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Law 5: The Referee

Law 6: The Assistant Referee

Let's take these two rules together, in part because the referee and two assistant referees work as a team.

The Referee's Position

The referee's diagonal that he or she runs goes from corner flag to corner flag.

Actually, a referee who strictly adheres to this diagonal will miss seeing a number of fouls. I like to think that the referee's positioning isn't a diagonal as much as it is a **modified** version of a half-open scissor—corner flag to corner flag and penalty arc to penalty arc. The referee is not a slave to this positioning, but it is a rough guide to follow, especially for the newer referee.

I have seen many youth soccer games when the referee made an important call—sometimes correctly, sometimes incorrectly—and loud dissent followed since the ref was 40 yards away from the play. I have seen just as many games in which the call was completely missed by an out-of-position referee. Just as with phones, long-distance calling can be very expensive. The preventive officiating technique is to be fit enough and to hustle each game so that you are close to the play.

Teams are much more likely to dissent from referee decisions when the ref is far away than with the same decision when the ref is 5-10 yards from the ball. After all, presence lends conviction.

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The Referee and Assistant Referees



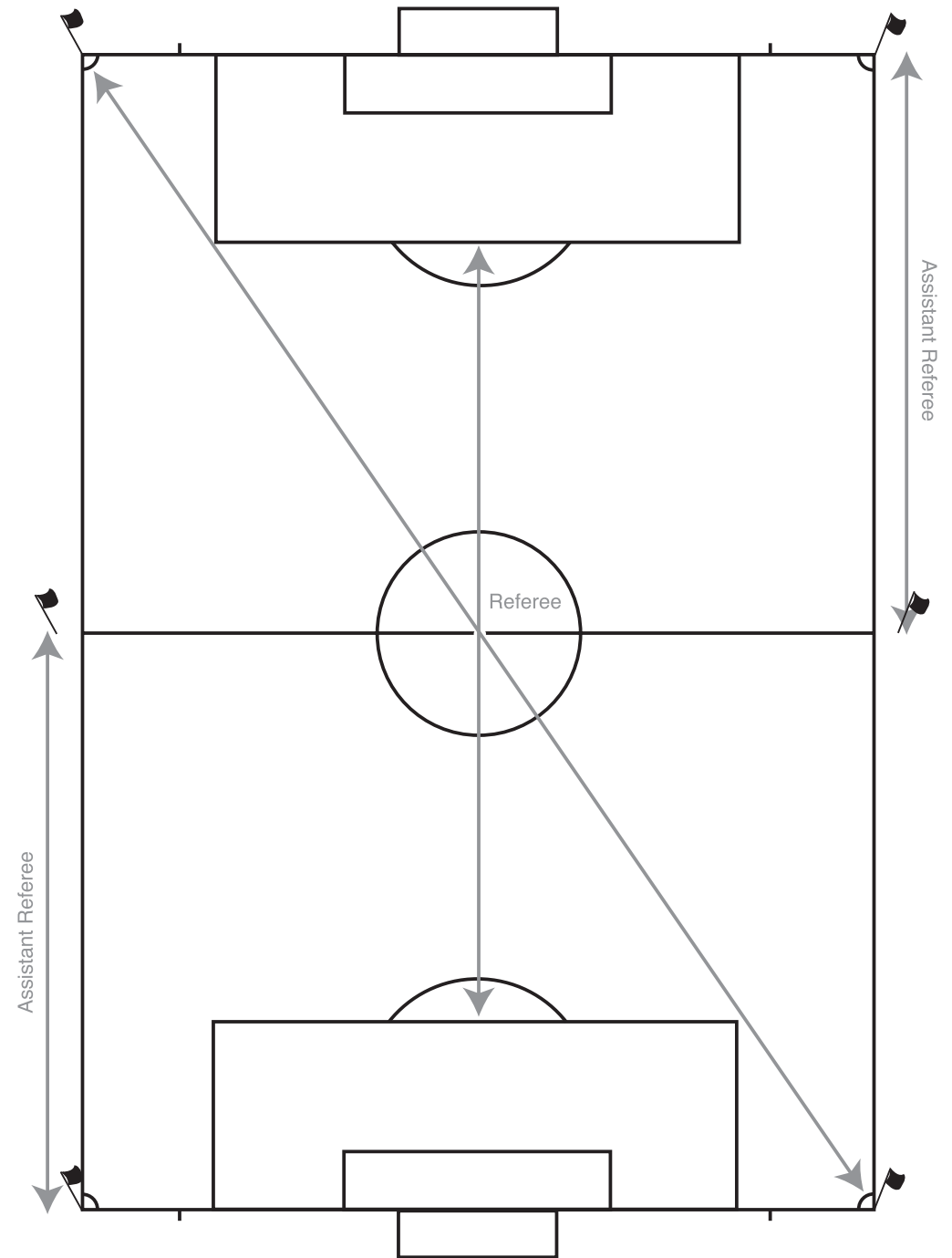
Should you blow the whistle for a foul in which you are too far from the infraction, continue running to the point of the restart. You will appear to be closer to the play than the ref who simply blows the whistle and stands there.

During the course of the game, you might encounter 1-2 players on each team who are causing problems. Modify your diagonal so that every time one of these players receives the ball, you are less than 10 yards away. Players rarely commit fouls when the referee is right there.

The Assistant Referee's Position

During normal play for nearly the entire game, the assistant referee's position is parallel with the second-to-last defender. The first defender is almost always the goalkeeper. It is very challenging for new assistant referees to have the discipline to stay with the second-to-last defender instead of watching play develop 40 yards upfield, especially when the ball is in or near the other penalty area. Half the challenge of being an assistant referee is having the discipline to be exactly in the correct position. For example, should the other team take possession of the ball and launch a long pass to your half, you will know if the player running toward the ball is offside by being parallel to that second-to-last defender.

See the diagram on the next page for the position of the officials in the diagonal system of control.



Should 21 players be in the other half of the field with only the goalkeeper in your half, the assistant referee's position is not with the second-to-last defender in this instance but at the halfway line.

Another exception to being parallel with the second-to-last defender is when the ball is closer to your goal line than the second-to-last defender is. Your position would then be parallel to the ball.

Other exceptions are during the taking of a corner kick and penalty kick. The assistant referee's position both times is at the goal line.

On a corner kick, the assistant ref is behind the corner flag.

On a penalty kick, the AR is at the intersection of the 18-yard line and the goal line.

Summarizing, the referee's perfect position can vary but the assistant referee's position almost always needs to be exactly in line with the second-to-last defender except with the situations noted above.

How Officials Position Themselves as a Team

Watch professional games and concentrate on the officials, paying special attention to their position and signals.

You will notice that referees like to keep the ball between them and an assistant referee. It's easier to officiate a match when there are two relatively close views, from different angles, of play around the ball.

You'll also see that referees often jog when play is in midfield, such as in or by the kick-off circle, and the ball might be 15 yards away. But referees sprint to get closer to the ball when it is in one of the "hot areas" such as in or by the penalty area or by the benches.

The penalty area is hot since it's by the goal and important goal-scoring opportunities happen there. The area in front of the benches is hot as coaches and substitutes have a close view of play by the touchline and will probably be upset should you miss something against their team.

Running on the Field

Referees and assistant referees need to be in good shape. They spend much of the game running forward.

They might sidestep as well. This technique is fine for the ref to use so that the goalkeeper with the ball is still in view while the ref moves down the field to the area where the ball will land. Sidestepping is also good for the AR to judge offside. However, a "cross-over step," with your legs crossing over each other as you move downfield, can look bad and may make you stumble, so please avoid it.

Running backwards is also important at given times. For the ref, again it's used when the goalkeeper has possession of the ball and is about to distribute it. The referee can also run backwards to prepare for restarts. ARs can run backwards along the touchline when the ball is right in front of them yet they need to move downfield to stay parallel to the second-to-last defender who is in motion. You will notice that players are aware when an official is looking at them and are much less likely to commit a foul because of this. Conversely, I have seen ARs turn their backs to the ball to move down the touchline and a foul was immediately committed.

A reason that a ref should practice moving backwards and to the side when the keeper has possession of the ball is simple: the ref needs to view the ball to make sure the keeper has not dropped it by mistake or the keeper was not fouled, while the ref moves downfield to the area where he or she thinks that the ball will go, sometimes called the drop zone.

All officials should use their ears in addition to their eyes to detect deflections as the ball goes out-of-bounds. ARs can use their ears to concentrate on hearing the thwack of the ball being kicked while looking directly at the second-to-last defender and forwards as well to correctly judge offside.

What Does an Assistant Referee Do?

According to the rulebook, the assistant referees indicate:

- When the whole of the ball has passed out of the field of play
- Which side is entitled to a corner kick, goal kick or throw-in
- When a player may be penalized for being in an offside position
- When a substitution is requested
- When misconduct or any other incident has occurred out of the view of the ref
- When offenses have been committed whenever the assistants are closer to the action than the referee (this includes, in particular circumstances, offenses committed in the penalty area)
- Whether, at penalty kicks, the goalkeeper has moved forward before the ball has been kicked and if the ball has crossed the line

The assistant referee can play a pivotal role in controlling the match, particularly in spotting off-the-ball incidents behind the referee's back. This is why the assistant referee must always concentrate, even when the ball is in the other half of the field.

Let's say that white took a shot that was saved by the gray goalkeeper, who punted the ball to the other half of the field. While running upfield, gray defender #3 punches white forward #10, who falls to the ground. The forward is at the very least stunned, maybe seriously hurt, perhaps this player is now bleeding.

The referee certainly did not see this as he or she was following the play, as was the AR in the other half of the field. Gray defender #3 needs to be sent off for violent conduct and play restarted with a direct kick for striking an opponent where the punch was thrown (and not where the ball was at that time). The trailing AR, who saw the infraction, should raise the flag. If the referee cannot see it, the other AR should raise that flag and after getting the ref's attention, point to the AR who made the important call. If that does not work out, the AR who saw the foul could always yell the ref's name to get noticed.

If the AR misses this serious foul, what type of problems do you think the officiating crew will have for the rest of the match?

When a Referee Overrules the Assistant

The referee can overrule the assistant referee but the assistant can never overrule the ref. The assistant is to *assist* the referee and not *insist* instead.

We have a situation in which the ball has gone over the touchline near the assistant referee, who indicated that it is gray's throw-in. However, the AR did not see the last bounce off a gray leg so it should be white's throw-in instead. The referee should blow the whistle and indicate that it's a white throw by pointing the direction that white is going. The ref should also say something nice to the assistant such as, "Thanks, Bob, but you were screened when the ball last came off gray so it is white's throw." The assistant should then point the flag in white's direction.

A referee should not overrule the AR often, otherwise the officiating crew will not be working as a team and the players will realize that the ref has no confidence in his or her assistant—so why should the players?

While overruling the assistant may be necessary on one or two occasions during the match when the ball is out of play, it is absolutely dangerous when the ball is in play.

When an assistant's flag goes up to signal an offside or foul, players tend to stop, even if they have been told to play the referee's whistle, not the assistant's flag. So it is much easier to overrule the assistant while the ball is out of play and do it only when the ball is in play if you are absolutely certain that the AR has it wrong.

Let's take this a step further and mention a Boys-Under-16 game in which I was the AR. Both the other assistant and I were well positioned with the second-to-last defender throughout the match to flag for offside. Yet, the referee decided to whistle for offside when we kept our flag down on five different occasions—two in my half of the field, three in the other AR's half. The game became an absolute disaster! Three players of the losing team were sent off near the end of the game for using abusive language when they cursed the referee.

Before we leave this point, let me just state that referees who want to continuously receive assignments and/or advance through the ranks are going to need to get along with officiating colleagues. Continuously overruling ARs is not the way to win friends and influence people.

Referee's Instructions Before the Match

The teams spend time training and working on teamwork in practice. Their coaches go over tactics before the game. Doesn't it logically follow that the officiating team needs to spend some time before the game discussing how they will work as a team?

The referee should go over what is expected of the assistant referees. I tell them to wait a split second to raise the flag for offside just to be certain that the player in the offside position is involved in the play. A slower flag and correct call is much better than a quick flag and incorrect call.

I also tell them to run all balls down to the goal line.

For good goals, they sprint up the touchline 15 yards or so, watching the players on the field at all times. Should the ball go into the net but the AR spotted a foul or some other problem which the referee did not see (that would nullify the goal), the AR should wait at the corner flag, the referee comes over. They then can briefly discuss what happened and determine whether the goal is valid. This does not include offside, as the AR should have already raised the flag and the referee spotted it, whistling for offside.

If the ball goes over the goal line and comes out in one of those bang-bang plays that happen once or twice a year and it's a good goal, the AR raises the flag to get the ref's attention—as soon as the referee sees the flag, the AR sprints 15 yards upfield. This is the only time that the ref blows the whistle for a goal.

The referee should also mention that on out-of-bound plays that occur between the ref and AR, if the ref knows which team's ball it should be,

he or she will give a small signal, such as hands on stomach pointing in one direction, so that the AR flags in that direction. After all, the officiating team looks bad when the ref consistently signals the ball one way and the AR has it another way. It's very important for the referee and ARs to have good eye contact with one another.

On throw-ins, the AR can watch for any infraction with the feet up to the halfway line closest to the AR while the ref watches for any infractions with the upper torso. The signal from the AR for an improperly taken throw-in is a twirl of the flag. Past the halfway line, the referee watches for any infraction. You would not want the AR twirling the flag 60 yards away for a foot completely over the touchline in the corner of the field when the referee is so much closer.

ARs should be told to signal fouls within a 25-yard radius of the AR by using the flag as a whistle and twirling the flag. More than 25 yards away, the AR would twirl the flag only if he or she clearly sees an obvious foul that the referee missed.

ARs are also to be told to watch for off-the-ball fouls behind the referee's back.

Should there be opposing players within 10 yards of a free kick near the AR, the assistant should come onto the field to pace off the 10 yards rather than the ref. Play is restarted with the referee's whistle after the opponents are 10 yards from the ball **and** the AR has returned to the proper position.

One AR has the look, the other one has the book. Meaning that one AR watches for the entire game, not putting numbers of cautions or send-offs in the book (score sheet), while the other AR records all this information. At halftime, the officials discuss any numbers in the book to make certain that there are no discrepancies. At that time, the AR with the look records those numbers. The reason that one AR has the look is so that while the ref and other AR are recording the number of a player being cautioned or sent off, retaliation or any other misconduct is not missed.

ARs can also signal if fouls should be cautions (yellow cards) or send-offs (red cards). The signal for a caution is hand over shirt pocket (where the referee keeps the yellow card) and send-off is hand touching back pocket (where the red card is kept). Although there are other AR signals to alert the referee to caution or send off, these are the most accepted ones.

If the referee blows the whistle for a foul near the AR, the assistant should then raise the flag in the direction of the team receiving the free kick. Doing this eliminates the problem of players or coaches saying, "The assistant was right there and did not see a foul but the ref decides to call it from 25 yards away!"

Halftime

Halftime is the interval at which teams, including the officiating team, go over what went right the first half plus what went wrong and how they are going to correct things in the second half. The officiating team as well needs to discuss any potential challenges awaiting them in the second half. An AR could say, "I saw #10 of white and #4 of gray talking to one another after they challenged each other for the ball toward the end of the half. I could not hear them as they were too far away. You (the ref) were running upfield in the other direction at the time. But I don't think that it was a nice conversation. We should watch out for those two fouling one another in the second half and take appropriate action."

A Dramatic Decision

I remember when I made a very important, and correct, entry into an important game as an AR. Two top New York men's teams, Brooklyn Italians and Frosinone, were playing a close match in 1984. Longtime professional referee Gino D'Ippolito was the referee and I was an assistant referee. The score was 1-1 with Brooklyn Italians having a corner kick near the end of the game, in the 89th minute. The ball was headed and landed in front of the goal. During the goal mouth scramble, Brooklyn Italians put the ball in the goal. What Gino did not see as he was screened but what I clearly saw was

that during the scramble, as the Frosinone goalkeeper was on the ground stretching to get to the ball, a Brooklyn player tried kicking the ball but missed and kicked the goalie in the stomach instead, helping prevent the goalie from reaching the ball.

I stood at the corner flag, Gino came over and I told him that the goal needed to be disallowed and it should be a Frosinone direct kick for kicking an opponent.

The final score was 1-1.

After the game, a reporter from an Italian-American newspaper, *Il Progresso*, interviewed me. Although I can speak Italian relatively well and have officiated in Italy, I'm glad that we conducted the interview in my native language of English. It took a good deal of courage to make that call.

Player Management

Officials need to approach the game knowing that they will be fair and maintain that attitude throughout the match, no matter what poor or favorable experiences they already have had with the teams that are playing.

It is also very important that the officials listen to the players. Some officials conduct the game as if they are the ultimate power. I have even heard one ref called the "Soup Nazi," from the "Seinfeld" show. Yes, the officials are in control of the game, but they must be approachable to the players.

During the match, the officials must be in constant contact with the players as it makes the game go much smoother. Players and coaches appreciate officials who work hard and care.

I was refereeing a women's match in which there were only five fouls the entire first half. White's center midfielder, #10, was fouled twice during the half and neither were bad fouls, yet she complained each time that she was fouled. I figured that if a problem began in that match, most likely it was going to start with her. So I stayed close to her whenever she had the ball and talked to her and the players marking her a good deal. Presence lends conviction and there were no more complaints from her the rest of the match.

That white team wound up in the semifinal match that I was refereeing. Before the match began, the league commissioner let me know that a player from that team was suspended for being sent off for violent conduct in a previous match. I said to the commissioner, “Let me take an educated guess and say that it was #10.” Certainly, I was not surprised upon hearing that she had been fouled and, in her retaliation, got in a very brief fistfight with the player who fouled her.

Attitude Is Altitude

This brings me to the approach of the assistant referees. The ARs, as we have seen, have an important role to play in a game. I have heard many officials say “I’m just the assistant referee for the game.” Wrong attitude!

I cannot tell you how many ARs I have worked with who would be much better if they only thought that what they were doing was important and really concentrated. Hard work goes a long way!

In many games, the success of the officiating team’s performance often depends upon a critical call by the assistant referee.

The assistant referees are on the side of the field and are obviously closer to the benches and spectators than the referee. Should a coach or substitute complain about a call that the referee made, sometimes it is better to ignore the comment. Other times you can say something such as “The referee was much closer to that foul than either of us” or “The referee had a very different angle than you did.”

Never contradict or undermine the referee in any way to coaches, players or spectators. A few years ago, I was officiating a Boys-Under-19 Premier game on a field and heard loud dissent on the adjacent field throughout that Boys-Under-19 Premier match. My game was over first so I watched the last 20 minutes of the other match. The referee was doing a good job. However, I witnessed the assistant referee on the side of the benches making negative comments about the referee to the benches after the ref blew the whistle. This AR committed an ethics violation (see Code of Ethics on pages 107-108). Let’s just say that officials who undermine their colleagues are better off spending their free time doing something else!

No matter what the level of the game—whether it’s intramurals, travel team, premier, school soccer, amateur or professional soccer—people talk. Officials who work as hard for lower division games as much as they do for Division 1 games plus girls’ and womens’ matches as much as boys’ and mens’ games get good reputations. Officials who take off from a game or two do not.

Since becoming an official more than three decades ago, I have heard complaints about favoritism of certain officials by assignors, referee organizations and leagues. These “favored” officials seem to get many of the so-called top assignments in addition to being assigned games on days when there’s little activity. I am certain that organizations and assignors have found these officials to be reliable, to hustle at every game they are assigned and to have forged a good or great reputation. Their hard work is being rewarded.

Whistle While You Work

Soccer referees carry their whistles in their hands, not in their mouths. In raising the whistle to the mouth to blow it, a referee has a moment to analyze a foul to make certain that there is not an advantage situation developing.

To emphasize the use of the whistle when it is necessary to blow it, such as for fouls, offside or close out-of-bounds, refrain from blowing the whistle some other times, such as when the ball was kicked so far off the field everybody can see that it is no longer in play. Or when a team has a kick-off after a goal, simply say, “Play.”

If the ball clearly went into the goal, there is no need to blow the whistle; simply point to the kick-off circle. However, the ref always blows it for a goal and points to the kick-off circle on those rare occasions when the ball hits the post, goes over the goal line and then bounces out. You blow the whistle in this bang-bang case so that everyone understands that it’s a goal.

A decade ago, I was interviewed by *Newsday* and the article’s author, Anne Bratskeir, correctly surmised that “blowing the whistle is an art form.” Indeed it is. I often consider my whistle to be conducting a great symphony of players, coaches and assistant referees.

You blow the whistle at normal pitch for common fouls, offside and when the ball just goes over either the touchline or goal line.

You blow the whistle very hard for a bad foul that warrants at least a verbal warning, perhaps a caution or send-off, as well as for a penalty kick foul or to disallow a goal. Blowing the whistle hard emphasizes to everybody that you have seen exactly what happened and are going to act decisively.

At the end of each half, you can use one long blow of the whistle or three short blasts in quick succession.

Referees use the pitch of their whistles and their voice for game control plus management of the players and coaches.

Advantage

Advantage is a wonderful clause in the rules in which whistling the foul would actually be hurting the team being fouled by not letting play continue. Let's say the white midfielder is dribbling the ball outside the gray penalty area when a gray player pushes white. Yet white does not fall down and is still able to continue the dribble unimpeded toward goal. The ref yells "Play on!" with both arms extended, indicating to everybody that there's an advantage.

When a team scores from an advantage, I feel as good as the goal scorer for having applied this clause correctly. But just continuing to move the ball upfield is a sign that advantage was applied correctly.

Officials properly playing advantage do a terrific job of letting the game flow, increasing the enjoyment of the game for everyone. Generally, the better the skill level, the more opportunities you will have to play the advantage.

To properly maintain game control, give the proper signal of arms outstretched and yell "Play on!" Also, later try to tell the fouled player, "I saw the hold but did not call it as your team had the advantage" and the player who fouled, "No more holding. I did not call your foul as the other team had the advantage." When you briefly speak to the players later, most of them are very receptive.

When should the officials play the advantage and when should a foul be called? Use these guidelines to help you:

A foul by the attacking team inside the defensive team's penalty area.

The ball is so far from the other goal that there is little rationale for playing advantage here. The defensive team would probably much rather have the free kick and get their team in position to receive it upfield.

One item to consider is when an offensive player fouls the goalkeeper who has hand possession of the ball. If the foul was neither a hard nor a deliberate foul and the goalkeeper is still standing, you could play an advantage as the goalkeeper would rather have the option of distributing the ball by punt, drop-kick, throw or dribble than have the goalie's team kick it from the ground by a free kick.

However, you must tell the players involved that you are playing advantage and let the attacking player know that he or she is not to foul the keeper anymore.

A foul by the attacking team just outside the defensive team's penalty area.

With nearly all fouls of this nature, do not play advantage. Below is an example demonstrating why.

A gray defender is dribbling outside the penalty area and is tripped by a white forward with the defender falling on the ground. The ball rolls to another gray defender who plays the ball. You yell, "Play on!"

The gray defender then loses the ball to a white forward who passes the ball to a teammate who scores. The gray defender who was fouled and had fallen left that white scorer onside. That is why you rarely play advantage in this situation—the ball is much closer to the goal of the team that fouled than of the other team.

A foul at midfield. You can certainly play the advantage here, particularly if the team with the ball has open space in front of it.

A foul by the defensive team just outside the defensive team's penalty area.

If you see what could be a clear advantage, let them play, as many of these advantage situations with the attacking team going toward the penalty area wind up as goals.

A penalty kick foul by the defensive team inside the defensive team's penalty area. Teams score on penalty kicks most of the time. Only play an advantage here if the attacking player has the ball near the goal with an open goal beckoning.

If the referee plays an advantage for a hard foul, during the next stoppage of play, the player who fouled could be cautioned or sent off. However if this occurs, to help avoid retaliation, yell toward the players involved, "Number three, I saw that foul and I'm going to deal with you when the ball is out of play." Saying the number also helps you remember which player to card a minute or so later.

Should the referee give an advantage but quickly realize that the advantage did not materialize, the ref should blow the whistle and call the original foul.

How Assistant Referees Use the Flag

Assistant referees are to run up and down the touchline with the flag on the side of the field at all times so that the referee can easily see the flag upon looking at the AR. The arm holding the flag is straight. Always keeping the flag on the field side is not easy because, as soon as the AR changes direction, the flag (which is down by the legs) then must be placed in the other hand. Think change direction, change the hand holding the flag. You might need to practice this technique away from a game situation to get it right. But it will soon become a very good habit that you have perfected.

Just as the referee blows the whistle decisively, ARs raise the flag decisively. Your mechanics should indicate that you are confident in the call.

As we have mentioned, the referee's position tries to keep the ball between the ref and AR at all times. Yet sometimes, this is nearly impossible.

In the United States and in the majority of countries around the world, most refs run a left-wing diagonal, meaning that they will be near the left wing on the forward line when play is in or near the penalty areas. Let's say that the ball is passed by a white player to the white left wing, who starts dribbling the ball near the touchline. Most likely, the ref is not going to be exactly at that touchline and is going to have to see the left wing collect the ball, then turn to see if the AR is signaling offside.

Consequently, the offside flags that are missed are often for situations in which the left wing was offside, as the referee did not remember to turn and look at the AR. In cases such as this, the AR snapping the flag while raising it so that it can be heard by the referee 50 yards away can make all the difference in the world. The bottom line is that if the ref does not spot the AR's flag for offside, the flag continues to be raised until it is noticed. The officiating crew does not look good the longer that play continues.

It is helpful if the referee makes a note of which AR to look at as the ref crosses the halfway line.

The Officials Are a Team

Since the officials are a team, they enter and leave the field as one unit—referee in the middle clutching the ball, assistant referees on the side of the ref with the flag to their outside. The more they work as a team, the more they act as a team—before, during and after the game—the more they will enjoy officiating. And the perception of these officials will be much better than an official who wants to be the lone ranger.

Refereeing by Yourself

All this is well and good. But what happens when you referee a game by yourself? After all, many officials referee games without the help of ARs. The great majority of my first 1,000 games were matches in which I was the only official assigned. What do you do then?

A coach once said to me, "Referees seem much more confident when they have assistant referees." Well, of course! Just as the players on his team would be much more confident if they had a full team rather than a depleted squad.

As a solo referee, you should continue to run the field using the half-open scissor that was diagrammed as a very rough guide. But since you are the only official, should many offside decisions need to be made (such as when one or two teams are playing an offside trap), you should stay a bit closer to the touchline than usual, thinking about how the ARs, standing just outside the touchline, signal for offside. The side of the field is the best position for calling offside. Yet if you stay too close to the touchline, you will be in a poor position to call fouls.

Club linesmen, usually the relative or friend of a player, will help you determine when the ball goes over the touchline. Tell them before the game, “Raise the flag only when the entire ball goes over the entire line. Do not give me the direction of the throw as I will determine it.”

They are not to signal direction as this can create a perception that they are cheating for the team they want to win. Make sure that you thank them both before and after the game as they are volunteering their time to help you.

No matter if the club linesmen say that they want to help you even more, even if a club linesman says that he or she is an international referee, the only responsibility of the club linesmen is to signal when the ball went over the touchline—not to raise the flag for fouls or for offside or when the ball went over the goal line.

How Do You Look?

On the next few pages are the signals for referees and assistant referees. To get these right, dress in your uniform, stand in front of a mirror in the comfort of your own home and practice these signals and mechanics.

Referee Signals



Free Kick



Indirect Kick



“Play On!” Advantage



Corner Kick



Caution or Send-Off



Penalty Kick



Goal Kick

Assistant Referee Mechanics and Signals



The AR runs downfield with flag always on side of field.



Goal Kick



Corner Kick



Foul, twirl flag



Throw-in



Substitution



Offside. First raise flag above head to signal offside, then after whistle blows, indicate which side of field...



Offside on far side of field



Offside in middle of field



Offside on near side of field