



VAR

FOOTPRINTS OF TECHNOLOGY IN SPORTS: A REVIEW OF THE VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE (VAR) & GOAL LINE TECHNOLOGY.

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unprejudiced, despite the incoming spate of suggestions from a prejudiced crowd. His alacrity is sometimes less revered and often taken for granted. The act of accusing the referee of being incompetent or unjust is extremely unfair to the referee, given his limitations. This is where Goal Line Technology (GLT) comes handy.

2. Video Assistance Referee (VAR)

While the goal line technology was having its way the International Football Association Board (IFAB) began the consideration of the introduction of the Video Assistance Referee (VAR), the technology was to apply only to key decisions, such as goals, red cards, penalties and mistaken identity. Following the constant trials of the new VAR it was introduced during a friendly football match between France and Italy, with the successful trial leading to a pitch side monitor in the FIFA Club World Cup in 2016.

With the success so far recorded by the goal line technology, by the year 2017, the A-league became the first to use VAR in a top-flight professional league, with the MLS, Bundesliga and Serie A following suit. VAR was used for the first time in England in an FA cup game and La Liga introduced the technology for the 2018 - 19 season. It was also used most publicly in the World Cup with IFAB officially writing VAR laws into the game of football, following the further successes recorded, VAR was introduced in the Premier League and at every stage of the Champions League from the 2019/20 season onwards for what FIFA deems “game changing decisions”, including the validity of goals, penalties, red cards and offside.

The decisions and incidents that the VAR can review are limited to: (1) goal/no goal; (2) penalty/no penalty; (3) direct red card; and (4) mistaken identity (for yellow and red cards). Although that might not seem much, this catalogue means that the VAR has a supervisory function for over a dozen of different types of calls. ²Regarding the issue of goal/no goal, it must review, inter alia, whether the attacking side has committed an offence in the build-up to or scoring of the goal (through a foul, handball, or offside), whether the ball has gone out of play, and whether the ball has crossed the line. In relation to penalties, its tasks include monitoring whether a penalty kick was correctly awarded or not awarded, whether the offence leading to the penalty was committed inside the penalty area, and whether any other offence has occurred during the build-up. Finally, there is a handful of offences triggering a red card, such as serious foul play and violent conduct, in addition to the issue of punishing the right player.

Some of these reviewable decisions are based on rules and it is here that the VAR has brought the greatest improvements. This notably concerns offside. In the pre-VAR world, incorrect offside calls were a norm, with studies consistently reporting error rates between 11

² Helsen et al. 2006; Oudejans et al. 2005; Catteeuw et al. 2010; Hüttermann et al. 2017



and 26%.³ While some scholars attributed the problems to optical errors caused by a wrong positioning of the assistant referees (Oudejans et al. 2000), others put forward the so-called “flash lag” hypothesis according to which the human eye has difficulties in identifying the position of two objects if one of them moves (Helsen et al. 2006; Catteeuw et al. 2010). The VAR has dramatically reduced mistakes in this area. Even if Gianni Infantino’s announcement after the 2018 World Cup that offside is “finished” may have been overly optimistic,⁴ it is true that, with regard to clear offside, incorrect calls have essentially disappeared.

Although cases of mistaken identity were never too frequent in football, they have recorded one of the most impressive improvements. Such incidents have now vanished since the introduction of the VAR. A ready example is the just concluded African Cup of Nations held in Cameroun where Ghanaian striker, Benjamin Tetteh ran away from the referee after swinging a punch at an opponent.⁵ The same goes for errors relating to the location of a foul (inside or outside the penalty area), which determine whether the punishment is a penalty or free kick. Even infractions of recently added rules are being monitored effectively. A 2019 amendment to the Laws of the Game established that goals scored directly from an attacking player’s hand or arm or, immediately after, by their teammate (offensive handball) are prohibited, regardless of whether the touch is accidental or not. It has been put to effect quickly by referees and video assistants across the world.

The VAR system, however, has not recorded much success especially in decisions relating to penalties. The English Premier League for instance, is always enmeshed in weekly controversies regarding VAR decisions. The decisions have become as subjective as the individual referees officiating the game. Reviews concerning penalties continue to prompt frequent and fierce criticisms from players, managers, pundits and fans, at levels comparable or even higher than pre-VAR.⁶ Penalties for handball have proven to be one persistent bone of contention. As explained earlier, the handling of the ball by a player from the defending side is not per se prohibited; it must either be “deliberate” or “unnaturally” enlarge their body. Refereeing decisions relating to these requirements regularly end up being disputed. Numerous examples could be cited, but one that has particularly stuck with fans of the English league is the game between **Brighton & Hove Albion v Manchester United – in September 2020.**

Ordinarily, blowing the final whistle generally means that the referee has ended the game, but all that changed at the Amex Stadium last September. Chris Kavanagh blew for full-time after a corner kick, but VAR ruled that Neal Maupay had blocked Harry Maguire’s header

³.ibid

⁴ See www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-fifa-infantino-idUSKBN1K31IG.

⁵ See https://www.eurosport.com/football/africa-cup-of-nations/2022/ghanas-benjamin-tetteh-runs-away-after-swinging-punch-furious-referee-awards-red-card-anyway_sto8710991/story.shtml

⁶ The Twitter account “VAR-watch”, which monitors the technology’s performance in the German Bundesliga, has rated 13 VAR decisions during the 2019/20 season as “questionable”, 8 of which concern penalties



with his hand. Fernandes slotted home the penalty spot to secure an unlikely three points for the Red Devils and leave Brighton raging.⁷ Many other baffling examples abound but suffice to state that a lot is still desired in the application of this fantastic initiative.

The VAR protocol stipulates that the video assistant should only step in if there was a “clear and obvious error” or, practically less important, a “serious missed incident”. In theory, the system could be designed in a variety of ways, but two main options should be distinguished. The first consists in giving the VAR the power to exercise what, in some appellate legal systems, is called *de novo* review. This entails a complete re-assessment of the incident “from scratch”, i.e., disregarding any prior refereeing decision made, and would lead to the VAR correcting each and every (reviewable) mistake that occurred on the pitch. A typical example are cases of what is usually called ‘dangerous play’ or ‘violent conduct’ like going for a challenge with the studs up. A referee at first blush is entitled to issue a yellow card until he is summoned by the Assistants to watch the monitor. The referee in such situations can rescind the earlier yellow card and substitute the same with a red. The second option is having a system based on deferential review. Here, the VAR would, as a rule, defer to the on-pitch referee’s decisions and only step in where a call was deemed evidently wrong. This is the approach that the IFAB has chosen. It reduces not only the number of interventions but also that of reversals, which are limited to blatant errors.

Both the goal line technology and the VAR have proven to be valuable tools for enforcing rule infractions. While the goal line technology has contributed immensely in enthroning ‘sporting justice’, its counterpart, the VAR has fared rather worse especially when it comes to decisions turning on standards. This varied impact is not because the technology is insufficiently developed, it is a consequence of the nature of the football laws it is tasked with adjudicating on. FIFA successfully trialed the use of the ‘robot referees’ at the just concluded Club World Cup. Unfortunately, the ‘robot referees’ aren’t half as cool as they sound. They’re essentially an automatic VAR system for offsides, tracking the limbs of players by relying on special cameras attached to the roofs of stadiums to create an animated skeleton of players with 29 data points. It is left to be seen how successful this would be in the long run given the myriad of controversies already associated with the technology.

It has no comparable advantage in relation to evaluative judgments, which explains the persisting difficulties the system faces when dealing with standard-like offences such as fouls and handball violations. Nonetheless, there is no gainsaying the fact that technology has positively impacted sports and the game of football in particular.

⁷See <https://sportsins.com/news/premier-league-var-controversies/>



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