

Bob Evans

© 2002

Co-author of For the Good of the Game

Doing the least / IBD8 / The laws, etc., Part I

Some of the recent threads are so interwoven that I thought it might help to put some historical, analytical and experiential stitching into the tapestry of the laws of the game to make it, if not clear, then at least visible to those in the audience who may not have decades of football lore in their system, and who struggle with the evident inconsistencies that Jon and others have pointed out quite correctly.

(And as a prefatory request, may I ask that you don't try to pick this piece apart as you would a submission to a court of law. Read it for its message, not for its legal defensibility. Don't do something similar to what one respondent did, when he pointed out that when I quoted the law, I did not complete the sentence of law 3 that says ". . . any player may change places . . . provided that the referee is informed . . .etc." By picking at that he missed the whole point I was trying to make.)

Let me start with the business of doing the least that is necessary to control the game. A study of the history of football reveals that officials of any kind were a late addition: first umpires (off the field), then on the field, then umpires with a referee off the field to "refer to", then with the advent of professionals, a referee on the field making independent decisions and not solely when asked by the players. The fundamental point? The game could be played just by the players, until it became seriously competitive. Then some kind of arbitration was needed, materializing in the body of a referee. But even after that time in the late 1800s, the following principle was established and maintained: The man would not interfere with the game, and would render a decision only when it was necessary for preservation of safety and sportsmanship. It did not take long for the framers of the laws to realize that regrettably, many referees enjoyed the power of the position and did not temper it with the wisdom of their forbears, and so early in the last century the framers had to exhort officials not to adhere strictly to the letter of the laws, but to referee with wisdom and without interfering with the pleasure of the other participants. That eventually became IBD 8. Now what does it mean to our every weekend referee?

IBD 8 applies to every level of the game. When Ed and I wrote on the subject, we wrote for every referee. (Sorry, Michael but our work was not aimed solely at the upper level audience.) So, to the almost plaintive question on the listserv recently by a referee who wasn't sure how to apply IBD 8 in the kids' games he does, I will say: "Do the least that is necessary to control the situation -- in your particular game." And what you do will not be the same as a referee in a tough Sunday afternoon men's league game. In the kids' game if you see a child becoming hysterical and out-of-control, rather than bring out a card, you might need to walk over to his coach and suggest that for the good of all, he remove the player and give the kid a chance to cool down. In the men's game, you might have to use one of a number of options: lecture the player, appeal to his sense of fair play, reason with him, laugh at him, share a joke with him, put his name in the book, send him off or do some other thing "...that is necessary to control the situation." The great beauty of IBD 8 is its applicability to every game we will ever see, and the important thing is to do the least, L--E--A--S--T, that's necessary. And if you choose to book a player for changing shirts with the goalkeeper, you've missed one hundred and fifty years of history, and the collective wisdom of thousands upon thousands of referees.

More on that in the second part of this little discourse: methods of control and what they mean.

Part II

Methods of control and what they mean.

The only two mentioned in the laws are the caution and the expulsion. What precedes them in a game? It's simple: anything the referee needs to do to control the match. That can include (for the

lawyers: but is not restricted to) a stare; a wink; a shake of the head; a glare of annoyance; a shout into the air; a whisper in an ear; a public dressing-down; a sarcastic observation; a philosophical aside to no one in particular; a yell in anticipation of some awful event; a loaded question; the dogged pursuit of a pair of antagonistic opposing players; a pointed finger slowly wagged at a player a few yards away; penetration into a player's personal space; an exchange of humor with a comic trying to undermine you; a laugh of delight; all manner of comments delivered sotto voce; a request of the captain; a comment to the coach; a smart-ass reply to a smart-ass comment; and others I can't think of at the moment.

And if none of that works, then we get to the caution, all nicely listed in the laws, and emphasized in memoranda from the USSF. But understand first that the caution is an OPTION you have, it is not necessarily an instruction you have to obey. (I've got to be careful here, else the literalists hang me on threads that emanate from Chicago.)

Let's look at the so-called mandatory cautions:

Number 2: shows dissent. If you decide the player is dissenting, you HAVE TO caution him; that's the law. But you and only you are the one who decides if he dissented in the first place. Example: Coach shouts sarcastically from the sideline: "Where did you learn to referee?" Answer, as the referee races past the bench: "Same place you learned to coach, Willie!" Was that dissent? Probably yes, but since the referee decided to handle it with repartee, not disciplinary action, he had decided it was not dissent, and therefore was not obliged to issue the caution. Those of you oldsters in Chicago may enjoy the fact that after that exchange, Willie Roy said nothing else to the referee.

Number 4: delays the restart of play. At a free kick near the edge of the penalty-area, the ball is placed and two or three attackers are talking, nodding and pointing as they prepare to take the kick. A defender five yards away is reluctantly retreating ever-so-slowly. Is he delaying the restart? Maybe, but since it is clear that the attackers are not ready to take the kick, the wise referee keeps telling the defender to get back, but does not pull the card for what may appear to be delay. He understands that the defender is delaying no more than is already delayed, so the letter of the mandatory instruction does not apply.

Number 7: deliberately leaves the field . . . This is my personal favorite, because I have dreams sometimes of getting a dollar for every player I have seen booked for leaving the field without permission, when he stepped over the goal-line to avoid being called offside at a corner-kick, or when he nipped off the field to go round a defender right on the touch-line. In both of the incidents I have described, according to the letter of the law, the player left the field of play without permission and must be cautioned. But you would never do it, because all the history and all the lore of this great game will tell you it is unacceptable to all the participants, and was not the intent of the proscription (special word inserted for the lawyers).

For all the mandatory cautions, YOU are the one who decides whether that law should be invoked. You decide on unsporting behavior, dissent, persistent infringement, delay, retiring the distance, enters or re-enters, or leaves, and then you issue the caution if you believe the law has been broken.

Now, what use is a caution? Lately we have seen the comment, credited to our fine FIFA Referee Kevin Stott, and to my friend of almost thirty years, Angelo Bratsis, FIFA Special Award winner: "What are you going to get back after giving a caution?" or similar words. You don't just flash the card willy-nilly because you are pissed off, for example. But here's a caution for the reader: don't apply that philosophy to every caution you issue, for understand that this disciplinary action has several uses:

1. punishment of the individual player
2. punishment of an undisciplined team
3. a public demonstration of the limit of your tolerance
4. building and reinforcing your reputation

Some examples. Last year during a professional match, the fourth official held up the cards for a substitution. Just after his number was held aloft for all to see, an attacking player challenged a defender very recklessly and fouled him. Actually, he really clattered him with a foul from behind that deserved a yellow card. Play was stopped for the foul, and the attacking player walked off to meet the substitute at the halfway line. After the match, the assessor, my good friend Ed Bellion, asked the referee why he didn't take

action at the bad foul. His reply? "Well, what am I going to get for giving the card? He was going off anyway!" Take a look at the four uses I specify above, and see which ones apply, and where this referee missed the point of a caution. He should have punished the player, and he didn't. (A caution can cost player money, and too many means a suspension.) He should have demonstrated to all the other players what he would and would not accept in the way of a challenge, and he didn't.

Bottom line: that good advice from Kevin and from Angelo does not apply to every caution. A few days ago, a relatively inexperienced referee told a great tale on this listserv about meeting a team a few days after he had done them before and had issued a caution at a free-kick. In the second game, the players shouted back and forth to each other to retire ten yards because they knew what the referee would do if they didn't. That referee had applied number 4 of the items above.

Finally, an example from some of the toughest soccer on the planet. After a recent Spurs/Leeds match in the Premiership, one newspaper lauded the referee for conducting the affair without having to issue a caution, and then wondered why more referees couldn't be encouraged to do the same, and not have to litter the field with cards. What the writer missed was the reputation of the particular referee. Early in his career in the Premiership, the man was a bugger for the cards, worse than "Bookie Thomas" of the Argentina World Cup. They say he used to cover his cards with Vaseline so they would come out quicker! The point is this: The referee had built an impressive reputation for intolerance of players' shenanigans, and the players knew it. They knew what would happen if they started messing about, and so they didn't misbehave. Point number 4 of the uses of a caution.

There, I've written 1200 words on a subject not covered in the laws of the game, and yet one that all referees need to understand in order to conduct a game effectively. I could write more. As Jim Gordon expressed so well then other day when he was talking about instructing, there has to be a knowledge base behind new learning, and the knowledge base for us is about the game, not the laws. And this is not about a referee who has played versus one who hasn't; it is about appreciating the lore and the history of the game as lenses through which to read the laws.

Next: Fouls/non-fouls/IBD 8/inconsistencies, etc.

Part III

WHEN THAT DEFINED IS MISUNDERSTOOD, AND THAT UNDERSTOOD, UNDEFINED:

Consider "dangerous play", "high kicking" and definitions thereof. I don't know what the situation is these days, but not too many years ago, the college soccer lawmakers and the rules committee for the High Schools were having trouble with dangerous play. It wasn't defined in the real laws of the game, and it was clear that when the lawmakers took it upon themselves to attempt to define it, they didn't understand the infraction or the purpose behind that particular law. Nor, sad to say, did most referees. With wrestling coaches and others of that ilk making laws for soccer, we ended up with the silliness of dangerous play being a raised foot within six feet of another player. Something like that, anyway. Let's look at the infraction, for if we understand this one, we may be close to achieving an understanding of the importance of game knowledge, game lore and game history.

Dangerous play has two elements, and two notable exceptions. The first element (undefined) is: a potentially dangerous act (for example, a boot at head-height; a head at boot-height; kicking at one ball when there are two others close by) performed by one player near another. The second element is that this act must have an effect upon an opponent or upon his legal attempt to play the ball.

Some cases illustrating the second element might include the obvious one, always called "high-kicking" by parents. A player leaping to head a ball sees a foot rising rapidly towards his noggin, and so pulls his head back and does not manage to play the ball. His legal attempt to play a ball that was clearly "on" for him (a concept that may one day become the subject of another of these little essays) was affected by his opponent's potentially dangerous act. Unfair! say history, knowledge and lore, and we need a whistle. Notice that it is NOT the potentially dangerous act than is penalized, but the EFFECT of it.

The obverse is also a familiar example. A player goes low to play a ball with his head just as an opponent is going to play it with his foot. Now most players are reasonable human beings, and if one thought he was likely to kick an opponent in the face in this situation, he would probably withdraw his foot. The magic of cut-and-paste allows me to repeat: His legal attempt to play a ball that was clearly "on" for him (a concept that may one day become the subject of another of these little essays) was affected by his opponent's potentially dangerous act. Unfair! say history, knowledge and lore, and we need a whistle. Notice that it is NOT the potentially dangerous act than is penalized, but the EFFECT of it.

Now, the exceptions:

First, no matter how dangerous the act, if no opponent is nearby, you cannot penalize a player for acting dangerously near his own team-mate. Why? Well, it is a principle of the playing of this game, that fouls are called when a player of one team does something to a player of the other team. That's the way the game was designed and has evolved. Think of a high ball between two team-mates. One tries to head the ball, but when he sees his mate's boot near the end of his nose, he backs off, leaving the clearance (or whatever) to his team-mate. Is either team adversely or unfairly affected? As I have described it, no. Except for cases of egregious misconduct, you don't give free-kicks to the opponents when a player bumps into, recklessly kicks etc., or acts dangerously towards his own team-mate.

Why isn't this spelled out in the laws? Because it isn't necessary. Anyone who has watched the game for a while, or has played it for a while develops a sense of what "is" the game, and what is not.

Second, the goalkeeper. He, of all the players, is allowed to endanger himself and affect the play of an opponent (up to a point) without suffering any legal consequences. He can hurl himself down at the feet of an opponent and put his face very near to where the ball is on the toe of an attacker, and such dangerous play is permissible, even though we know that most forwards will jump over the 'keeper rather than try to kick the ball near his opponent's chops. Described that way, it sounds very similar to the act for which we would penalize other players. Is that inconsistent? Yes, without question. BUT, it has been a part of the game since its inception and doubtless will stay that way, and it does not need to be spelled out in the laws. Everyone knows goalkeeper is a dangerous position to play, everyone accepts it, and generally speaking, players are highly protective of their 'keeper as a consequence. He is allowed this extra privilege of playing dangerously.

Now let's extend some of these principles to other fouls. So I reiterate: we punish not the act itself, but the effect of it upon an opponent. Not the act, but the effect. And there, my friends, you have the substance of IBD 8 of Law 5, and with a slight leap we can see therein the magic of doing the least that is necessary to keep the game under control. Where there is no effect of a foul on an opponent (at the level you are refereeing) you are encouraged to allow play to proceed. The infringement was trifling. You don't need to stop play to control things. If you can talk a player out of misbehaving, do it. You don't need a card to control things. But if the foul has an effect upon an opponent, call it. The whistle establishes your control again. If at an act of misconduct, talking doesn't work, you have your cards to gain control. IBD 8 is the heartbeat of refereeing, but you can't learn it if you look for understanding only in the letter of the laws.

The principles are quite simple. The practice of them however, is fraught with difficulty, which makes the art of refereeing soccer a difficult one to master.

Now I'm off to Houston to drop in at the national testing to see my friend Ed Bellion receive the Pearson Award for many years of very significant contributions to the National Referee Program of the United States Soccer Federation. He'll also be instructing the assembled referees on principles of mobility and positioning in the modern game. He preaches what he practiced.