



THE WORLD CUP AND FAIRNESS

WHY THE FS IN FIFA DON'T STAND FOR FAIRNESS

By Karsten Jonsen, Research Fellow, IMD, Switzerland – July 2014

IMD
Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.org
www.imd.org

The football world is no stranger to foul play. This year we saw a biting example, as well as the usual number of penalties from heaven and referees from down below. The last World Cup in South Africa featured France at the expense of Ireland after football hero Thierry Henry's handball set up a goal in the closing minutes of the match. And incidents go further back as many shades of Maradona's "hand of God" made their way in the 1986 World Cup quarter final. Despite some apparent unfairness, unlike many other sports associations, football's governing body FIFA refuses to get a serious helping hand from technology through the use of video referees. Why are we addicted to unfairness in this beautiful game?

To comprehend this, we may need to look beneath the surface into the "soul" of football and the underlying cultural assumptions of FIFA. Football is one of the few truly global sports, played on all continents and in most countries. It's followed by more than a billion people. Besides its competitive aspect, it serves many social purposes and is considered by some as a "religion for the people." FIFA has more than 200 member states (more than the United Nations) comprising over a quarter of a billion active players, and truly encompasses a variety of cultures. The non-Western countries of the world represent football's biggest fan base. This global aspect makes FIFA different from many other international sports associations that are predominantly Anglo-Saxon in most aspects, such as those for tennis and rugby, which have embraced the use of technology for increasing "fairness" at the top level of their sports.

Football has always had an element of surprise and "unfairness" to it – occasionally allowing the underdog to win – leading to heated discussions in pubs and homes around the globe about "who should have won" or "was the ball in or out." The most famous example was perhaps the goal at Wembley in 1966, which indirectly gave the world championship to the United Kingdom (at least we've got goal line technology now, 50 odd years later...) Moreover, football is unique in the sense that its very low scoring frequency (typically two or three goals per match) can result in one single act of cheating or "diving," or a wrong decision by the referee, changing the outcome of the match. With the amount of money that is at stake in top level football, it is perhaps surprising that there is still a status quo in terms of rules, and the refusal to use video refereeing has persisted for so long. The discussions in the pubs are no longer about the ball being in or out, rather they concern FIFA accepting cheating and fatal decisions. Of course, the supporters of the team that gains from the oversight are delighted, and once the competition has begun, the bad taste that was left in the mouth has long been replaced by the strong smell of potential victory.

A clue to understanding this might lie in the cultural dimensions and assumptions that come into play because of the truly global nature of the sport and the mix of cultures. First, there is the question of "fate." In many Anglo-Saxon cultures, there is a tendency to respect the cultural dimension of *mastery*, meaning that we have a certain amount of control over our environment and what goes on around us. In football this could typically be done by video-camera surveillance followed by intervention and correction in order to ensure maximum fairness at all times. In both Latin and Muslim cultures, by contrast, people are often less oriented towards mastery and more towards the belief that there is a larger plan (e.g. decided by fate or a higher power) that determines to some degree what might happen, and thus people more readily accept the outcome, e.g. "the hand of God."

Second, there is the question of *hierarchy*. Catholic and Muslim cultures are typically more hierarchical than Anglo-Saxon cultures and authority plays a larger role, and the referee is the sole person who should make decisions on the pitch. Even if "cheating" is discovered afterwards, the result of a game is irrevocable.

Third, there is the question of the present versus the past. Anglo-Saxon cultures are typically more in tune with the *present* and thus immediate needs and factors, whereas Latin and many other cultures are more concerned with the *past*, honouring traditions and continuity. This time-dimension, where the way things have been done in the past trumps, might also help explaining the argument of letting the game flow, even if the price is paid in unfairness.

In conclusion, FIFA may be caught in a clash of cultures, torn between a strong call from Anglo-Saxon TV commentators, commercial interests and mass media to prevent "unfair" results and the desire of other societies to maintain the history and ancient beauty of football culture. FIFA needs to ensure *harmony* and balance between its members, which is another cultural dimension to take into account. There is probably no single easy solution to FIFA's dilemma, but hushing things up does

not create harmony. Bad refereeing decisions, not to mention the countless incidents of spitting, biting and cheating, are made globally transparent overnight, thanks to social media. Thus football's governing body must be more transparent and proactive off the pitch. In the meantime, the game goes on and it excites us nevertheless. Who cares if the two teams playing the final are there as a result of randomness, cheating and referee errors, as long as the show is good?

Dr. Karsten Jonsen is a Research Fellow at IMD.

Related Programs



ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE - <http://www.imd.org/owp>

The global business program for individuals and teams

Program Directors Michael Wade, Bettina Büchel, Dominique Turpin

- Get exposed to the latest management thinking and to practical and innovative solutions for your business
- Anticipate global business trends
- Boost your performance, broaden your perspectives and expand your global network
- Design the program that suits you and your team
- Become a complete executive through activities that develop your mental, physical, and emotional health