



In the eye of the storm: the referees' perspective



Howard Webb

Who would want to swap places with referee Howard Webb in a potential Premier League title-decider between Manchester United and Chelsea?

After the championship race was blown open amid a spate of officiating errors in games involving the title contenders, Webb faces an unenviable task at Old Trafford, with players, managers, fans and pundits ready to pounce on any perceived mistake.

The last Premier League meeting between the two sides led to United manager Sir Alex Ferguson incurring a five-match touchline ban for his criticism of referee Martin Atkinson's performance in Chelsea's 2-1 victory.

And Ferguson has already ramped up the pressure on Webb by claiming Chelsea benefited from "great decisions" in their 2-1 victory over Tottenham at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

So how do referees prepare for such monumental encounters? How do they keep their heads while all around them are losing theirs? And how do they deal with the inevitable criticism which follows?

We asked former Premier League referees Alan Wiley, Jeff Winter and David Elleray, who took charge of many crunch matches during their long careers in the top flight, to provide a window on to the world of an official on the day of a big game, and assess the challenges facing Webb and his assistants on Sunday.

PRE-MATCH PREPARATION

Winter: "In the week before a game, referees would talk to each other. I would look at which ref did the reverse fixture earlier in the season and ask them: 'Were there any problems?'"

"A ref does have it in back of his mind how important the game is and he will, just like the teams, have a game plan. He will know where the flashpoints lie. He will know which players have got history with opponents. This doesn't mean they are pre-meditated, it just means they are on the job."

ALAN WILEY



"One manager used to invite me in for a cup of tea when you arrived at the ground. It was a totally embarrassing situation and I used to think 'what am I doing here?' They were trying to curry some favour and if that ever works that is a very sad condemnation of the game."

Elleray: "The day is one of focus from the moment you wake up and that focus steadily sharpens as kick-off time approaches. Get to the ground about two hours before kick-off, inspect the pitch, have a security briefing, warm up and then out you go...."

Wiley: "The standard practice nowadays is that the captain and the manager or assistant manager of each team comes to the referee's room and exchange the team sheets."

"The referee will probably say to the two captains: 'Speak to me on the field and I will work with you as much as possible.'

"He will also introduce the fourth official to the managers and tell them to work with him all afternoon, but remind them that there is nothing on the field he can change."

LET BATTLE COMMENCE

Elleray: "It is vital to take control of a game early on, not necessarily with the use of cards. If it is a really bad foul then of course the card comes out but most referees hope to manage the early stages and slowly reduce the tension amongst the players."

"You need plenty of off-the-ball chatting and talking to the players - the odd light-hearted comment can ease the tension."

Winter: "In a very important game you ideally want the first card to send out a message. You don't want it to be for a technical offence like kicking the ball away or a mild sort of dissent. You want to be able to talk to the players because if you are showing cards from the off, they are going to flow."

Wiley: "In the last 12 months, Howard has refereed the Champions League final and the World Cup final so he is used to big game atmospheres."

"Wherever you can you try to keep the game moving as much as you can. The crowd have gone there and paid their money to watch the 22 players, not the referee. As a referee you only want to come into the game when you need to."

PENALTY DECISIONS

Wiley: "Never get too wrapped up in the reaction of players. Several years ago, I did Chelsea-Man United at Stamford Bridge. I gave a penalty to Chelsea and the reaction of the United players made it look as if it was a contentious call. But when you watch it back it was a straightforward penalty. You have to have your confidence in your own decision-making."

JEFF WINTER



- Took charge of 2004 FA Cup final between Manchester United and Millwall
- Wrote autobiography entitled Who's the B*****d in the Black?

Winter: "The big thing with a penalty decision is you have got to be able to sell it. When you are awarding a penalty it is a gut reaction. You see it and in your mind in that instance you make your decision. If you are not sure you have your assistants. If a ref has any doubt over a penalty you don't give it. The old adage is 'If in doubt give nowt.' The one thing you can't do is guess."

Elleray: "If you reject a penalty appeal, you use your body language to show that you will not change your mind. The referee needs body language which is strong in terms of showing confidence and authority without being aggressive. Facial expressions should show calmness and determination. Movements should be slow and deliberate. Look players in the eye to show you are not afraid."

BACKCHAT

Elleray: "Players will attempt a whole variety of subtle and less subtle techniques to try to influence your decisions. Some players quietly - and occasionally openly - challenge your decisions in the hope of grinding you down so that you start giving them decisions to get them off your back."

Winter: "Players can be their own worst enemies. If you have a player screaming and bawling at you all the time and then they go down in the penalty area in the last minute - you are not totally sure, but subconsciously, are you going to give it?"

"Whereas if you have a player who has been chatty, friendly and given you no bother and he goes down, does he get the penalty? That to me is not cheating, it's possibly an element of human nature. Players who rant and rave could be doing themselves more of a disservice than those who get on and play the game fairly."

Wiley: "If it's reached a stage where you think 'no more', you call the captain over and tell him you have had enough, and so-and-so is going to get a yellow if the chat continues. Or you can do it off the ball and tell the captain to have a word with a player. It is about using the captain to try to avoid sanction of a yellow card."

REACTING TO MISTAKES

Elleray: "The best referees park (forget) a poor decision and do not dwell on it. You never try to even up as two wrongs don't make a right."

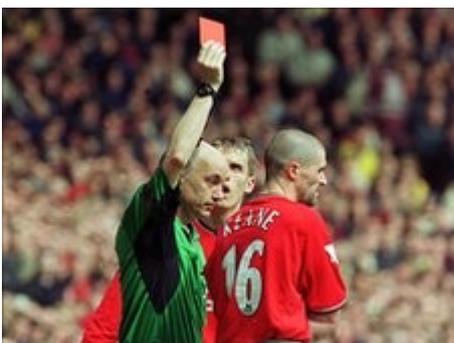
Winter: "During the course of the game you can think you might have got one [decision] wrong but you have not seen a replay or heard what pundits and experts have had to say. The only people who can influence your mind are the fans and the players and they have such a strong vested interest that you can't let yourself be influenced."

Wiley: "If you have made a call and then it is shown that it may have been a mistake the best referees park those ones and move on. In all walks of life if you make a mistake and if you think about it, that's when another mistake will happen."

THE POST-MATCH ONSLAUGHT

Elleray: "It is never easy to ignore criticism 100% but there is no point going looking for it. If a game has been controversial then you know that if you read the newspapers, listen to the radio or watch TV, you will see or hear criticism so it is best to avoid them. For me the criticism did not hurt too much if I was right - it hurt a great deal when I was wrong because it was justified."

DAVID ELLERAY



- Refereed 78 international matches in 35 countries

Wiley: "There's nothing anyone can say or do that can change the decisions you have made. I think the best analysis is self-analysis. Watch a DVD of the game as if you are not the referee and analyse your own performance."

Winter: "It's not nice in any form of life to hear people criticising you. Football is a very, very public domain. It's not just somebody in the office saying you shouldn't have done that, it's the TV and the newspapers and they can get very, very personal.

"I think it would be very helpful if referees were allowed to speak to the media after the game. When and where is the best time to do it, I'm not totally convinced but I don't think there should be this wall of silence from within the game.

They have to be able to hold their hands up and say sorry I got one wrong, but explain why they got it wrong. By the same token they have to have opportunity to defend their corner and explain their decisions."