

OFFICIATING BIAS

Context:

- The decisions that sport officials make are supposed to be governed by a formal set of rules.
- Decisions should be based on objective evidence and free of any bias or emotion which can pervade a game
- The official is, in the simplest sense, required to make judgements and decisions that are based on what they see in the sporting contest.

But:

- a number of authors contended that many officiating decisions are made due to the social context of the game, or because of psychological and political considerations.

As such, decisions are not based solely on the actions of players (Ansorge, Scheer, Laub, & Howard, 1978; Askins, Carter, & Wood, 1981; Lehman & Reifman, 1988; Rainey et al., 1989a; Wanderer, 1987),

Therefore:

Some decisions can be attributed to officiating incompetence or officiating bias

The Officiating Environment

- Officials do not make decisions in a social vacuum.
- Officials sometimes work in a social environment that can often contain large and vocal crowds, which, it is claimed, can have a direct impact on officials (Lehman & Reifman, 1988; Mitchell, Leonard, & Schmitt, 1982).

Therefore:

- The public nature of officiating work, coupled with the ambiguity of events that officials need to adjudicate, prevents officials from being oblivious to crowd reaction

Some Supporting Research

- research which examined professional soccer in England and Scotland. It showed that the number of 'player expulsions' and 'penalties scored from' increased in a linear trend based on mean crowd size (Nevill, Newell, & Gale, 1996).
- the effect was further illustrated by, who showed that the 'home advantage' in English soccer disappears when crowds do not favour any one team (Pollard 1986)

The Home Advantage

Some background:

- Home teams have won significantly more games in -
soccer (Glamser, 1990; Nevill et al., 1996)
cricket (Sumner & Mobley, 1981)
basketball (Varca, 1980).

Therefore:

the home advantage is seen as a good predictor of game outcome in professional sport (Courneya & Carron, 1992; Dockery, 1997; Snyder & Purdy, 1985) and is ranked alongside 'team quality' in importance for the pursuit of team outcomes, i.e., winning.

Home Advantage and Officials

- In English professional soccer decisions which have a negative impact on the home team are negatively reinforced by the crowd. Thus, honest mistakes are noticed, and the official will be tempted to 'even things out.' (Nevill et al., 1996)
- In general terms, it has been hypothesised that officials make more subjective judgements in favour of the home team (Nevill et al., 1996)
- players are twice as likely to receive an official caution in soccer when playing away from home (Glamsner, 1990).
- In basketball, referees may be intimidated by home audience harassment, and therefore, call less fouls against home teams (Varca, 1980).
- players "tried to get away with more" in home games because they perceived officials were more intimidated by crowds to award more calls to the home team. (Jurkovic, cited in Nevill et al., 1996)
- in Test-match cricket visiting batsmen are more likely to be given out LBW (leg before wicket) in India than in any other Test playing country (Sumner & Mobley, 1981).

It would appear that players are able to sense an 'unnatural' benefit when playing home games, and, consequently, take advantage of this benefit to meet their own ends.

Player Treatment

Additional evidence to support officiating bias has focused on the treatment of 'star' and 'stand out' players.

- 'star players' (those players who had participated in NBA All-Star games) were called for significantly fewer fouls ($p < .05$) at home games, while non-star players were *not* called for significantly fewer fouls when playing at home (Lehman and Reifman 1988)

This research indicated that officials may not apply the same standards to all players, irrespective of where the game is played.

- Comparable officiating bias towards 'star players,' both for and against, has also been reported in:

baseball (Rainey, Larsen, & Stephenson, 1989)

gymnastics (Ansorge et al., 1978; Scheer & Ansorge, 1975; Scheer, Ansorge, & Howard, 1983).

- players who 'stand out' from other players, e.g., players with red hair, a beard, differing skin colour, or exceptionally long hair, may be subjected to less favourable forms of bias.

It was concluded that black players were cautioned more often than white players, particularly in out-of-London away games. (Glamser 1990)

Glamser stated:

No doubt that blacks were playing more aggressively in response to a hostile crowd, but the referees had to be watching them closely as well, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy situation.

Implication: Is this some form of bias/racism?

- referees often connected various fouls with players who possess distinguishing physical characteristics.
- Officials are likely to connect subconsciously such players more readily with fouls that they commit, and therefore the second or third foul is perceived as such.
- For more non-descript players, the second or third foul may be perceived as their first foul only.

Some Counter Perspectives

- officiating bias *per se* is difficult and almost impossible to substantiate.
- other reasons can be offered for discrepancies in match results and player behaviour. These include:

familiarity with the playing surface and arena;

fatigue of the visiting team;

social support for the visiting team;

displaced aggression of the visiting team; and,

intimidation of players from the visiting team (Glamsner, 1990).

- it is easier for players and coaches to externalise problems, i.e., blame the referee, than to look within oneself to the true causes of defeat (Ross, 1997).