

VAR Reaching Consequences? The £9.2 Million Refereeing Decision and Changes to the Laws of the Beautiful Game

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Refereeing decisions are frequently the subject of debate in the world of football; these decisions generate such interest because they can often be interpreted in different ways. This is one factor, which contributes to the game's unpredictability.

A prime example of this occurred last night. During [Manchester United's last 16 Champions League match against PSG](#), the referee, Damir Skovina, awarded a last minute penalty to United for a handball by PSG defender Presnel Kimpembe, following a referral from the video assistant referee ("VAR"). All four of the former players in the BT Sport studio (host Gary Lineker, Rio Ferdinand, Michael Owen and Owen Hargreaves) thought the penalty was incorrectly awarded; however, Peter Walton, a former Premier League referee retained by BT Sport to give his expert opinion on refereeing incidents, was in agreement with Skovina and thought the award of the penalty was correct.

Marcus Rashford stepped up to score the resulting penalty, meaning United won the tie and in doing so became the first team in Champions League history to overcome a 2-0 or greater home first-leg deficit in the knock out stages of the competition. United will now progress to the quarter-final, for which they will receive an additional £9.2 million in prize money.

Following [the AGM of the International Football Association Board \("IFAB"\)](#), which was held in Aberdeen on 2 March 2019, a change to the handball law, together with a number of other law changes, will take effect in June 2019.

The Handball Law

As the events of last night and the subsequent reaction indicate, the handball law is one of the most debated laws of the game and is inconsistently applied. The current law provides for a direct free kick (or penalty if the incident occurs in the penalty area) to be given where a player "deliberately" makes contact with the ball with their hand or arm.

Despite the law requiring a "deliberate" act, we often see free kicks or penalties given where the ball accidentally strikes a hand or arm; this is especially the case where the handball creates or prevents a goal or possible shot on goal.

In last night's game the ball hitting Kimpembe on the arm prevented it heading in the general direction of the goal (although it appeared to be heading towards row Z rather than on target), but Kimpembe's body was turned away from the ball and the contact with his arm did not appear to be a deliberate act.

From next season, the wording of the law will be amended to add a reference to a player's "natural silhouette". Where the ball strikes a player's arm accidentally but their arms are extended beyond their "natural silhouette" then, in the IFAB's view, the body is being made unnaturally bigger and a free kick should be given.



Article By
[Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs](#)
[Squire Patton Boggs \(US\) LLP](#)
[Sports Shorts](#) [Entertainment, Art & Sports](#)
[Global](#)
[European Union](#)
[France](#)
[United Kingdom](#)

Given that it is difficult to argue Kimpembe deliberately handled the ball, last night may have been a preview of the new law in action.

The handball law will also be amended so that goals scored directly off an arm, or where a player gains possession and then scores following a handball, will expressly no longer be allowed, regardless of whether the handball was deliberate or not.

Other Law Changes

Substitutions

Late substitutions to “run down the clock” have become commonplace in football. Currently, players who are substituted in a game are required to leave the pitch via their team’s technical area (i.e. where their team’s bench is located). In tight games especially, it has become routine for a player who knows he is about to be substituted to make his way over to the far side of the pitch, making the distance between himself and the technical area bigger, so that it takes him longer to leave the field.

To try to put an end to this practice, the law will require players leaving the pitch to leave at the nearest goal line or touchline. Whilst it may appear unnatural to begin with to see players leaving the pitch in different areas, this will hopefully bring an end to this time-wasting tactic.

Goal Kicks

Since the emergence of “tiki-taka” football, it has become more common for teams to “play out from the back”. This often involves teams selecting their goalkeeper on their footballing ability as well as their actual goalkeeping ability.

Under the current laws, where a goal kick is taken the ball must leave the penalty area before a player touches it, otherwise, the goal kick is retaken. This law is increasingly being used by players to get themselves out of trouble by stepping into the penalty area and touching the ball after coming under pressure from an opposing player following a short goal kick.

The law requiring the ball to leave the penalty area from a goal kick will be scrapped next season and goal kicks may be passed to players anywhere on the pitch.

Comment

Due to the significant prize money on offer in football competitions in the modern game, referees are coming under greater scrutiny for the decisions that they make. The introduction of VAR will undoubtedly reduce the number of talking points and assist referees in making the correct decision, but the fact remains that, even with VAR, there is an element of subjectivity to the application of certain laws of the game and the scrutiny of referees is likely to continue.

Whether the introduction of the law changes relating to substitutions and goal kicks achieve their desired aim remains to be seen. In the author’s view, the change to the handball law brings the law in line with refereeing practices that are already being applied and therefore will not have a significant impact on the application of the handball law in future matches.

Author: Sam O'Neill

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