

The unseen scrutiny of soccer referees

The Charleston Battery played FC New York recently in the friendly confines of Blackbaud Stadium, but the home crowd that is often friendly to the Battery players was not so kind to the referees who officiated the match. But most of our fans know little about these men and women who receive intense criticism after having bad games but are rarely applauded for having good ones. I sat down before that game with Don Wilbur, a “referee coach” for the United States Soccer Federation and FIFA. He evaluates referees for USL PRO, the NCAA, Major League Soccer, CONCACAF and FIFA. We discussed soccer officials in USL PRO and the process for evaluation and education of referees at every level.

Evaluations necessary just to become a referee

Simply a love of the game and a thorough knowledge of the rules of soccer are not all that are necessary to become a referee, at least at the national or professional level. FIFA, for one, administers rigorous physical fitness tests that prospective referees must pass each season. One of the tests involves referees running six separate 40-meter sprints with 90-second recovery periods between each of the six sprints. International referees must run all six sprints in 6.2 seconds or less, while national referees must run each of the six sprints in 6.4 seconds or less.

A second physical fitness test that FIFA administers consists of repeated high intensity runs. Prospective referees must run 150 meters in 30 seconds, then walk 50 m in 35 seconds, then again run 150 meters, and finally walk 50 meters in 35 seconds. This equals one lap, and the referee must run at least 12 laps in these times.

But physical health is not the only assessment made prior to becoming a referee. Prospective officials must take psychological tests to assess many components of their behavior. A Referee Evaluation Form administered by Exact Sports is given in the preseason. It involves one-on-one meetings with the referee and a performance coach as well as group meetings with the officiating crew and the referee coaches. The tests look at multiple variables among four domains, including psychosocial state, motivation and orientation, officiating games, and career development. It helps to assess the need for interventions, such as training courses, and helps to develop schedules and assignments. These tests are felt to be beneficial to develop self-awareness, improve individual and team dynamics, and improve referee selection overall.

Finally the leagues do try to create crews that work well together. In the preseason, referees are asked confidentially to list assistant referees, fourth officials, and referee coaches with whom they prefer to work. Perhaps more importantly, they are also asked confidentially with whom they prefer him not to work. Hopefully creating cohesive officiating crews can lead to better officiated matches.



Preparation and pre-match interviews

Prior to each match for which he will judge referee performance, Wilbur will call the official for a pre-match interview. During the teleconference, the head official describes his research of the teams and players he will officiate. Wilbur says it is critical for the official to understand the formations and the styles of the teams. The officials seek to understand the style of coaching and the temperament of the coaches and players. They even read newspapers and watch television to learn any information that might affect action on the field, such as players’ grudges against certain teams and whether they plan to play

physically in that game. For instance, Wilbur expected the head official last Friday would mainly try to control action in the midfield due to the defensive nature of both teams playing, as both the Battery and FC New York had struggled offensively this season.

In Major League Soccer, pre-match evaluations seem to be even more formal. Prior to the Philadelphia versus San Jose match April 30, the referees had detailed information about the players and teams in order to prepare for calling the match. Their document went into a tremendous amount of detail about the style of play and the players. For example, it discussed how Philadelphia typically plays an attacking brand of soccer. They have a central midfielder (Okugo) who is a strong tackler. They also have a strong central defense with players who tackle hard and move out of position to defend. The referees also expected a good deal of contact in the penalty areas, especially as one of San Jose's forwards (Wondolowski) is very good in the air. Both teams have players who tend to fall in the penalty areas and look to draw penalty kicks, so referees knew to prepare for that possibility with these teams.

Also, the officials extensively research the players involved in order to learn how to best handle them in difficult situations. "Players need to understand that they have reputations too," Wilbur says. He mentions two of the veteran Battery players that have very different reputations with officials. One tends to be very demonstrative and yells frequently, while the other is more levelheaded and reasonable. The officials know with which of those players to discuss calls and which to ignore.



Wilbur also tries to correct some tendencies of the referees. For instance, he offers as an example one referee who in his last match waved his hands at players (as if to say "no more of that or you'll get a card") eight times without ever issuing a card subsequently. Wilbur explained to him that he should only wave his hands once at a player before resorting to issuing a card.

The multiple layers of post-match analysis

After each match, Wilbur says that referee coaches meet with the head official and the entire team several times. The first evaluation typically involves only Wilbur and the head official. If available, the referee coaches and referees receive a DVD of the match to review later. At least according to the 2009 USL Referee Manual, it is "'strongly encouraged' for all USL First Division teams to provide a video copy of their home matches to the center Referee." In MLS, Wilbur is given a spreadsheet for the match with six to eight critical calls or no-calls showing video from multiple angles to review with the referees. Plus, the league frequently has webinars with the ref-coaches to review clips of penalties, tackles, player conduct management, and other decisions to identify trends in officiating for the ref-coaches to pass on to their referees.

Database of evaluations

While the multiple, in-depth evaluations each match might seem excessive, it is critical that all of these evaluations go into a large database that will allow the leagues and referee coaches to evaluate the officials over the course of the season and their careers. This system of evaluation helps to determine which referees get to move up. For instance, if a young assistant referee consistently has good games, he might move up to head referee. Successful head referees in USL PRO often get to serve as fourth officials in Major League Soccer. There are approximately eight to ten rookie officials in MLS each season.

The data is compiled into worksheets and scorecards on each official showing their habits, strengths, and weaknesses. For instance, these scorecards show what parts of the field certain referees consistently make correct calls versus incorrect calls and no-calls, whether they are better with some calls rather than others, whether they overly use or avoid cards and send-offs, etc. And while there are remediation penalties (such as the need to have a certain number of passing scores at subsequent games), Wilbur is quick to point out that at least at the MLS level, there is little difference between the highest- and lowest-scoring referees.

Are MLS referees better than those in USL PRO?

There seems to be a common perception that the officiating in USL PRO is poor, but from my investigation into the evaluation process, it at least seems to be an area of focus, and one that potentially could improve significantly. There is one major difference in officiating between the MLS and USL PRO. Major League Soccer uses national or professional referees for all four positions – the referee, the two assistant referees, and the fourth official. USL PRO, the league in which the Battery plays, uses a national referee as the referee, but the assistant referees and fourth official are often locally based, as the league and teams often cannot afford the travel expenses for four officials for each game all season.

But just as the travel costs for four officials are daunting to teams in USL PRO, finances seem to affect the use of video analysis. Even if the USL PRO teams have video to give the referees, it is usually from one camera angle. Having more consistent and thorough use of video would not only point out mistakes but might also allow the referee coaches and the league itself to educate the referees in manners similar to Major League Soccer and FIFA.

Scrutiny can take its toll

There is a tremendous amount of stress on soccer referees that fans rarely see. Knowing that a command center of officials exists to analyze every call or no-call from multiple video angles, and that those officials and the numerous evaluations they receive each night can adversely affect their ascent to the top soccer leagues has to impact the referees. Only the best of the best officials make it to these top levels. Wilbur points out that while there are approximately 140,000-150,000 soccer referees in the United States, there are only 80-100 in MLS. “These guys have to be masochists. They have to subject themselves to intense scrutiny, not just from fans, but also from the leagues. The desire to do well is there. They want to move up to the next level,” Wilbur claims.

And the public scrutiny is certainly present now, with Twitter, television, radio, chat rooms, message boards, and blogs all serving to spotlight bad decisions. “I wouldn’t want to referee today,” Wilbur notes. “It’s life in a fish bowl. Every mistake can be analyzed. A mistake tomorrow night will be available for the whole world to see forever.”

I want to hear what you think! Are you surprised by how thorough the review process is? Do you sympathize with them for the scrutiny and criticism from fans?

We expect no less for our NCAA post-season officials. You must train, know the NCAA Rules and prepare to serve our game. Good Luck with the upcoming season and I hope to see you during our post-season tournament.

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