

Is Soccer setting itself up for another Figure Skating Controversy?

Do the laws of soccer make it too easy for officials to be bribed?

The Winter Olympics have recently concluded with a cloud of controversy directed mostly at the officiating. Sport is supposed to belong to the athletes but unfortunately when money, and politics get in the way, as is the case when the stakes are so high, there is the possibility of cheating and scandal.

In sports where the results are rated subjectively like figure skating, ice dancing, gymnastics, synchronised swimming, etc, there is room for scandals because the result cannot be measured in goals or time or points. Any judge can make up the result and alter it to his/her advantage. Even if the judge is totally honest, they may be forced by their associations to vote in a particular method.

In sports where you can measure the clear victor such as speed events, the clock is the judge and there is no dispute. Who is the fastest, wins, period. Non officiating type cheating occurs in these type sports.

Then there are team sports where officials play a significant role which may affect the outcome. In team sports such as hockey, basketball, lacrosse, baseball, football, soccer, etc. it's the laws or rules of the game that will dictate if there is an opportunity for bribery or fraud. The best rules are such that the official or referee does not have the power to completely affect the end result. Even though the games are measured in goals or points, there is some subjectivity in the implementation of the rules by the officials.

Most officials would prefer that the rules of the game allow them to make the players decide the winner. They would hope that their power in deciding a game is diminished as much as possible. They like the pressure of officiating a good close contest but dread making a bad decision that could influence a game. Far worse than that, they do not want the pressure of deciding an outcome in a hostile environment.

Officials are humans, have feelings and can make mistakes. The laws should protect the officials so that a mistake will not necessarily totally affect the result. So this brings me to the game of soccer and it's laws in comparison to other team sports.

Comparing hockey to soccer, if a hockey referee was bribed to try to make one team win how could they do it? Basically, to score a goal the puck still has to go in the net. How can an official help a team? They can call penalties against one team. That's about it. So how much influence does the referee really control?

Frank Cirone, head of math at Cedarbrea Collegiate concluded that, in hockey, penalty-shots or penalties result in goals in about 15% of the attempts. A goal scored during a penalty rarely affects the outcome of the game where an average 5 to 6 goals are scored per game. On the other hand, in soccer, where a penalty shot is the easiest way for an official to influence a game, about 80% of the attempts result in a goal. A goal scored on a penalty shot often effects the outcome of the game where an average 1 to 3 goals are scored per game.

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One goal is much more valuable or precious to the game of soccer than hockey. We saw how the Canadian Women's Hockey Team may have been a victim of some sort of bribed officiating. Canada was given 10 penalties in a row. The US team still did not win. Can you imagine if an official gives just two penalty shots in a soccer game against one team. It's practically a guaranteed victory.

In baseball, an umpire can call a few more strikes or balls but the average number of runs per game is higher and therefore he/she will have even less influence in a game because of all the things that have to happen in order to score a run. Basketball is similar. Lots of baskets and points that can be overcome. Soccer is different.

The penalty shot law in soccer gives officials plenty of room to easily throw a game. Or they can be pressured to throw a game. In cases where their lives may be at stake, they have too much power. This is a problem because players know that. And when the stakes are so high they will make it even harder for officials (even honest officials) to properly apply the laws because they will try to fake an infraction since it means so much to the potential outcome. The more important the game is the more important that one goal can be because those games can be 1-0 games.

What is even more dramatic is that the penalty box is so huge that a penalty shot can be awarded in a situation where the attacking team is in no position to really take a good shot at scoring had the infraction not been called.

And now that money is bigger than ever in soccer due to television revenues, the chance for bribery is greater. With the opportunities for European Championships and other competitions plus with a relegation system still in place, owners of rival clubs need that extra revenue from the added games to earn big profits and cannot afford to be relegated or miss certain competitions. The referees are under extreme pressures with the penalty shot law as it stands today. It's easy to put pressure on a referee to try to help decide a game.

Something has to be done with this law to take away the power the referee has here. It's too big a responsibility especially with such a huge area where a penalty shot can be awarded. As reported in The Toronto Star just recently, a game in Greece was marred by violence and called short. Panathinaikos chairman Angelos Phillippidis said games were rigged to favour Olympiakos, which has won the last five Greek championships. Violence erupted after Olympiakos was awarded an injury time penalty that allowed the tying goal. The referee was punched and kicked by Panathinaikos fans and was taken to hospital. An investigation is being launched.

I took a referee's course for the purpose of helping my coaching and I was asked to fill-in for an injured referee for an old-timers league. The assignment went on for most of a summer while the regular referee recovered from an ailment. Although I enjoyed the workout, and got better at reading the game, I always dreaded that controversial call in the box that would have both teams leave unhappy. The penalty shot was too drastic a call. I hated whenever the ball got in the box especially toward the end of a tight game because of what might happen. Calling a penalty shot was practically giving away a goal. Handling calls in the rest of the park was a piece of cake. Making a bad call once in a while is human and I did plenty of that but the fear of making a bad call in the box that might decide the game was no fun. I had to make some difficult decisions and old-timers certainly know the rules better than the referee so going home without someone being upset at you whenever a penalty shot was called was impossible.

Coaching was easier and less stressful so I didn't referee again. In my next article I will explain why all coaches should take referee courses to improve their coaching. At any rate, as a referee I didn't really like having the power to decide the game on a penalty call especially when the infraction would not have resulted in a goal. But that's what the law calls for. It's a bit like hanging someone for theft. Murder maybe, but not theft.

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My father Danny, an avid fan of Italian soccer on Sunday's brought this issue up to me in light of the Olympic Scandals. He felt that clearly, the more powerful teams were given more breaks and victories via the penalty shot then lower, less powerful teams. He claims that the big city, rich teams like Juventus, AC Milan, Inter, Roma would always get the breaks over the small city clubs. He felt that it has become more noticeable in the last few years. The money at stake is too big, and the rules allow it to happen. His solution, make it harder for

goals to be scored on penalties by moving the ball back a few yards, or by creating a second box where a different penalty would result. His suggestions:

Create a box or semi-circle with a radius. E.g. 8 yards from the centre of the goal. Infractions inside this area result in a penalty shot as is current and infractions outside this area and still inside the 18-yard box result in a penalty shot from 15 or 16 yards out. Another option is to change the penalty shot to a shoot-out similar to the old NASL penalty shot where a player starts at the 35-yard line and has 5 seconds to move up and score. The goalie can also come out. In this case, there is a lower success rate for scoring a goal shifting the balance of power away from the referee.

Whatever it is, somehow, the referee must have less power. That's not to say he can't still influence the game but it would be harder and less likely. If this rule is not looked at, we could see Salt Lake all over again in Japan or Korea at a World Cup Match.

Other team sports restrict how much the officials can influence a game, soccer must look at doing the same.

Thanks for reading,

John DeBenedictis

I'd love to hear your opinions. E-mail me at NSCAC@attglobal.net. It would be great to have some of your comments in our next newsletter. We will edit your comments if you are not comfortable with writing in English. We realise many of our coaches learned English as a second language but your opinions are important so do not be afraid to say what's on your mind and we will make it sound good for all to read.

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