Respect for the Men in Black: The Abuse of Match Officials in English Football

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When Arsene Wenger pushed fourth official Anthony Taylor during Arsenal's recent win against Burnley, it was the latest in a long-running series of abuses suffered by match officials in English football. The incident involving the Arsenal manager may not have been quite as egregious as some past offences, such as the infamous push from Paolo Di Canio on referee Paul Alcock in 1998, but respect for match officials, or rather a lack thereof, remains a lingering issue.

The problem of abuse is not limited to the highest echelons of the English game. Referees at the grassroots level recently threatened to strike because of the verbal and physical attacks to which they are subjected with alarming regularity. Indeed the men in black are often the focus of ire for frustrated players and fans or managers looking for someone else to blame. It is against this backdrop that the Football Association plans to re-launch its Respect campaign.

Initially launched in 2008, the Respect campaign aims to tackle inappropriate behaviour and improve the experience of everyone involved in football, especially referees. The current adult club guide to the Respect initiative puts zero-tolerance for assaults on referees high on the FA's list of objectives. Indeed the guide proclaims that “if you physically assault a ref, you will be banned from playing and could face criminal charges”. Alongside the guide, the FA introduced various codes of conduct, aimed at different levels of the game, which sought to give some teeth to the Respect initiative. The codes of conduct set out behaviours which players, coaches and spectators must comply with, as well as sanctions for non-compliance including fines and bans. The Memorandum of Procedures for Field Offences (the “Memorandum”) under the FA Handbook 2016-2017 delineates the levels of fines applicable for failures to comply with the codes at various levels of the game. “Respect sanctions” are automatically applied on a team-wide basis when a certain number of qualifying offences occur. Qualifying offences for these purposes include dissent and dismissals for abusive, offensive or insulting language.

The Memorandum makes separate provision for offences against match officials outside the five highest tiers of the English footballing pyramid. Offences are categorised on a graduated scale from threatening behaviour to assault that results in an injury to an official. The maximum sanctions for an assault on a match official include a ban from all football for 5 years or 10 years where the assault causes serious injury. Understandably such sanctions are not replicated in the professional game, where fines and lengthy suspensions are the more common punishment. The key question in all of this is whether the Respect campaign and the various disciplinary mechanisms are having an appreciable effect on reducing the level of abuse directed at match officials.

A survey found that 54% of grassroots referees felt that the Respect campaign had been a success. In response to the same survey, the FA reported a substantial decline in bookings for dissent since the initiative began. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest that abuse against referees is still rife at the grassroots level, with survey data indicating that 94% of referees experienced verbal abuse while officiating football matches. Equally, incidents such as those between Arsene Wenger and Anthony Taylor do little to assuage ongoing concerns about behaviour in the professional game.

For some referees, the Respect initiative had begun to run out of steam but the impending re-launch provides a renewed focus on the problems match officials face. There has been little evolution in the regulatory framework surrounding the abuse of match officials in recent years but the existing sanctions, if properly enforced, are likely
sufficient to address the issues which permeate all levels of the game. Ultimately, the abuse of match officials is a cultural issue that will only be resolved with the cooperation of the football community at large. The FA should seek to use the tools of education and enforcement in combination to bring about the behavioural change needed to ensure that there is respect for the men in black.

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