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Video assistant referees (VARs) experiment Protocol (Summary)

The International Football Association Board
Münstergasse 9, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland
T: +41 (0)44 245 1886, F: +41 (0)44 245 1887
www.theifab.com

Live experiments with video assistance for clear errors in match-changing situations

“Minimum interference — maximum benefit”

Introduction

The 130th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of The International Football Association Board (The IFAB) in Cardiff on 5 March 2016 approved a two-year period of “live experiments with video assistance for clear errors in match-changing situations” involving a Video Assistant Referee (VAR), who will be a match official, to determine if ‘the implementation of VARs improves the game’.

The aim of the experiment is NOT to achieve 100% accuracy for all decisions as there is no desire to destroy the essential flow and emotions of football which result from the game’s almost non-stop action and the general absence of lengthy stoppages. The philosophy is:

“minimum interference – maximum benefit”

To ensure that the referee (not the VAR) is the key match official, the referee will always make a decision (except a ‘missed’ usually ‘off the ball’ incident), including the decision that no offence has occurred. The referee’s decision can only be changed if the video review shows a clear error i.e. not ‘was the decision correct?’ but:

“was the decision clearly wrong?”

National FAs and competitions are only permitted to take part in experiments (or use VARs) with the permission of The IFAB. Permission will only be granted where The IFAB protocols will be used in full and The IFAB’s referee-VAR education and technical requirements have been fulfilled:

“one protocol – used by all”

Reviewable decisions

Match officials make hundreds of decisions in every match, including decisions that an offence has not occurred. It would be impossible, without completely changing football, to review every decision. Thus, the experiment limits the use of VARs to 4 categories of match-changing decisions/incidents:

- Goals
- Penalty/ no penalty decisions
- Direct red cards (not 2nd yellow cards)
- Mistaken identity

In all these situations, the VAR is only used after the referee has made a decision (including allowing play to continue), or if a serious incident is 'missed' i.e. not seen by the match officials.

Principles

1. Video technology will only be used to correct clear errors and for missed serious incidents in defined match-changing decisions: goal, penalty/no penalty, direct red card and mistaken identity (e.g. the referee cautions/sends off the wrong player).
2. The final decision will always be taken by the referee.
3. Video Assistant Referees (VARs) are match officials - any information the VARs provide to the referee will be treated by the referee in the same way as information received from an assistant referee, additional assistant referee or the fourth official.
4. The referee must always make a decision regardless of the existence of VARs i.e. the referee is not permitted to give 'no decision' and refer the situation to the VAR. If the referee decides not stop play for an alleged offence, the decision (to allow play to continue) can be reviewed.

On rare occasions, when it is unclear whether a penalised cautionable (YC) offence is a sending-off (RC), or who should receive the sanction, the referee may consult the VAR.

5. The original decision given by the referee will not be changed unless the video review clearly shows that the decision was clearly wrong.
6. Only the referee can initiate a review; the VAR (and the other match officials) can only recommend a review to the referee.
7. Whatever the review process, there is no time pressure to review the decision quickly as accuracy is more important than speed.
8. The players and team officials must not surround the referee or attempt to influence if a decision is reviewed, the review process or the final decision. A player who uses the 'review signal' will be cautioned (YC).
9. The referee should, as far as possible, remain 'visible' during the review process to ensure transparency.
10. If play continues after an incident which is then reviewed, any disciplinary action taken/required during the post-incident period is not cancelled, even if the original decision is changed (except a caution/send-off for stopping a promising attack or DOGSO).
11. There is a maximum period before and after an incident that can be reviewed.
12. The VAR protocol, as far as possible, conforms to the principles and philosophy of the Laws of the Game.

Review process

The VAR will watch the game on TV screens in the video operation room (VOR) which may be in/near to the stadium or in a more central location (e.g. match centre). For integrity/transparency/credibility, the VAR, assisted by a replay operator (RO), will have independent access to, and replay control of, all broadcast ‘feeds’ so any review uses the same footage as that which may be seen on television.

The VAR will automatically ‘check’ every situation/decision to see if a potential clear error has been made in a match-changing situation or if a serious incident/offence has been missed; there is thus no need for coaches or players to request a review as if something has been missed it will be seen by the VAR.

If no review is needed then communication with the referee is not necessary – this is a ‘silent check’. If a ‘check’ indicates that an incident should be reviewed, the referee should be informed immediately. In addition, if the referee suspects that a major error may have occurred, or something serious has been missed, a review can be requested.

Only the referee can initiate a review – other match officials (especially the VAR) may recommend a review but only the referee will decide whether or not to have a review and the outcome of that review. The referee may decide that the match officials have clearly seen the incident and therefore no review is needed.

If the referee wants a review when play has not stopped, play should be stopped as soon as it is in a ‘neutral’ area i.e. when neither team has a good attacking possibility.

The referee must clearly indicate that the review process has been initiated by visually showing the outline of a TV screen; a decision can not be changed unless the review signal has been shown. The restart of play must be delayed until the end of the review; referees must prevent the ‘offending’ team/player restarting play to prevent a review.

Once the review is initiated, the referee has the option to:

- make a decision based only on the information received from the VAR or
- review the footage directly before making a final decision (on-field review – OFR)

OFRs will be mainly for ‘subjective’ decisions or to assist match control or to ‘sell’ a decision. An OFR should not be needed for factual decisions such as the position of an offence or player (e.g. offside), point of contact on the body for handball or a foul etc.

The referee can watch footage in normal speed &/or in slow motion but, in general, slow motion replays should only be used for “point of contact” for physical offences and handball; normal speed should be used for the “intensity” of an offence or to decide if a handball was “deliberate”. The other match officials will not review the footage unless asked to do so by the referee.

For red card offences (except DOGSO), only the incident is reviewed. For goals, penalty incidents and DOGSO offences, the referee can review the play as far back as the start of the attacking move which led to the incident and, if relevant, how possession of the ball was gained at the start of that phase of play. The Laws of the Game do not allow restart decisions (corner kicks, throw-ins etc.) to be changed once play has restarted, so they can not be reviewed.

At the end of the review process, the referee will make the final decision and will clearly indicate the outcome of the review, take/change/rescind any disciplinary action (where appropriate) and ensure the correct restart of the game.

Whilst the review process should be completed as efficiently/quickly as possible, accuracy is more important than speed. Players and team officials must not attempt to influence or interfere with the review process. A player who shows the TV sign will be cautioned (YC); anyone entering the referee review area (RRA) will be cautioned (YC) (player/substitute) or dismissed (team official).

A match is not invalidated because of:

- malfunction(s) of the VAR technology (as for goal line technology (GLT))
- wrong decision(s) involving the VAR (as the VAR is a match official)
- a decision not to review an incident or the review of a non-reviewable situation

Referee education

Considerable time and resources will be needed to educate referees and VARs to use the VAR system effectively, especially when under pressure in key or complex match-changing situations. This education will be of fundamental importance to the VAR experiment. The education will aim to develop an efficient review process to:

- achieve a high level of accuracy in determining whether a decision/incident will be reviewed and in the 'final' (post-review) decision
- minimise the time taken for the review, without sacrificing accuracy

Analysing the data

The IFAB has appointed KU Leuven (Belgium), a university with considerable referee/football experience, to gather and analyse the VAR data. Their results will be validated by TU München and Harvard universities.

Decision time-line

The IFAB hopes to make a decision about VARs in 2018, or in 2019 at the latest.

Glossary

A

Assistant Video Assistant Referee (AVAR)* – pronounced A-V-A-R – usually a current or former referee appointed to assist the Video Assistant Referee especially to:

- watch the ‘live’ action when the VAR is undertaking a ‘check’ or a ‘review’
- keep notes of incidents etc.
- communicate the outcome of a review to the broadcasters

Attacking possession phase (APP) – the ‘starting point’ of the reviewable period of play for a goal, penalty incident or DOGSO offence. It is the start of the attacking move which led to the goal, penalty incident or DOGSO offence and, if relevant, how possession of the ball was gained at the start of that phase of play (but not a restart which began the attack)

O

On-field review (OFR) – when the referee decides to view the replay footage in the RRA

* The VAR, AVAR, RO and RA must be neutral in respect to the competing clubs

R

Referee review area (RRA) – ‘visible’ location outside the field of play where the referee can view replay footage

Replay operator (RO)* – person with technical knowledge who assists the VAR in the video operation room (VOR)

Review assistant (RA)* – person who assists the referee in the referee review area (RRA); must be neutral in respect to both competing teams

S

Silent check – when the VAR checks a decision/incident but has no communication with the referee (no clear error identified)

V

Video Assistant Referee (VAR)* – pronounced V-A-R – a current or former referee appointed to assist the referee to correct a clear error in a match-changing situation (or if a serious incident is missed) by communicating information from replay footage

Video operation room (VOR) – the room/area where the VAR, AVAR and RO etc. view the match and have independent access to, and control of, the broadcaster’s video replay footage. It may be in/near to the stadium or in a more central location (e.g. match centre)