years later. When soccer finally got around to instituting video review, in 2018, it did so in just about the worst, most ham-handed way possible. Decisions took eons to arrive and were not nearly as precise as they pretended to be. Fans had zero transparency about what was happening. Long-standing rules that had seemed simple enough in the pre-VAR days took on quantum-mechanical levels of complexity when subjected to frame-by-frame scrutiny. Every week brought a fresh outrage.

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The past four years have smoothed out some of those early kinks. Offside calls are now hyper-accurate and semiautomated. And VAR really has done some good: It has eliminated the worst officiating mistakes and ensured that we will not see another hand of God-type abomination, in which a particularly egregious bit of foul play somehow goes unspotted and changes the course of a match. Even so, you'd be hard-pressed to find a soccer fan who thinks VAR is great as is. The Ecuador-Qatar decision is a clear example of why. It was, in the narrowest, most annoying sense, the correct decision. To the naked eye, or even to those watching a television replay, the infraction was virtually invisible amid the chaos. But VAR spotted it.

Congratulations, officials—you got it right. But for what? Sports are, in the end, entertainment, and officiating must always be a balance between accuracy and watchability. If the former were our only and ultimate concern, we would put every potential infraction under the microscope ... and the game would be utterly unwatchable. The plays that officials review—that they *ought to* review—are the ones where the call, if allowed to stand, would seem genuinely unfair. No one (except maybe the opposing team's fans) likes to see a legitimate-looking goal disallowed. When Valencia's header found the net, he and his teammates did not delay their celebration. The Qatari players did not turn to the referee in protest. The fans did not hesitate to lose their minds. Not even the commentators seemed to have considered the possibility that the goal might not stand, and so television audiences didn't either. No one was asking for this. Had the game proceeded, no one would have thought twice.

VAR is useful only insofar as it makes soccer better for the fans. It can do that only if it can alert them that a check is under way soon enough and return a verdict fast enough that it doesn't make celebrating goals impossible for fear of a reversal. It should rule out only those goals where, when you look back at the replay, people might reasonably think, *Yeah, that's offside*. Some sort of modified tie-goes-to-the-runner rule would help here by eliminating the scourge of the "toenail offside." You could even give the attacker a buffer of a foot or two.

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To its credit, FIFA has introduced new, computerized visualizations to help justify and explain VAR's delphic verdicts, a strategy that has worked well with tennis's Hawk-Eye line-calling technology, which fans and players love and accept without complaint. The visualizations are certainly a step forward. But VAR is no Hawk-Eye. For one thing, Hawk-Eye is near-instantaneous; so far in this tournament, VAR visualizations have arrived as much as 10 minutes after the fact. Even more important, perhaps, *onside versus offside* is not to soccer what *in versus out* is to tennis. When a sweet forehand appears to paint the baseline, the first thing you think is, *But was it in?* That is, unavoidably, what tennis is all about: *in or out*. Soccer fans do not spend 90 minutes wondering *on or off*? There are a million other variables to worry about. That is part of the fun and complexity of soccer. And that is how it should be.

Less than 15 minutes after having his opener disallowed, Valencia scored again, then went on to double Ecuador's advantage another 15 minutes later. The match finished 2–0. This almost surely will be just the first of many VAR controversies during the 2022 World Cup. (Anyone see the first half of that Argentina game?) If you thought this one was complicated or ambiguous, just wait until we get a VAR decision that hinges on a referee's interpretation of "phase of play." Sunday's decision, thankfully, ended up being inconsequential. The next one might not be.
