Who would be a football referee?

Routinely vilified, verbally and physically abused, their decisions and fitness scrutinised by millions – why would anyone want to be a football referee? Jim White meets the whistle-blowers

By Jim White
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Phil Dowd sends off Chelsea captain John Terry at Goodison Park Photo: GETTY IMAGES

According to the official report, the match between Ynystawe and Cwm Albion Under-14s in the Swansea Junior Football League last spring was 'ill-tempered’. That’s one way of putting it. By the time Ynystawe had taken a 2-0 half-time lead the referee, an experienced Swansea official called Clive Stewart, had already sent two players off for violent conduct. Worse, as he attempted to calm things down, he was subjected to a barrage of impassioned comment and opinion from supporters, who largely consisted of the parents of the youngsters involved. If anything they seemed to be encouraging the on-field aggression.

In the second half, tempers hardly softened, even after Cwm equalised. But it was when Ynystawe took a 3-2 lead that things erupted. On the pitch, elbows were flying, studs making regular contact with flesh and bone. Off it, the shouting and snarling increased. So much so that, concluding that the safety of all concerned was being severely compromised, Stewart was forced to abandon the game, a Sunday morning runaround for teenagers. After he had brought things to a premature halt – and red-carded two further participants – Stewart was making his way to the changing-rooms, shaking his head at the spectacle he had just encountered, when he was approached by Richard Norman, a spectator whose son had been playing for Cwm. Without warning, Norman punched the referee in the face – with such force that Stewart required 10 stitches in a wound across his nose.

For his vicious assault, Norman was later given a four-year sentence for wounding, of which, after various reports had been submitted, he was expected to serve nine months. At the time of the attack Stewart, who was 62, had been giving up his time to referee junior matches in the Swansea leagues for 23 years.

There are more than 50,000 qualified referees in England, varying from veterans padding around local parks to the elite group of 16 Premier League referees. The best practitioners do it as a full-time job, earning up to £90,000 a year, yet most do it for little more than their petrol money. Referee training has never been more rigorous, involving constant assessment. Successful candidates progress through the ranks, running out as linesmen as part of their learning progress. At the peak of the game, top refs can take part in up to three matches a week, skipping from Premier League to Champions League to international matches. Here they come under intense scrutiny, their every judgment and decision pored over by media and managers. But before they even start to engage with the very best players in the game, they are obliged to learn their craft out on the parks and municipal pitches, officiating in the nation’s minor leagues. And here they face very different challenges.

The unhappy truth is that the attack on Clive Stewart in Swansea is by no means an isolated case. Every season the grassroots of our national game are spattered with the blood of match officials. Young and old referees get head butted, punched and chased to their cars in fear for their wellbeing. While it is unlikely to happen in the Premier League, in Saturday and Sunday leagues (where referees often have no linesmen to support them), assaults on match officials currently run at more than 300 a year; the Manchester County FA alone recorded 42 attacks on referees last season. That is just the physical assaults, the ones that get reported. The verbal abuse is so commonplace as to be not worth documenting, but is sufficiently morale-sapping to provoke as many as 7,000 referees in the past couple of seasons to give up. Referees often describe themselves as a breed apart. But the current circumstances are testing even their resolve.

'We are very concerned about the numbers who are leaving the game because of the behaviour of players and spectators towards them,’ says Iain Blanchard, the Football Association’s national head of referee development. That’s why Blanchard launched the FA’s Respect initiative at the start of the 2008/09 season, with the aim of reducing the abuse officials receive at the game’s top level, thus causing good behaviour to trickle down to the lower leagues. The FA knows the situation won’t change overnight – it is a long-term project – but with the English game’s leading manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, suggesting this month that the Premier League’s best officials are not fit enough to do their jobs effectively, there is some way to go. Yet Blanchard is adamant that something had to be done to protect referees.

'We needed to raise awareness of the issue,’ he says. 'Eighteen months ago the referee dropout rate was as high as 80 per cent in places. The level of abuse is appalling. What some people don’t seem to acknowledge is that the referee is vital to the working of a match. Without a referee you simply will not have a game of football.’

Listen to the abuse directed at him and it is not hard to form the belief that the referee has become one of society’s handiest outlets for anger, the person on whom to unleash a week’s frustration and disappointment, the nation’s punchbag. Which raises a question that has a serious bearing on the future of football: these days, who would be a football referee?

It is an early-season game between Reading Town and Wantage Town in the Hellenic League Premier Division. Three rungs below the Football League, this is a competition populated by reasonable footballers, some former professionals, young twenty- and thirtysomething men who take their weekly run-out very seriously indeed. There is a sprinkling of a crowd, perhaps 70 strong, mostly friends and family of the players.

In a portable building, behind a door marked match officials only, Oliver Dalton is preparing for the game. Over the ensuing 90 minutes he will be in charge of the 22 men on the pitch, plus another couple of dozen sitting on the benches.

His decision is final. At 18 he is younger than anyone else involved in this afternoon’s game. But that is the way football is going: younger referees are being fast-tracked into the system to patch up the gaps left by their departing elders.

The local FA has high hopes for Dalton and is keen to entrust him with games such as this. Today an assessor is on the touchline, checking his performance. Dalton arrived an hour and a half before kick-off and, with 15 minutes to go, is briefing the managers of the two teams on new rules about technical areas (the space in front of the benches that managers and their staff occupy during matches). 'Only one person is allowed in there at a time,’ he says. 'Now, I’m not looking to enforce it. But if I start getting grief from there and I see there’s about half a dozen of you in there, then I might take action. OK?’

The two managers tell him he won’t get any trouble from them on that score and everyone shakes hands and wishes each other all the best. It is the friendliest moment of the afternoon.

Dalton is here, he says, because he loves football. A reasonable school player, he realised at 14 that he was not going to get to the top and – following the example of his father, who was a local league official – took up refereeing because it might enable him to experience the game at a level far higher than he would be capable of playing at. He is now a level four referee, which allows him to officiate Hellenic games; he is hoping to be promoted to level three by the end of this season, which would propel him up to

Conference standard, with only two steps to go before he is sufficiently qualified to step out at Old Trafford or the Emirates Stadium.

'Anyone who’s seen me play will tell you I was never good enough to play in the Premier League,’ he says. 'But you never know, I might ref there.’

The statistics suggest he has made a wise decision. At 16 years of age, a boy’s chances of becoming a Premier League footballer are one in 100,000. But a 16-year-old who chooses to train as a referee has a one in 100 chance of officiating a Premier League game.

'Refereeing does appeal to kids,’ Blanchard says. 'They find the authority it gives sexy.’

Dalton’s prime motive is not that. He says refereeing is an enormous physical and mental challenge; there is no comfort zone out there on the pitch, and for him that is exciting. He says that since he has taken it up he has felt a boost in his self-confidence; his time- and man-management skills have improved enormously. He thinks it has helped him grow as a person. And then there is the money. After four seasons of refereeing, he has saved enough to head off in a car he bought for himself to the University of Warwick, where he is studying economics. 'I’d never have managed that on a paper round,’ he says. Today he will receive £47 for his efforts.

Keith Hackett, a former top-flight referee and the outgoing general manager of the Professional Game Match Officials Board, which selects referees for Premier League matches and aims to improve the standard of refereeing across the board, thinks Dalton has a rocky route ahead of him. He says it has never been tougher to be a referee. It is certainly a much more imposing task than Hackett faced in the 1970s and 80s. It is not only the abuse – though that is worse than it used to be. It is that the speed and intensity of the game has increased exponentially. 'Without a doubt, it’s harder now than when I did it,’ he says. 'Young lads coming through into refereeing now, they’re athletes, they have to be.’

To meet the demands of the game, Hackett suggests, top referees have to be physically in much the same sort of condition as the players they direct. A ref can run up to 12,000m during a match, 2,000m of which can be at pace. To check that his members are maintaining their fitness, Hackett introduced the ProZone data analysis system, in which their every move on a field is monitored and the statistics of their performance studied in great detail.

But not everyone is convinced by the findings. Sir Alex Ferguson, the country’s most decorated manager, recently questioned the capacity of the Premier League referee Alan Wiley. 'He was walking up the pitch for the second goal, needing a rest,’ Ferguson boomed after Manchester United’s home game with Sunderland. 'He was not fit enough for a game of that standard. The pace of the game demanded a referee who was fit. He was not fit. It is an indictment of our game.’ Ferguson later apologised for any embarrassment he had caused Wiley, insisting he was only trying to highlight a problem in the English game. Wiley made no public comment. (According to the ProZone stats, Wiley had run nearly 12km during the game, more than all but seven of the players.)

Several times a season the elite refs meet for a physical assessment and a bit of a get-together.

I was privy to one held in Leicestershire recently. The car-park alongside the field where some of the physical tests were to take place was full of expensive vehicles; my own looked paltry among the glittering Mercs, Audis and BMWs. A couple of the sleeker models had personalised number plates including the word ref. Given that most top officials earn less than £90,000 a year, it seemed a more ostentatious collection than might be expected. But there was a reason for the flash motors. 'If we were spotted turning up in an old banger like yours to a Premier League ground,’ one referee explained, 'we’d lose the respect of the players straight away.’

Once out of their cars, the men were put through endless tests to check on their sprinting, their recovery rates, their ability to get from foul A to handball B at a lick. They were tested on their angles, the speed at which they took up a position within the preferred average of 14.5m distance from the action. As they went about their business, the banter was unending. When they had a game of football at the conclusion of the session, with me as the referee, they had much fun at my expense; their language was ripe and their dissent constant. At one point, one leading official – a household name – stood about half an inch from my nose and loudly told me that 'You really haven’t a clue, have you?’ I let it pass. In any case, he was too quick for me to catch him up to flourish a yellow card.

Fitness, though, is but the half of it. 'What we look for in our referees is a full knowledge of the laws of the game, plus the courage to ensure those laws are followed,’ Hackett says. 'It takes some personality to do that. Some people used to say that someone like Graham Poll [England’s top referee up until a few years ago] was arrogant, but a referee needs a sense of self-assurance.’

According to Andre Marriner, 38, who joined the elite list of Premier League referees in 2004, the rewards are manifest. 'For me there’s nothing better than being a referee,’ he says. 'I was at Everton the other day, one of my favourite grounds, and the atmosphere was amazing. Running out of the tunnel, the sound of the crowd, the compactness of it all, it makes the hairs stand up on the back of the neck just thinking about it. There is nowhere else I feel more alive.’

It makes it sound almost like fun. But then Marriner, like his fellow officials, has developed a capacity to ignore much of what is going on around him. In order to remain in the middle there is something else a referee needs: a skin apparently constructed from tungsten. As the financial stakes have grown at the top of the game, so has the intensity of the response to referees.

'A Premier League referee is taking responsibility for at least £100 million worth of assets, minimum,’ Hackett says. 'His decision-making processes will be on show in front of the inhabitants of 207 countries across the world. The repercussions of what he does have never been more substantial.’

It is all too much for some modern managers, who have led the assault on match officials. When team bosses themselves are under such intense pressure to deliver results, any target on to which blame can be diverted is seized upon.

'You have to remember we are competitive people,’ says Owen Coyle, the manager of Burnley, promoted to the Premier League this year. 'We expect our referees to be up to the job, and if they’re not, then we are not slow to tell them.’

The dialogue, though, is entirely one-way. 'We’re such an easy target, and we have to take whatever they throw at us, which usually they do to distract attention from the shortcomings of their team,’ says Marriner, who worked as a postman before taking a career break to devote his energies to being a Premier League referee (all top referees are full-time these days). 'We all make mistakes, but imagine if we came out and criticised a forward for missing an open goal. We just wouldn’t do that.’

It is in the immediate aftermath of a game, when emotions are still boiling, that the referee is most exposed. Coyle believes that managers should be brave enough to admit when they have made false accusations about the officials.

'No one is more critical than me of referees,’ he says. 'But they have the hardest job. And we need to acknowledge that. Last season, against Queens Park Rangers, they scored when I was convinced their player was offside. I gave the linesman fearful abuse. I said to him – and I was furious – when you look at the replay I hope you ring me to apologise, because you got it all wrong. But – you know what? – when I looked at the replay I realised it was me who’d got it all wrong. He’d made a brilliant decision. So I rang the lad to apologise. And he was so decent about it, he made me feel 10 times worse for having a go at him in the first place.’

Coyle’s moment of contrition, though, was private and retrospective. The verbal critiques of the sort Ferguson launched at Wiley are delivered weekly, in the press and on television, and are very public. And on the parks, amateur coaches are watching, follow that lead, picking up Ferguson’s and Coyle’s bad habits, casting the referee as the cause of all their troubles.

Watching Oliver Dalton from Reading Town’s touchline – quick, athletic, close to the action, on top of every contentious moment – a neutral would suggest he was admirably even-handed in his decisions, getting every one right. But there is no such thing as a neutral at a football match. Apart from me and the referee’s assessor (who tells me afterwards that Dalton is 'an outstanding prospect’), everyone in the ground is partial. The emotional imbalance means that, as the game reaches its climax, both teams seem convinced he is biased against them. From the crowd, whenever there is a collision or foul, comes the throaty, accusatory cry of 'ref-er-ree!’. One particularly voluble man greets every decision against his team with 'you are shit!’ and every decision in favour with 'I see you’ve found your bloody glasses at last, then’. From the players comes a squeal of dismay when a ruling goes against them, no matter how legitimate.

'You just have to block it all out,’ Dalton says of the endless noise directed at him. 'If you start to worry about it, start to take into account what they’re complaining about, then you lose it. If you get a decision wrong, you just have to make sure you get the next ones right. What you must never do is try to compensate for a mistake.’

Besides, Keith Hackett suggests, the riper the language and the more hostile the players and fans, the better the learning environment. Abuse is an essential part of the learning curve for a would-be referee.

'It hardens you up,’ he says. 'You can’t be a shrinking violet to be a referee. You have to be able to take it. And you learn to take it in the lower leagues and the parks. I used to love going back there when I was a top official. Just to test myself. See if I was mentally strong enough.’

Andre Marriner agrees.

'Crikey, yeah, the abuse is untold,’ he says of his experience in lower-league football. 'Far, far worse than at the top. I got a real taste of it when I was coming through the leagues. Sometimes I’d go home after a game and think: why am I taking this? But I spoke to colleagues, shared experiences, realised it was nothing personal, that’s just what it is to be a ref. That is how you learn. And if you don’t learn to deal with it, you’d find it very hard at the top where the intensity is so much greater.’

As Dalton’s game draws to a close, the sound of the final whistle seems to dissipate the tension. The players suddenly appear to deflate, their anger oozing out on to the turf. They shake each other’s hands, most shake the referee’s, several slap him on the shoulder. One of the coaches – the one who has earlier accused him of being blind – trots on to the pitch and congratulates him on a good performance. 'That’s what happens,’ Marriner says. 'It’s a passionate game. But passions soon cool once it’s over.’

Well, some do. As Dalton makes his way to the changing-room, that shouty home supporter remains exercised. While Dalton walks across the pitch, he bundles round the perimeter fence, loudly suggesting that the ref should be wearing the green shirt of the opposition. The red-faced man arrives at the door of the official’s changing-room at precisely the same moment as Dalton. For an instant a confrontation looks inevitable. But the referee’s two assistants step in front of the man, allowing Dalton to slip inside unchecked. His accuser swears, kicks at the closing door and heads for the bar.

'I never get intimidated at this level,’ Dalton explains, as from one of the dressing-rooms comes the sound of the manager yelling at his players for their lack of effort. 'It’s because there’s three of you. Having assistants is an enormous help. On the parks, you're on your own, and that’s when it can get scary. I remember once sitting in the dressing- room, with the door locked, for a good 10 minutes while a bloke outside threatened to kick my head in. Eventually he left. But I dashed pretty smartly to my car and got the hell out of there in case he was waiting.’

Referees. They really are a breed apart.