

*By Gil Weber, National Emeritus Referee*

August 2002 -- Based on recent requests from several members of socref here are my revised pregame instructions. While much of this remains as written in 1999, I've updated various sections to reflect policy and protocol changes from USSF, FIFA, and the International Board.

As I stated in the original preamble, adapt these instructions to your own style and temperament. I urge you not to repeat verbatim that which you read here. Rather think about the points I make, reflect on how I deal with them, and then create your own pre-game spiel to meet the needs of your games and the experience levels of your AR's. With that, here goes...

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Except when you need to deal with substations or other matters on your touchline, you'll help me most by focusing your attention inside the lines for the entire 90 minutes (or however long). Please don't turn around to see who chases the ball when it goes into touch behind you. Don't watch to see what happens to the ball when it goes behind the goal line. Our game is between the lines, so watch the players and the field at all times.

The players are smart, and if one of them is going to do anything nasty it will probably happen when he thinks we're not watching. If you turn to watch the ball behind you, that's when a player will look, see his chance, and elbow or punch or spit. Then an opponent is lying face down on the field and I look at you with a facial expression asking "What happened?" If you then look back at me with eyes like a deer caught in headlights, we're in trouble. We can't let that happen, we have to be aware, so watch the "hot" areas of the field at all times.

If I whistle for a free kick close to you and I have to come to the spot of the foul to deal with players or move the wall, do NOT watch me! Nothing is happening where I am. Watch the players behind me, directly across from you in the penalty area. That's where the s\*\*t is going to hit the fan because the players know my attention is away from them, and they look at you and see that you're watching me! Then the nasty stuff starts, so watch the field!!

Every time the ball is dead the first thing we must do is make eye contact. If you have something to communicate then try to tell me what's on your mind with hand signals. But if it's a more serious matter that requires discussion then motion me over.

On each stoppage it's also important that you look across the field to the other AR. Make eye contact. If there is a flag up behind my back (e.g., for substitution) then mirror it. If I don't look at you don't worry. I'm not ignoring you. I'm simply violating my first rule which says we must make eye contact. I'm allowed to violate my own rules :o) Now, if I don't look at you several times then give me a shout and point to your own eyes -- I'll get the message to pay attention.

Offside is yours but please remember to wait just a moment to determine participation. Let's not put the flag up for a player standing in an offside position only to see the player with the ball run through the defense and collect his own pass. A second or two late and accurate is better than a fast but, ultimately, inaccurate flag. If you do put the flag up (and it's not a mistake which you immediately correct) then hold it until I blow the whistle, or wave it down ("thanks very much"), or if I've gone completely asleep until the defense takes the ball and there is no longer a threat of attack.

Never, never pull the flag down with an attack in progress simply because I did not see it. Stand there forever with the flag raised if you have to. You're not the one who looks foolish -- I am, and that's my problem. The defense and their coaches will certainly let me know that your flag is up. (Boy, will they let me know! :o))

But we can not allow a goal to be scored if you had the flag up and then brought it down because I did not see it and you then decided you had to catch up to the second to last defender.

Similarly, if the ball goes into touch and then comes back into the field, raise the flag and stand there until I blow the whistle or until the attack breaks down. I'm the one who looks foolish, not you. We cannot allow the ball to go off the field, come back in, and then go into the goal. If you've dropped the flag and I never saw it, and I then award a goal we'll have a riot. So keep the flag up as long as there's a threat of attack!

If the ball goes into the goal and comes back out, and if I did not realize it and play continues, raise the flag and stand there. Do not drop the flag. A goal is a goal, any my falling asleep does not negate that. As a last resort, shout to get my attention -- this is a game-altering incident and we have to get it right.

If I've turned away from you and headed up field and have not heard your shout, then the AR on the other side of the field should see your flag and should mirror it ("Hey, dummy. Look behind you and try to extricate yourself from the hole you've just dug.").

Now, if the other AR does not see and mirror your flag, and if the game has had some stoppages and restarts then it's too late at that point to award the goal. All you can do is tell me at half time/full time and I'll have to deal with the consequences of my inattentiveness.

OK, we know that AR's are now instructed to become more involved in managing the game, for example with fouls. Please help me, but please also give me first shot since I tend to play a lot of advantage. Early in the game especially be just a little bit hesitant popping the flag until you get a feel for what I'm allowing.

If you're convinced that I would have called the foul had I seen it then don't hesitate to raise the flag. Be sure to give me direction and a little hand signal (e.g., shirt pulling). Remember, I may not have seen the foul, and I have to sell the call to the players! If you can help me avoid the deer-in-the-headlights stare when the players ask "What was the call, ref?" I'd be most appreciative. :o)

I'm going to ask you to be very careful flagging for any fouls in the penalty area that would result in a PK. That's NOT saying the penalty area is exclusively mine, but I am supposed to be able to see what's in front of me, and I'll take responsibility for that. I'll also protect you from irate defenders and coaches, so don't worry about them. So please think very, very carefully before flagging for PK's.

Now there are two exceptions -- times when you should flag for a PK without any hesitation.

1) If some Diego Maradona wanna-be sticks his hand up above his head or far from his body and unquestionably, intentionally handles the ball, and I'm the only person on the planet who did not see it, then raise the flag, give the standard USSF signal for PK. Again, this is not some marginal handling -- this is clearly "mano de dios" stuff and you're convinced I've had a huge brain f\*\*t.

2) If I've turned to run up field and a defender cold-cocks an attacker behind my back then you must raise the flag. Now, that flag will be behind my back (and flags behind the CR's back should be avoided) but we're talking a game-destroying incident if it's not dealt with promptly. So raise the flag and the other AR should be observant enough to see it and mirror. "Hey ref, look behind you. There's a problem significant enough for me to flag and point past you."

Manage the game as best you can when play is near to you. Handle encroachment on close-by free kicks and corner kicks. Come into the field if you need to. But keep an eye on the attackers and read the game. They may want to take a quick free kick, and if you're standing next to the wall 10 yards inside the field when they put the ball into play then we all look bad when I have to blow the whistle and hold the restart while you retreat to the touch line. So use common sense here and try to stay at the touch line if you can.

Talk to the players when they're at the corner arc and you just know the attacker is going to kick the defender's ankles ("Play the ball guys, not the ankles"). If the player then kicks the ankles you nail him -- raise the flag. Talk to the players -- politely, respectfully, but we're in charge. They are not.

If they complain ("Hey linesman, that was offside") don't be bothered. Players will complain and disagree. They're allowed to disagree and vent a little emotion. That's part of an emotional game. But when they tell you to stick the flag where the sun doesn't shine then it's different and you need to call me over. Anytime you call me over it has to be for something so serious that you could not manage it yourself. So you must be prepared to tell me "white #6 spit at blue #12" or whatever. Do NOT call me over to say that green #5 is complaining about offside. I don't care about that and you should not be over-reacting to that kind of stuff. So listen and hear what needs to be heard and ignore what can be ignored. Stay calm and in control.

Same with the coaches and substitutes and spectators. They're allowed to disagree as long as they don't get out of line or become disruptive to the game, or interfere with your running on the line. So try to manage things as best you can -- politely but firmly. If you've tried but you cannot deal with elements outside the touchlines then call me over. I WILL TAKE OUT THE TRASH!

If the ball goes in the goal and in your opinion it's a good goal then follow standard USSF procedures but do NOT run up the line. If I decide it's not good then you have to run all the way back. Make eye contact! If I agree it's good then trot slowly up the line looking over your right shoulder at the goal line and penalty areas to observe post-goal nastiness (especially fights over the ball in the net). Watch the players!!!

If in your opinion it's not a good goal then stand there, at attention, per USSF instructions. I'll look at you, you can motion me over and tell me "#6 clearly obstructed the keeper and prevented her from getting to the ball" (or whatever it was). If I agree we'll cancel the goal and restart for the defense. If I disagree we'll go with the goal and I'll keep the defenders away from you. Again, don't be offended; it's not personal.

Now, if in your opinion it's not a good goal, and I fail to make eye contact (instead pointing and running directly to the center circle), then raise the flag behind my back. Again, I hate flags behind my back but I've violated my own rule which says make eye contact and standing at attention won't do any good at that point. So you need to get my attention. The other AR must mirror the flag ("Hey, dummy, look behind you").

If I whistle for a PK then come around the corner and take your position off the field at the intersection of the goal line and penalty area line. Be a goal judge and watch for keeper movement forward from the goal line. I'll watch for encroachment into the penalty area by the field players. If the ball rebounds from the keeper or goal do NOT try to rejoin play with the offside. You'll get caught in no-man's land and you're useless to me. Stay on the end line and be a goal judge. I'll watch for offside. Move out to the touch line only when it's safe -- when the play had cleared the penalty area and the ball is going to the other half of the field.

If the keeper moves forward of the goal line and the kick is not successful then move your left foot into the field so that you are straddling the goal line. That tells me there was goal keeper movement. In my infinite wisdom (or lack thereof) I may choose to ignore that subtle signal from you. Do not be offended; it is not personal.

All other mechanics are to standard USSF teachings (for corner kicks, throw-ins, goal kicks, substitutions, etc.). Just follow what you were taught and you'll be fine. When you check the players be certain that the jersey number on the lineup is the same as the number on the shirt. And please look at the photos on the player passes! Does the player standing in front of you bear any resemblance to the photo? If not, hold the pass and show it to me. Do not return it to the player or coach.

One last thing. I'm not picky about the exact spot for throw-ins, goal kicks, offside, etc. If the player is close let her play. Show the player where to take the throw-in and if she's within a few yards let it go. If she goes 15 yards away after you pointed to the proper spot then raise the flag.

I don't care that the ball goes on the exact blade of grass for offside restarts. Let them play. I don't care if the ball is placed a few inches outside the goal area for a goal kick and the nearest opponent is 40 yards away. Who cares? Certainly not the opponents. Don't raise the flag and motion with your hand to tell me that the ball has to go back a few inches after it's been kicked into play!

If the keeper is punting the ball and reaches a few inches outside the penalty area just before kicking (clearly handling outside the area) don't raise the flag! The nearest opponent is probably 40 yards away. Who cares? Let them play. Give a shout "Keeper, watch your lines." Then if the keeper persists we have the option to nail him after we've provided a reasonable warning. But let's not micro-manage technical offenses that don't matter in the long run. That only causes preventable irritation for the players and coaches and spectators.

Now, if the keeper comes out and challenges an opponent and handles outside the area then of course you flag it. That handling is unfair. But otherwise don't be overly critical of things that don't affect the game or the players' enjoyment.

Flag what needs to be called. Let inconsequential stuff go. Talk to the players ("Keeper, watch your line when you're punting the ball").

Now, any questions on things I covered, or are there things I did not cover that you're still unclear about? OK, let's pluck this turkey. :o)

That's it!

Gil Weber