

“Right” vs. “Best”

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A recent article in Referee Magazine, written by USSF National Instructor Dan Heldman, introduced the philosophical concepts of “right” vs. “best” with the thought that they could be applied to the refereeing of a soccer match. These two conflicting concepts were what is right is always best and conversely, what is best is always right.



“Right” implies an absolute standard where there is only one permissible result. “Best” implies a standard that is *not* absolute and is variable depending on the situation. If these two concepts are related to decisions made by a soccer official then the “right” approach can be viewed as the literal definition represented by the “Letter of the Law”, and “best” can be considered as the common sense approach representing the “Spirit of the Law”.

At all levels of soccer, new referees are trained to focus on being “right”. Knowledge of the soccer laws and the common sense enforcement of the laws is the primary referee instructional model. Gradually, over time and with experience, referees are encouraged to better understand the differences between what is “right” and/or “best”, and to use this expanded awareness in their decision making at all the various levels of competition (novice, experienced, competitive, recreational, youth or adult).

It is the defined “duty” of the referee to penalize only those violations that matter. At the same time, it is within the referee’s “power” to determine which violations really do matter. This, in effect, authorizes referees to invoke the concept of “best” when they determine it to be the appropriate decision. In all such game situations the referee must first and foremost never ignore the issue of player safety. Fairness must also be taken into consideration, as it is one of the cornerstones of the “Right” vs. “Best” decision making process.

Growth as a referee involves being able to develop the ability to recognize when “right” might not always be “best”. A good referee must know how to and be willing to bend the “Letter of the Law” in order to serve what may be “best” for a given game situation.

When referees observe that a foul or rule infraction has occurred they have the power to either stop the game to deal with the infraction or to ignore it, whichever they determine to be the “best” thing to do in the game situation. Some factors that referees should take into consideration when making such a determination are: reactions of a player(s) to a call/no call; are players affected by the incident or are they playing through it; do they want the call or accept the incident as part of the game; and/or is a call an unnecessary interruption to the play.

Such decisions are affected considerably by the age of the players or their skill level regardless of their age. Typically younger and lesser skilled players want the fouls called. They get upset when fouls are not called and consequently, as such, the concept of “best” may need to be considered on a less frequent basis.

The concept of invoking the “Spirit of the Law” is not limited only to decisions related to fouls. The “best” approach can be used in all aspects of the game

where and when applicable. In a blow-out game for example, the referee may choose to implement a selective bias in making some “best” calls (or no calls) in an effort to keep the score down.

In the past the laws of soccer were rigid and not modified (as they are today for younger players). The adult rules were always in place. As an example, the yielding of ten yards on all free kicks, which is the rule written for adult men, was the rule for all players.

A good referee in youth matches would often accept six yards or so as being “best”, realizing that the “right” distance was not the “best” distance for the age level of game being played. This “best” approach has since been formally recognized and the distance for the youngest age groups has been reduced accordingly. Such decisions have often been the case where a frequently wide-spread implementation of a “best” approach has resulted in an actual change in the Laws of the Game.

The expectations of players, coaches and spectators are engrained in the belief that “right is always best”. They are more than willing to accept the use of the “best” concept when such a decision is in their favor. On the other hand, when a decision is not in their favor, their expectations are that the referee had better be “right” -- period. When the result is not in their favor, they have little or no tolerance for a referee implementing the “best” concept. Referees need to especially appreciate and understand this reaction when they apply their “best” approach.

All of us must recognize that the game of soccer at all levels is not a matter of “black and white” laws. Instead the game is an assortment of “gray” situations that require a blending of what may be “right” with what may be “best” for the given incident and that every incident must be judged solely on its own merits relative to both the Spirit and the Laws of the Game.

