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Referee Programs

U.S. Soccer Referee Week in Review - Week 27



The ussoccer.com Referee Week in Review is designed to address the issues facing referees at all levels by using video highlights from professional games as well as the U.S. National Teams. Written by U.S. Soccer Director of Referee Development Paul Tamberino and U.S. Soccer Manager of Assessment and Training Brian Hall, the Referee Week in Review will highlight specific areas of focus and current U.S. Soccer initiatives designed to improve performance and aid in the development of officials across the country.

Referee Week In Review

Week 27 – ending September 29, 2008

WEEK 27 OVERVIEW

With four weeks remaining in MLS's regular season, a unique trend is surfacing. Teams are playing attacking soccer as evidenced by the average of 3.9 goals per game this past week. In fact, one game had nine balls hit the back of the net while another game had five. In many instances, teams are playing to win versus playing not to lose.

Referees are also continuing to exhibit consistency in allowing flow and taking appropriate risk in managing the game. Week 27 had an average of 24.4 fouls whistled a game. This compares well to a season-to-date average of 24.9. This illustrates the consistent approach referees have been taking without jeopardizing the safety of the players.

However, as the games become increasingly important, referees must not lose focus on the fact that the games must be brought to a safe conclusion. Referees should not take unnecessary risks or lose focus in the later stages of a match so that the good work done in the first 75 minutes or so is undone. Remember, players become tired and frustrated in the final stages of a game and this may contribute to a momentary lapse in concentration on the part of the player which may resonate in negative actions requiring referee intervention/prevention.

So, despite the positive efforts to keep games flowing and minimizing calls associated with trifling, minor or soft challenges, referees must not lose track of their primary responsibility: game control. For this reason, officials should spend the appropriate time reviewing the content of prior "Week In Reviews" as well as directives from U.S. Soccer so that they are able to address critical game situations as directed.

- *On the ussoccer.com web page, you can listen to weekly podcasts highlighting the main issues from the "Referee Week in Review" document. On the ussoccer.com homepage, look mid page for the tab that says "Podcasts."*

WEEK 27 COMMENTARY

Contact Above the Shoulder: A Critical Game Situation

For the third consecutive week, games have involved contact above the shoulder either with elbows, forearms or hands contacting the face of the opponent. In each case, the receiving player's safety has been clearly endangered.

This past week, referees were successful in correctly addressing one of the two incidents involving contact above the shoulder. The issue of contact above the shoulder, elbows and unfair aerial challenges has received a lot of print in prior "Week In Reviews." Officials are encouraged to review the criteria and guidelines that have been thoroughly outlined starting in Week 8. A **team approach** is required to ensure each incident involving contact above the shoulder that endangers the safety of the opponent is addressed correctly. Officials should start with "Week In Review 25" ([click on this link to access](#)) and then follow the links as a refresher regarding expectations.

Finally, as stated, a **team approach** is necessary to ensure that the referee crew is on the same page relative to the best possible method for the **team** of officials to address any occurrence of contact above the shoulder that should result in a red card. The referee team has a responsibility to the game and to players' safety to address each case correctly.

The REFEREE TEAM must get it right. When it comes to critical game decisions (red cards are one of them), after the pregame meeting, every official should leave the locker room with an answer to the following question:

- “What do I do if I see something different than another member of the crew, even if they have made a decision – regardless of where it occurs on the field?”

At U.S. Soccer's Midseason Pro Clinic, the topic of **CRITICAL GAME SITUATIONS** was addressed and has been reinforced multiple times in “Week In Reviews.”

- *Any situation involving a potential red card should be considered a **CRITICAL GAME SITUATION**. If any individual on the referee team has something different than the others, this individual is EMPOWERED and MUST provide this information to the referee. This includes situations in which the referee has already handed out the disciplinary sanction. Upon receipt of the information, the referee must then determine whether to act upon it or not.*
- *In **CRITICAL SITUATIONS**, referees should not be so focused on showing a quick card before garnering vital information from the other crew members especially when warning signs exist that may require reflection. Empowerment starts with the referee seeking information to get the call correct.*

The following clips provide examples of two situations that commonly result in elbows:

- (1) An attacker being held from behind while in possession of the ball; and
- (2) An attacker has picked up speed and has pushed the ball by the defender and will pass the defender on his run with the ball.

Both situations are warning signs for officials to be prepared for contact above the shoulder (elbows).

Video Clip 1: DC at Dallas (38:08 – second half)

This clip provides a clear example of an elbow directed above the opponent's shoulder that has the potential for injury. The referee appropriately issues a red card for violent conduct after applying the F-I-R-E guidelines last addressed in “Week In Review 24.” ([**click on this link to access**](#)) As the incident unfolds, consider the following guidelines in making the determination as to whether the elbow endangers the safety of the opponent and is done with excessive force:

- **Frustration**

Was the action a result of frustration? In this case, there are just over five minutes left in the game and the fouler's team is losing 2-0. The fouler is being slightly held from behind which increases the frustration level.

- **Intimidation**

The act by the part of the attacker was intended to intimidate the opponent by sending a message. The attacker could have used his arm or hand at the waist level. This begs the question: “Why the elbow above the shoulders?”

- **Retaliation (payback)**

In this case, any form of retaliation is not evident. Referees, however, must be cognizant of any potential prior conflicts.

- **Establish Territory or Space**

The elbow was used to force the defender to “back off” and give the attacker space especially considering the tight marking by the defender. Officials should be concerned when a defender is making contact (holding, pushing) with an attacker from behind and the attacker is shielding the ball or moving away from the defender.

Most importantly, however, in recognizing the actions of the attacker are worthy of a red card is the fact that the attacker's actions used excessive force and endangered the safety of the opponent.

Note: In many instances, the defending player holding the attacker may also be cautioned for unsporting behavior. The referee must assess whether the defender's actions (holding) contributed to or led to the attacker's actions. The Laws of the Game (Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct) state that a player must be cautioned for unsporting behavior if they “hold an opponent for the tactical purpose of pulling the opponent away from the ball or preventing the opponent from getting to the ball.”

Video Clip 2: Kansas City at Chivas USA (54:43)

The second situation commonly associated with elbows is illustrated in this video. An attacker picked up speed, pushed the ball by the defender and passed the defender on his run with the ball. As the clip proceeds take note of the warning signs:

- Speed of the attacker.

- Lack of speed by the defender because he has to change direction and play “catch up.”
- The ball is pushed by the defender.
- The defender must find a way to slow the attacker’s progress and keep him from the ball.
- The elbow/arm go in an upward motion not horizontal.
- The attacker holds his throat.

Once the referee has recognized the warning signs, he must be prepared for a potential elbow or extending of the arm into the opponent to impede his progress. Once, the elbow/arm is extended, the referee must then be prepared to identify the area of contact (above the shoulder or at chest level). The area of contact then determines the referee’s sanction.

As the replay is shown, it is clear that the area of contact is above the shoulders and the safety of the player has been endangered. Hence, a red card is in order.

In this clip, the referee’s view of the contact is hampered by his position directly in line with the play, trailing it from behind. However, the referee does know that an arm/elbow has been extended. Having this information, the referee should take note of the attacker’s reaction (holding his throat) as this may be a valid warning sign. Once the referee has noted the warning signs and has determined his line of vision was not optimum, he should take his time in deciding the punishment and ensure he consults with the rest of his officiating team to determine the appropriate punishment.

The warning signs point to a **CRITICAL GAME SITUATION**. The referee must recognize this and ensure he takes all the necessary steps to get the decision correct. This includes consulting with the nearby assistant referee (AR) **and** the fourth official as they are the two referees who have the optimal view of the situation. Of these two, the fourth official has an even better perspective.

Handling the Ball

One game this weekend included two critical handling decisions by the referee that were both dealt with correctly. Each case involved “making yourself bigger” as defined in “Week In Review 19.” ([click on this link to access](#))

A key determinant in deciding if a handling offence occurred or not is found in the referee’s answer to the following question: Did the player make himself bigger?

- **Making yourself bigger**

This refers to the placement of the arm(s)/hand(s) of the defending player at the time the ball is played by the opponent. Should an arm/hand be in a position that takes away space from the team with the ball and the ball contacts the arm/hand, the referee should interpret this contact as handling. Referees should interpret this action as the defender “deliberately” putting his arm/hand in a position in order to reduce the options of the opponent (like spreading your arms wide to take away the passing lane of an attacker).

Some of the critical signs referees should consider in making the determination as to whether a handling situation is a foul are (further details can be found in “Week In Review 19”):

- **Is the arm or hand in an “unnatural position?”**
- **Hand to ball**
- **Distance**
- **The result of the action**

Video Clip 3: Colorado at New York (16:02)

Using the “making your self bigger” criteria, the referee correctly awards a free kick for handling the ball. The defender’s actions meet the criteria because he is clearly standing with his arms extended from his body, in an “unnatural position.” More evident is the fact that the extended arms take away the passing lane from the attacker attempting to cross the ball. The extended arms reduce the opponent’s options and take away normally available space to pass the ball.

The AR provides assistance to the referee by raising his flag to make the call. This assistance is warranted as the offense is close to the AR and he may even have a better view of the “making yourself bigger” criteria than the referee. Once the AR has flagged the handling offence (as you can see he does in the background of the clip), he will then need to provide assistance on whether the foul occurred inside or outside of the penalty area.

This clip provides an example of the AR deciding the foul occurs outside the penalty area as the AR merely raises and wiggles his flag and then points the direction. If the AR was of the opinion the foul occurred inside the penalty area and therefore a penalty kick should be awarded, the AR should raise and wiggle the flag and then – after the referee’s whistle – indicate that the foul occurred in the penalty area by holding the flag across his waist mimicking the substitution signal.

Video Clip 4: Colorado at New York (32:27)

In the same match as video clip 3, the referee is faced with another case of “making yourself bigger.” In this clip, the handling occurs inside the penalty area and the referee correctly awards a penalty kick. Despite the close proximity of the attacker to the defender who handles the ball, look how the defender jumps out at the ball and extends his left arm out which contacts the ball. The arm is moving out towards the ball

and is not at the defender's side. The defender's action takes away space from the attacker and the result is the denying the attacker the ability to create a scoring chance by connecting his pass with his teammate.

Offside: A Missed Opportunity

Despite being in the correct position, the AR misses an offside decision that takes away an attacking chance on goal near the right flank of the penalty area. Since the AR placed himself in the best possible position, why did he miss the call?

Video Clip 5: DC at Dallas (12:29 – second half)

Here is the analysis from the AR involved in the decision:

- Just before the ball was played, a central defender was moving up quickly.
- The attacker who was declared offside was making a run directly in front of me.
- My concentration was split between the attacker, the ball and the central defender (I lost the right defensive back).
- As the ball was played through, the attacker was dead even with the right back, but as he was between the right back and me, I could not see him, and had forgotten he was there. My concentration was on the center back moving up.
- As soon as I put the flag up and saw the back, I thought I had made a mistake, but it was too late by then.

Here is the ARs recommendation to correct the issue:

- Better concentration, you can't lose track of players on the field.
- Watch more tapes. ARs need to know which players come up late and which teams don't have disciplined backs that can all step up together.

The keys to success are concentration and keeping track of the players (their positions on the field and their movement). REMEMBER, "wait and see." Applying this principle may have potentially given the AR the time he needed to see the position of the defender he had lost. This recognition might have then contributed to more entertaining soccer.

WEEK 28 FOCUS

Energy Levels

Referees and ARs are reminded to ensure that their energy levels exceed that of the game. Energy levels do not only refer solely to hustle, work rate and fitness. Energy level refers to concentration and mental focus. Both the physical and mental aspects of each official's game must surpass the requirements of the game. Officials must not get too comfortable and let their guard down. Expect the unexpected and put yourself in the right position, physically and mentally, to deal with the unexpected. Prepare with proper nutrition, hydration and rest to maximize physiological energy.

Remember: The game is not over until it is over!

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