

DON'T KILL THE GOOSE THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGGS

Nelly Viennot is a high-class French referee's assistant who has been unreservedly accepted into the rather 'macho' world of refereeing on human and sporting merit. In the same way as those who have succeeded at the highest level of men's national or international competition, her greatest success has without doubt been the fact that she officiates without anybody attaching any importance to the fact that she is a woman.

However, as a famous French film revealed to the angelic face of an unbelieving world, Father Christmas may be a wretch in the form of a firecracker cowardly thrown from a stand two days before the great Christian festival. With her eardrum injured, this determined and tough slip of a woman staggered before collapsing to the ground. She was carried off on a stretcher and regained consciousness (but not her hearing) in the changing rooms while the referee quite rightly decided to stop the match, and her family, including her two young daughters, were trembling with worry. But what is one referee on the balance sheet of the football business?

by Michel Vautrot*



Voices quickly criticized the fact that she had not been replaced by the sec-

ond referee in the purest traditions of the circus ("the show must go on despite the accidental death of the artiste"). Others stupidly thought that, if it had been a tougher man, the firecracker would have had the same effect as salt fired at a rhinoceros ... and that it wasn't right to punish the players for the idiotic and irresponsible actions of a spectator!

Revolted boorishness which inspired the cutting (and widely seen) cartoon showing a man sweeping the 'remains' of our heroine away from the edge of the pitch so that the game could continue in the greater interests



The man in black.

of the competition. Has our elite sport become so ill on the vast sums of money invested in it that it has so tragically lost sight of where it came from and its sense of reality? We still need international legislation to provide more detailed codification of this type of incident which may have serious consequences for the physical well-being of those in charge, not to mention the exemplary nature expected from above. When global laws leave room for interpretation due to their rather vague wording (Law V: *"The referee may temporarily or permanently stop the match due to interference from external events, whatever they may be"*), when certain federations are more directive than others in the event of aggressive acts towards their officials (match stopped), and when others only require it if the victim of the aggression fails to recover fully, one may rightly wonder about the action that would be taken in the final phases of continental or world competitions when the stakes are enormously high.

Two factors (financial and media-related), two measures? What a thought! Would, paradoxically, the life of a referee (or a player) be more precious for a national match than for a World Cup final? There again, asking the question in a falsely innocent way means that we already know the answer being careful not to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

While human nature is such that it is always encouraging us to make changes, objective analysis leads us - in many areas, including clothing - to the conclusion that there is often good reason to preserve that which has

been put in place by the good sense and observation of those who have gone before. This attitude applies perfectly to the sporting attire of our referees and although there has been a positive initiative to brighten up the colours they wear, practice has led to reservations given that black was certainly not chosen by accident.

For reasons of marketing, players' and goalkeepers' shirts now come in any number of colours and those of referees are often two-coloured, this being while and despite the fact that there is ever greater confusion on the field of play in distinguishing the man with the whistle. More and more teams are complaining about this (it is not unusual to see an official change his top after a few minutes of the game or at half-time) and if this drift towards 'fashion' continues, we will soon be asking our referees to travel around with boot-fulls of shirts so that they can find one which will be neutral in the multicoloured world of players, substitutes, ball-boys, stewards or other policemen in their respective attire.

There is no doubt about it, being a referee nowadays guarantees that you will see every conceivable colour!

Omnipresent in our daily lives, one might think that if there was ever a place where advertising would not be found it would be on the referee's kit. Imagine a judge handing down his verdict in court with a sponsor's trademark on the white ermine of his robes?

Besides the ethical difficulties that that presents, with the danger of a conflict of interests due to investment by those currently financing football or those who will be financing it in years to come, the neutrality of a judge - in sport or elsewhere - is sacrosanct. With the many assorted badges (FIFA or fair-play badges, federation

emblems or national flags, competition logos, etc.) already making the 'referee' look like a Christmas tree, I cannot believe that football has not (any longer) got the resources to cover the costs and fair remuneration of the guardians of its temple.

You begin by dipping a toe in, but the odds are that your legs and then your whole body are gradually sucked in to quietly concoct a real 'referee sandwich' in the style of a formula one driver or a racing cyclist.

Personally, I regret the fact that the good idea put forward by FIFA President Joseph Blatter (taking 5% of the total resources of the professional leagues) did not find favour, as it does not take a genius to realize that a good match relies on the quality of those in charge.

If there should be a shortage of advertising, we could always make the referee stand at the entrance to the stadium with a bowl next to his whistle and a small notice saying 'according to the generosity and goodwill of the spectators'.

Before matches, as he is then called 'over-paid' for the next 90 minutes.

Who mentioned killing the goose that lays the golden eggs?

*Former international referee. (Article published in the February 2001 issue of *'FIFA Magazine'*.)

Erratum

In the **December 2000-January 2001** edition of the *Olympic Review*, the caption on page 7 should have read 'powerlifter in action instead of 'weightlifter in action'.