

MODERN IDEAS ON TRAINING

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Tofik Bakhrarov is, arguably, football's most famous match official. Azerbaijan's national stadium in Baku is named after him. He was the 'Russian' linesman who gave Geoff Hurst's goal ten minutes into extra time in the 1966 World Cup final. When asked on his deathbed how he knew the ball was over the line he is alleged to have uttered only one word - 'Stalingrad'. Bakhrarov was considered a great referee by his countrymen - an Azerbaijani hero. Outside the stadium, they have his statue, so what are the qualities of a great referee? Will we ever see a statue of a match official here in England - maybe on the patch of grass outside The FA headquarters?

Answering the question about the qualities of a great referee brings them running in white coats. Yet it shouldn't be too difficult and, of course, until you define it then you never know how to get it. Defining the qualities of a great referee allows us to think more productively about selection, teaching, development and support.

Are great referees born or are they made? Most match day crowds would have a clear view on their provenance but ignore that for the moment. Born or made? A psychologist would be able to tell you whether an individual had the personal qualities suited to higher level decision making in a pressured environment before that child reached their teens. Intelligence is in part genetic, partly a consequence of early experience and partly derived from direct intervention. Refereeing ability - at the elite level - will be much the same. For me the most important qualities of a great referee are the personal attributes which the individual brings to any life experience. Personality testing would identify those who could be great, but in the absence of such tests in this article, let me define my five attributes of the great referee for you.

An attribute is a personal quality. It is relatively stable over time and begins to emerge in early childhood. There are some qualities which are desirable and others less so. The desirable attributes for a referee are:

1. Physical fitness: fatigue leads to errors of judgement - ask any tired lorry driver. A referee needs not only to keep up with play but think clearly when doing so.

2. Sensory acuity: excellent eyesight, hearing and physical awareness.
3. Flexibility of mind: refereeing is problem-solving with rapidly changing variables at speed.
4. Evenness of temperament and concern for fair outcome: stability of emotional response depends upon personality traits formed in childhood. Concern for a fair outcome means burying one's own ego. Not all referees can do this.
5. Resilience: is sticking at it in the face of adversity. This is not dogmatism - but a willingness to shoulder responsibility.

Personal attributes are the most important indicators of the potential for greatness. More so than knowledge of the laws, or skills in their interpretation, or match experience. Choose your parents wisely!

Attributes

1. Physical fitness
2. Sensory acuity
3. Flexibility of mind
4. Evenness of temperament and concern for fair outcome
5. Resilience

Knowledge

1. Laws of the game
2. Contexts in which decisions take place
3. Technical understanding of the game
4. Behavioural response
5. Match procedure

Skills

1. Clarity of communication
2. Understanding of consequences of interventions
3. Advantageous positioning
4. Team working
5. Interpretation of laws in match situations

Experience

1. Performance under duress
2. Errors - learning from mistakes
3. Officiating matches
4. Seeking the views of others
5. Performance collapse





Next comes the knowledge. London taxi drivers spend years on mopeds with maps and an A-Z learning their trade. They drive around in all weathers testing themselves, getting it wrong starting again and sticking at it. Most referees will have sat in a classroom and seen a few slides.

Things are changing. Referee training is improving for the better, but there may still be some who view learning to be a referee as something to be endured. Knowledge for referees needs to be liberated from classrooms and seen as more than just fluency in the laws. What referees must know does not stop at what's in the book. Here is my list:

1. Laws of the game: best learned with others and through a variety of methods the best of which approximates the real situation - for example, role play
2. Contexts in which decisions take place: an appreciation that some game situations generate likelier opportunities for infringements and dissent and being ready for those moments
3. Technical understanding of the game: basic knowledge of how players move, tackle, collide, manipulate and work with each other
4. Behavioural response: being able to read the likely response of players and staff, particularly to unfavourable decisions and manage a way through positively

5. Match procedure: what happens in what order before, during and after a match.

So select first on the basis of the right attributes, then train in the knowledge of the game including its laws. What next? Next we develop the appropriate set of skills, and for me they are as follows:

1. Clarity of communication: unambiguous and timely decision-making communicated in the simplest possible language
2. Understanding of consequences of interventions: an informed and professional understanding that there are times to intervene and times when it may be astute to avoid doing so
3. Advantageous positioning: being fit is one thing but you also need to be smart enough to be standing in the optimal position for you and your team to make decisions
4. Team working: having a game plan, investing trust in your officials and knowing when to defer to another view
5. Interpretation of laws in match situations: this is the crux of refereeing - it's the difference between intent and accident. The skill of judging when a hand across the face is deliberate or a necessary consequence of jumping for a dropping ball.

All of this will produce a good referee but one still not worthy of a statue in Soho Square. Not yet anyway. For

that we need experiences. The experiences to which I refer do not all come from football matches. Many will come from handling domestic situations or reconciling conflict at work. Some may arise as a result of mistakes made in the past or from following a course of training in another discipline. For me they include:

1. Performance under duress: this is about problem solving in hostile and stressful situations. It could have been learned in another profession - the ambulance service, teaching, police work. It may be that it has been learned through a different sport such as orienteering. The true measure of a great referee comes out in such moments.
2. Errors - learning from mistakes: arrogance and ignorance are a deadly combination. Truly talented people turn mistakes into learning opportunities provided they get that opportunity!
3. Officiating matches: there is no experience like doing it for real and in as many different contexts as possible.
4. Seeking the views of others: feedback is the breakfast of champions. Seek out the views of others. Watch matches with non-referees and get their take. Be open!
5. Performance collapse: knowing what to do when it all goes 'pear shaped' and you begin to feel less than adequate doesn't get taught on courses. This is part of life. It's also where a mentor could be of help. This is someone you trust who helps you deploy the other tools and techniques to reframe the experience and come out better for it.

Finally, and before I finish many of you will be thinking about words like authority, control, charisma and maybe even presence are missing from my inventory of great refereeing qualities. Pierluigi Collina would be someone whom I would regard as having 'presence' in the way that Jack Pallance had it as a bad guy in those spaghetti westerns. However presence is a consequence of a combination of attitude, knowledge, skills and experiences. Remove Pallance's gun and his presence diminishes. Remove any one of the above qualities and your 'presence' disappears before your eyes! Collina without an understanding of match procedure or a weakness in positioning wouldn't be quite so intimidating.

If refereeing is problem-solving with rapidly changing variables at speed and it involves humans at both ends of any decision, why teach it through compartmentalised experiences? Should we not be trying to recreate the real conditions as closely as possible in our training? It seems incongruous to me that referees at the highest level will do classroom sessions, decision analysis, physical fitness, communications skills and share experiences but have limited opportunities to marry these into a training challenge. It remains a subject for another essay, but I'm already thinking about the equivalent of orienteering for referees. You arrive at a succession of way points knackered and then have to make instant decisions with real consequences. There must be some merit in this sort of training at the elite end.

I'm not sure whether Tofik Bakhrarov had any of the above qualities in any degree or whether he did orienteering. I am sure he has a statue - and Sir Geoff Hurst unveiled it.

Alistair Smith is the designated Learning Consultant to The FA. This summer he worked with referee tutors on their residential training programme. In this article he examines an alternative view on what great referees might look like. These views are his own - he would like to point out that he has never been a referee!