

The Pre-Game

by Sherman Whipple

We've all done it at one time or another. We arrive at the field to do a middle, maybe we are running a little late - need to start the game on time. The assistants are experienced, we **assume** everyone knows their duties, so we check in the teams, do the coin toss, check the nets, and start the match.

Fifteen minutes into the half, there is a scramble in front of the net, the keeper comes up with the ball, the attackers and defenders are all looking at the referee, waiting for a call. Our lead assistant is moving back towards midfield. What happened? Do we allow the keeper to play the ball out? Did the ball pass over the goal line and under the bar before the keeper took possession of it? Is that why the AR moved out? Or, is the AR just positioning himself to cover the second last defender for the keeper's play?

The point is, **we don't know what happened, but something clearly did** and, now, our only choice is to stop play and go over to the assistant to find out what happened. Was it a goal (KO)? Was there an offense in the PA, by who, a defender or attacker (PK or DFK)? Was it a good save (no goal, dropped ball)?

No matter what we do now, the flow of the game has been broken, and worse, the referee crew looks silly. **This could easily have been prevented had we taken a few minutes before the start to conduct a pre-game with our assistants.**

At the professional levels the referee crew will spend an hour or more doing their pre-game; covering every possible situation they might encounter during the match. At the youth and amateur levels, you may only need five minutes for your pre-game, but regardless of the level of play, the pre-game is a procedure every referee must adhere to.

So what do we cover in a pre-game?

Following is a summary of the key points covered in a 5 minute pre-game, contributed by a referee from another state association, with some edits from our SDI. While many of the basic mechanics are covered in the [Guide to Procedures for Referees, Assistants and Fourth Officials](#), this provides a format for the referee to specify those duties and methods of communication he/she expects from the crew.

EYE-CONTACT:

The most important one: **Make eye contact with each other at every stoppage of play** - certainly with the assistant in your end - when the ball goes out of play in their half. Always mention this in your pre-game so everyone is on the same page, and knows what to expect. Get into the habit of giving each other a nod of the head, or a discrete thumbs-up. Then everyone feels more confident - no one is alone out there, and everyone is covering each other.

OFFSIDE:

Give a reminder that is the most important aspect of the job. Stress that **raising the flag indicates offside position AND involvement** - in other words, the AR thinks it should be penalised. Suggest delaying the flag if uncertain. The referee then has the responsibility to take a "second-look" in case of a late flag. After the referee blows for the free-kick, the AR drops flag to a position to indicate section of field. Remind them that if you miss their flag to keep it up until the ball goes out of play or clearly into the possession of the defenders.

GOOD GOAL:

Cover the mechanic for good goal - If a goal appears to have been scored, **PAUSE** - no hurry - no one will be looking at the officials. It is best to get it right with a second or two delay, than hurry and have a serious incident. It is an emotional time: 1) Referee will look to the AR (stay calm); 2) Eye-contact is made; 3) If all is in order, the AR will sprint towards the halfway line; 4) The referee will then point to the center circle and backpedal toward the halfway line (No whistle, please!) to indicate the goal and restart.

You should also cover what to do in situation where the ball goes quickly over goaline for a goal, then back out again. The mechanic is: 1) AR raises flag (ball over goal-line); 2) AR makes eye-contact with ref; 3) Referee blows whistle to stop play then; 4) AR sprints towards halfway. In any case when a goal is scored, all officials observe players for nonsense involving scorers/defenders etc.

"BAD" GOAL:

If the ref disallows, easy. If the AR believes the goal should be disallowed, there are two key mechanics: 1) If the goalscorer was offside, the AR stands with flag signal for an offside infraction - flag straight-up in the air. 2) If any other attacker was offside, or there was some other infringement by an attacker which could nullify the goal, the AR stands at attention with NO FLAG signal. The referee must make the decision. A conference at that time is discouraged (only as a last resort). It is better to work out some subtle indicators ahead of time like a closed fist, a shrug. At any rate the referee must make the final decision.

FREE-KICKS:

How much help is the referee looking for in calling free-kicks? Does that extend into the penalty-area (PK) or not? What does the referee want the AR to do if a foul is called for the attacking team and the ref does not know whether it was outside the penalty-area (free-kick) or inside (PK)? How does AR communicate the correct info to the ref? Then, if it's a free-kick, what position does the ref want the AR to take: Stay with offside, or go to the goal-line? Will the ref always want the same thing, or will he vary depending on position, distance etc? What will his signal be to the AR?

PENALTY-KICK

What does the referee want from the AR? To watch keeper movement? Goal-Line? Nothing?

BEHIND THE BACK STUFF:

What does the ref expect from his ARs regarding stuff that happens that he can't see? The AR must be involved. The players expect one type of game to be called, so consistency is required. For example, if the referee is allowing incidental contact, then the AR should ignore similar contact out of the referee's view. How involved does he want his ARs to get? How does he want the information communicated? How much OR how little information does he want? Does he/she want the AR to inform him or her of misconduct? The referee would then decide if the act merits the issuance of a card.

RECORD/TIME KEEPING:

What does the ref want the AR to keep a record of? Time? Cautions? Subs? Nothing? Even if the referee delegates some duties, the referee is still responsible for making an accurate reporting. Assessors, assignors and league authorities hold the referee accountable.

WAVE-DOWN/EAT THE FLAG:

The ref should say that, from time-to-time, he may have to ask the AR to put the flag down - to "eat it". He should stress that he does not wish to offend the AR, and it may be that the AR has done nothing wrong, but at certain times he may feel the need to allow play to continue, and ignore the flag. He should ask the AR to accept that decision, and to get back to the game without feeling offended. And he should then discuss these incidents at the end of the half so everyone learns the reason he did it - maybe the ref was wrong, but he has to retain the right to "wave down".

Finally, stress that the crew has to function as a team. The keys to successful teamwork are knowledge of the fundamentals, trust in your fellow officials, and communication.