

VAR TECHNOLOGY: IS IT REALLY NECESSARY?

In two previous articles, the author explored the role of technology in sport to include the general advantages and disadvantages. The use of technology has been advanced in sport over the years. In football, technology has been introduced through Goal-Line technology, Foam technology and Virtual Assistant Referee (VAR) technology. This article will focus on VAR in this issue.

VAR was championed in early 2010 through the Royal Netherlands Football Association (KNVB). The International Football Association Board (IFAB) in 2015 amended its football laws to allow the VAR systems for extensive testing. VAR was used at the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the English Premier League (EPL) finally adopted it in the 2019/2020 season.

When it is used

VAR is supposed to intercede where there is an obvious error in one of the four areas.

- a. Penalties-VAR can quash a penalty if there is an obvious error in the original decision.
- b. Straight red cards can be penalized using VAR but second yellow cards cannot.
- c. Mistaken identity-Where a wrong player is sent off by the on-field referee, this can be overhauled using VAR.
- d. Goals-VAR is used in close offside goal decisions after a goal has been scored. It is noteworthy that the concept of 'clear and obvious' errors does not apply to offsides. A player is either onside or offside, even if by a few inches.

How it works

When the VAR speaks to the on-field referee through an earpiece, play is paused by the on-field referee as the decision is reviewed. Upon review of the video footage, VAR advises whether or not action will be taken. The on-field referee will draw a rectangle with his arms to replicate a TV a screen to change his original decision if indeed there is a mistake.

In other decisions the on-side referee will need to watch a replay on a screen which is known as an on-pitch review.

Benefits of VAR

Many stakeholders have argued that the introduction of VAR introduces better officiating in matches especially where teams have been denied a rightful loss as a result of poor officiating. Further, increasing stakeholders are accepting VAR as necessary technology as football strives to catch up with other sports such as tennis, cricket and rugby.

Criticisms of VAR

The author will highlight some of the criticisms. These have included:

- a. Lack of transparency-Unlike cricket and rugby, football fans do not have access to the conversation between the VAR and on-field referee.
- b. Delays in reviewing decisions disrupts the flow of the match. Whereas VAR was expected to ensure minimal interference, this has not been achieved as the on-field referee spends time listening to the VAR as well as on the on-pitch screen.
- c. Subjective decisions. Despite the availability and use of VAR, the eventual decision comes down to human interpretation by the on-field referee which may be seen to defeat the entire purpose of VAR.
- d. 'Cheated fans'-Some fans have felt cheated after celebrating a goal which is reviewed. Further, some feel denied the opportunity to engage in banter during and after matches as a result of use of VAR.

In light of the above, the author will highlight a few changes that the EPL has made to VAR to ensure its efficiency. To begin with, on-field referees have been advised to avoid using the on-pitch screen whenever possible to avoid delays in the game. Further, EPL officials will follow a softer interpretation of the *handball rule*; which involves looking at the player's intent. EPL referees will however not disallow any goals in which the ball strikes the hand of an attacking player in the build-up, deliberate or otherwise.

The author has highlighted the workings of VAR, its pros and cons as well as ways in which the EPL has made changes to the technology to ensure its efficiency. In next month's article, the author will discuss some controversies that have arisen in the use of VAR, suggestions on improvements and lessons to learn from other sports that have utilized technology for longer.