VAR: LESSONS FOR FOOTBALL

The author highlighted the workings of VAR, perceived advantages and disadvantages of the systems in football and the adaptations the English Premier League made to the system to make it work in the last issue.

VAR has been at the centre of many controversies since its introduction to the game.

An example of this is during the 2018/2019 Champions League quarter finals where Manchester City fans were enraged by VAR after their Champions League quarter-final second leg with Tottenham. Fernando Llorente scored in the 73rd minute, but on replay, it appeared as though the ball was close to hitting his hand or elbow area before falling into the net; causing the referee to make a 'handball' call. The on-pitch referee reviewed VAR and allowed the goal based on that. For Manchester City to reach the semi-finals, they needed one goal, to make it an even 4-4 score. At stoppage time, Raheem Sterling scored a goal that evened out the score and was surely going to guarantee Man City a spot at the semi-finals. However, VAR technology disallowed the goal as it considered that Aguero was offside when he received the ball at start of play.

Further, the EPL's adaption of VAR causes immense confusion amongst players because its adaptation of VAR technology is different from the one employed in the Champions League and World Cup qualifying matches. The EPL as highlighted previously has a more tolerant approach to physical contact and handballs.

Lessons from other sports

Cricket has for a long time used a lot of technology. Cricket employed the Third Empire who was usually qualified and had access to replays of incidents such as disputed catches and boundaries from which s/he advised the central umpires. S/he mostly asked to judge if a player is runout or not, for which he uses instant video replays and determines the outcome without consulting the other two umpires.

Further, the Dispute Review System(DRS) allows players to challenge decisions made by the umpires on the field and which may be reviewed sand a correct result declared. Teams are usually allowed to challenge up to three failed challenges. HawkEye is also another form of technology used in cricket mostly by TV networks around the world to guarantee the umpire's decisions.

From the above examples, it's prudent to then highlight some lessons that football can borrow from other sports.

VAR has been used in instances where it covers so-called 'major' incidents. However, in cricket, technology is used even for 'minor' incidents such as catches. If at all technology is to be embraced it is the author's position that it should be all encompassing. Further, in cricket, the concept of the 'umpire's call' means that where an incident is deemed too close for technology to intervene then it is left to the 'on-field' umpire. Football could borrow this

approach especially as regards offside calls and handballs. It is notable that cricket fans can listen to the communication between the Third Umpire and the on-filed umpire who explains what the DRS is showing and the suggested decision. Fans have expressed disillusionment and feeling left out with the use of VAR in football; they also pay a lot of money to watch these matches. As such, transparency between VAR and the on—pitch referee would be necessary moving forward as it fosters a sense of inclusion and perhaps value for money. Lastly, all major cricket grounds display the HawkEYe technology used by third umpires to review decisions which makes the spectators and fans feel included in the action.

From rugby, fans are kept informed as well of what is happening through the big screens at the stadiums, officials still make their own judgments despite Television Match Official (TMO) while those who have purchased ref link technology can listen to the referee's conversation with the TMO including television viewers at home. In rugby, the person appointed as TMO is listed as part of the refereeing team unlike in football where it's anonymous. This builds into trust and the fact that their real identity gives fans some sort of comfort and faith.

With tennis, cricket and rugby having adapted technology while evolving over the years, it is clear that technology is here to stay in football. As such, football should borrow best practices while looking to maintain a balance between integrity, fairness and keeping fans engaged. As with every venture, there are teething problems. All stakeholders including fans should support this new normal.

As Jordan Peterson said, 'To master a new technology, you have to play with it.'