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The Referees *Les Arbitres*

Yves Hinant, Belgium, 2009, 77 minutes

If you think your job is stressful, you haven't seen anything yet. The pre-game preparations of European soccer referees, which variously include throwing up, praying to God and generally being utterly terrified, make evident the demands of their job.

The original title of Yves Hinant's revelatory new documentary was 'Kill the Referee,' which captures just how high the stakes are in the world of international soccer. These mysterious men with whistles and cards are not just hated, they are loathed, reviled, the subject of death threats, bomb threats and more invective than is humanly possible to withstand. It's little wonder that they approach each game as if it was their very last.

From the film's opening scene, where Swiss referee Massimo Busacca is captured in the final moments of a match between Greece and Sweden, the level of intensity and attention demanded from the men officiating the play is almost super human. Wild-eyed and sweating bullets, Busacca communicates with his assistants, who are constantly feeding him information through their radio headsets. Bits of their dialogue, punctured by bouts of furious profanity, and a deep animal roar from the packed crowd make explicitly clear the pressures that be.

A huge hit when it premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, *The Referees* was filmed with unprecedented access, capturing the different teams of officials (helpfully delineated by nationality into Norwegians, Italians and English) both on the field and off. A particularly telling event took place during the Euro 08 finals when English official Howard Webb made a correct, albeit extremely unpopular call, and awarded a penalty kick to Austria, which allowed them to tie up their game with Poland. A goal which prompted Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to publicly declare that he wanted to kill Howard Webb. The members of Webb's immediate family had to be placed under police protection and even Webb himself, an ex-policeman, appeared a little shaken when he discovered doctored photos of himself on the internet sporting a Hitler moustache.

One might well ask is it all worth it? The answer may lie in how you feel about soccer. Thankfully the World Cup, held this year in South Africa, is just around the corner, which may provide additional clarification.