

NYON, SWITZERLAND, AND BERLIN, 15 MARCH 2005

download printable PDF  | [comments](#)

The Last Sane People on Earth



In *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, **Eduardo Galeano** writes of the *árbitro*: "The only one obliged to run the entire game without pause, this interloper . . . breaks his back galloping like a horse. And in return for his pains, the crowd howls for his head."

We have been thinking almost constantly of late about referees. First, a confession: we have yelled at referees. We have sworn at them, even as recently as last weekend. So everything that follows is tinged with hypocrisy.

But the forced retirement of European referee **Anders Frisk**—the subject of death threats, conveyed over his private telephone line in Sweden (see **Nick Harris**, "**Detailed Threats and Breach of Security Forced Frisk to Quit**," *The Independent* [U.K.])—has created in us great disgust. Disgust toward those making the threats, whoever they are, and disgust toward Chelsea manager **José Mourinho** for lacking the responsibility to match his motivational ploys. Mourinho had harshly criticized Frisk after a Champions League match with Barcelona on 23 February and further insinuated that Barcelona manager **Frank Rijkaard** had sought an illegal confab with Frisk at the interval. These accusations were made publicly, in the wider context of ongoing investigations in Germany into alleged match-fixing among referees in domestic football. Mourinho would not have needed to shed much subtlety to say: "The fix was on."

Our disgust transcends the level of individuals and attaches itself to the complicity of media and society in having created the demon "big soccer," the phantasm that appears to delude many into believing that these telecast spectacles actually merit such attention. We have always regarded the football pitch as a stage, illuminated by klieg lights. The events on stage are significant, but carrying menace toward Frisk or the other stage players exhibits a type of dementia—like accosting an actor who plays Hamlet for his indecision.

In this theater of the absurd, increasingly we admire the stolid referees for their small conclave of sanity, for their efficiency and somewhat wooden gaits. They keep note of infringements, hands gripping tiny pencils. They enter and exit the field as one, flags and other accoutrements tucked to the side. One might expect them to look self-conscious or embarrassed, but they carry a certain cachet. The match cannot take place without them. They get to shake everyone's hand, the gilded hands of Beckhams and Raúl's.

The Global Game

world football, women's football, media, culture

www.theglobalgame.com

We are not sure that Frisk fits this impressionistic view, for he looked a glamorous accessory despite his full-time job with Swedish insurance giant **Folksam**. But his life demonstrates heart and commitment. He has six children—concern over which apparently prompted his retirement—and gave of his time last year to participate with UEFA and the International Committee of the Red Cross in a **mission to war-torn Sierra Leone**. He and other well-known referees were asked to show that the rule of law has value by officiating a match and visiting families long separated by civil conflict.

We would be naive to think that football referees do not exert control outweighing that of officials in other sports. As the ongoing corruption case in Germany illustrates, a referee's integrity is all-important. A second German official has now been arrested on a match-fixing allegation, following the notorious confessions of 25-year-old **Robert Hoyzer**, who claims to have fixed several results on goadings of Croatian brothers **Filip, Milan and Ante S**. At the Café King in Berlin's Charlottenburg district, Hoyzer's misdeeds allegedly were purchased for £46,000 and a plasma-screen TV ("**Hoyzer's Whistle-Blowing Echoes across Europe**," *Daily Telegraph*, 11 March).

The timing of the inquiry, said in February to be occupying 33 investigators, has proven inconvenient with the 2006 World Cup finals 15 months away (**Paul Newman**, "**Whistle-Blowers and Fixers: Scandal That Casts a Shadow on the World Cup**," *The Independent* [U.K.], 9 February). For reunified Germany, staging the spectacle proves a time for examining history and plumbing the country's soul, if nations have souls. For example, the Nazi past will be confronted at the **Olympiastadion Berlin**, the venue for the World Cup final. It has been refurbished to include a museum and plaques to memorialize the 1936 Olympics' glorification of Aryanism. One plaque marks Hitler's *Fuehrerloge*, "Fuehrer box" (**Erik Kirschbaum**, "Nazi Ghosts Leave Berlin's Rebuilt Arena," Reuters, 29 June 2004).

The scandal involving referees has recalled the Bundesliga bribery cases of 1971. In that inquiry, judge **Hans Kindermann** determined that 53 players from seven teams had taken money to fix games. The league suffered a large drop in attendance, teams lost their licenses, lives were destroyed. Yet Kindermann himself felt the game had been purged, although by the late 1990s he again had concerns: "Soccer has become a dance around the Golden Calf" ("**1971 Scandal Nearly Ruined German**," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 February). Questions exist over whether sports, with its excesses, should be a talisman for a reconstituted German body politic. *Die Zeit* writes that footballers "are the true heroes in these dark days" (quoted in **Luke Harding**, "The Game's Up," *The Guardian*, 4 February), yet *FAZ* keeps the more than five million German unemployed in full view:

The game has become a lifestyle event, played in new and renovated stadiums, and the league has good reason to hope that the fans will not be distracted by this winter's events. The attempt to use soccer in the service of an image-boosting campaign does carry certain risks given the cast of shady sideshow characters and con men hanging on the edges of the game. As a result, it does little good to paint an excessively positive picture of Germany using the colors of the sport called soccer. (**Roland Zorn**, "**The Wrong Player for the PR Game**," 4 February)

The Global Game

world football, women's football, media, culture

www.theglobalgame.com

We are left grappling with an unknown: the inner life of a referee. A professor of organizational psychology at Lancaster University in the U.K. groups the job with police officers, traffic wardens, teachers and tax inspectors. The jobs are all vital, yet the practitioners are natural targets for criticism (**Terry Kirby**, “**Position Vacant: Applicant Must Have Thick Skin**,” *The Independent* [U.K.], 14 March).

Fortunately, while we can only marvel at the inner steel of those like Frisk or **Pierluigi Collina**, we know of two currently practicing referees who bring their self-doubts and peeves into public view. **Aaron Corman** writes from Portland, Oregon, in *Planet Soccer*: his extended narratives are peppered with accounts of officiating indoor games, including interesting game situations. As a side note, he also maintains a weekly social calendar more complex than what we have managed in the last 15 years. His musings are leading him to a trip around the world, watching soccer and keeping notes on culture. Second there is *RefBlog*, a harder-edged diary by a writer willing to ponder the shortcomings of his fellow man. He writes of his fiancée, for example, taking a **hard shot to the stomach**. When a shoe comes off her foot from force of impact, he is reminded of **Charlie Brown** being undressed by a line drive: “She didn’t get knocked over, her legs didn’t jerk around—it was just like there was a spring on the bottom of her foot that sent the shoe flying.”

He imagines a **series of commercials** to promote a website of his imagination: soccerisnotlife.com. The idea is, by showing mundane examples of people violating the social contract—one man, for example, goes incendiary while accusing a grocery-store cashier of making a one-penny mistake in pricing lettuce—to point out the absurd behavior of players on the pitch, who sometimes take the sport much too seriously.

At the end of the commercial, the following words appear on a black screen: “What if we treated other people like we did referees?”