

Recognizing Your Weaknesses

All referees have strong areas and weak areas in the way they referee, even Pierluigi Collina. The successful referees are those who work on their weaker abilities so that they are not nearly as weak. No one will be outstanding in every area, but good referees are outstanding in several and merely very good in the others. As one wise instructor said, "Referees who never listen to advice and never change, have reached their maximum potential."

One example of a referee who argued with the assessor at every opportunity and never changed was "Len." At nearly every game, Len issued multiple cards, which he always blamed on the players. His foul recognition was fair, but he seemed unable to tell when the actions had turned into misconduct. That often happened because he missed some fouls. When the players complained, often with justification, he would caution. The complaining stopped but not the physical misconduct.

On several occasions, I spoke to him about foul recognition. He knew shirt pulling was illegal, and he was quick to whistle any time a ball came in contact with a hand. His problem was that if the challenge got in the general vicinity of the ball there was no foul or misconduct. He is not the only referee to have this problem, and the problem must be corrected if you expect the big games.

Len did not seem to understand that the ball must be played first for the challenge to be fair. There is no exception to this rule. This is very difficult to see from 40 yards away, which is where Len usually was. It is much more visible from 15-20 yards. The call or no call is sold much more easily from that distance. If you let the center circle become your main patrol area you will miss too many important challenges.

When the ball is played before contact is made, the tackle is often fair but not always. There are a few intentional and accidental actions that could make such a tackle unfair. One might be coming from directly behind and crashing into the opponent's legs a nanosecond after touching the ball. This is far from the fair (and usually less dangerous) situation where the tackler plays the ball and, since his leg is where the ball was, trips the other guy.

Len's more serious weakness was his failure to recognize misconduct. It would usually start with a reckless challenge that caused some pain. Typically, if this is not dealt with the players feel as if they have the right to do the same thing. What is more of a problem is that one or two players will up the ante a bit to see where the limit is. Len did not seem to have a limit, so his older boys games looked like a riot in progress.

It is better to stop this sort of thing earlier rather than later. If the foul is way over you will caution but if a little over you can talk to the player in a manner visible to all. Doing so sends the message that the referee has limits and this is what they are. While this won't always stop bad challenges, it will slow them down so long as you continue to be vigilant.

If you have the attitude that Len had -- that it is always the fault of the players -- then look again. You could be the cause rather than the solution. If your games are calm or even intense, but without people being carried off injured by dangerous tackles, then you probably are doing okay. If there are injuries and a high level of complaints, have someone look at you.

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