

Research article

May I curse a referee? Swear words and consequences

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether male and female soccer (football) referees would execute the Laws of the Game despite players' verbal abuse. Law 12 (Fouls and misconduct) instructs the referees as to how they should react when a player, substitute or substituted player expresses a swear word. The player should be issued a red card. Referees ($n = 113$) were presented with 28 swear words and asked how they would respond if this situation occurred in a real game (red card, yellow/blue card [blue cards are used in juvenile games, player leaves field of game for 10 minutes], admonition, no reaction). The selected words were divided into categories (such as pertaining to intelligence or sexual abuse) indicating different degrees of insult. Approximately half of the referees would have responded to players saying swear words in a game by issuing a red card (55.7% red card, 25.2% yellow/blue card, 12.1% admonition, and 7.0% no reaction). The response was independent of the referees' qualification and experience. It was found that the insulting content of a swear word determines the referee's decision. Referees would apply Law 12 only in one half of the cases, depending on the insulting content. The findings are discussed in the context of game management.

Key words: Soccer, referees, Law 12, game management.

Introduction

Referees are responsible for the players' adherence to the Laws of the Game. Players, substitutes, substituted players, and team officials must respect them. In soccer (football), the Laws of the Game are subject to the authority of the International Football Association Board (Fédération International de Football Association, 2009/2010). The latter defines the outlines of the game (e.g., the field of play, the duration of a match) as well as disciplinary sanctions (e.g., yellow or red card). Referees should enforce the laws to the letter and provide flexibility only in well defined situations (e.g., Law 12, Cautionable offences: persistent infringement of the Laws of the Game).

Research on soccer referees has been largely focused on physical aspects (Castagna et al., 2002; Catterall et al., 1993; Di Salvo et al., 2007; Helsen and Bultynck, 2004; Krustup et al., 2002), the offside (Maruenda, 2004; Oudejans et al., 2000; 2005), countable decisions (Helsen and Bultynck, 2004; Plessner et al., 2006a), and stress (Brand, 2002). Referees frequently have to make decisions under challenging circumstances. Research has shown that, when judging fouls, referees may be influenced by crowd noise (Nevill et al., 2002) or by the home-field advantage (Boyko et al., 2007; Garicano et al.,

2005; Sutter and Kocher, 2004).

Executing the Laws of the Game during a match requires evaluation of game situations which means referees have to make judgments on the evidence available (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Plessner and Haar, 2006b). Those heuristics are used in ambiguous situations (Plessner et al., 2006a). Souchon et al. (2009) explored the standard of competition as a heuristic factor in judgment influenced by stereotypes. Souchon and colleagues (2009) analyzed 30 handball matches from two different levels and registered evidence of different sporting and disciplinary judgments. Another heuristic factor is gender (Souchon et al., 2010).

Physical and perceptual-cognitive demands of referees and assistant referees were investigated during the Euro 2000 championship (Helsen and Bultynck, 2004). Helsen and Bultynck found that referees have to make approximately 200 decisions per match. About 137 are observable, such as a corner kick. Decisions (direct free kick) related to Law 12 (Fouls and misconduct) are involved in about 28% of all judgments. Only Law 15 (The throw-in) is applied more frequently (about 31% of all judgments).

Plessner and Betsch (2001) initiated a discussion on referees' decisions and concluded that decisions are influenced unintentionally by previous judgments. In regard to this discussion, Mascarenhas et al. (2002) argued that referees apply game management. This means that referees are generally supposed to apply the Laws of the Game, but during an actual match they have to be sensitive for the flow of the game. This can lead to a situation where the referee is not executing the law the way the rules would have indicated. However, this incorrect decision is appropriate for the game. Brand et al. (2006) supported the approach of game management. They analyzed the impact of the sequential context by showing contact situations from actual games to basketball referees. Those ones, who saw the scenes in order they occurred, assigned more severe consequences than those referees, who viewed the situations as single incidences. Therefore game management implies consistency in referees' decisions. Previous judgments serve as references for subsequent decisions. Unkelbach and Memmert (2008) added the consistency model (Haubensak, 1992) and discussed the calibration process. This lasts for the duration of about 10 scenes at the beginning of a match and sets the referees' internal judgment scale. Unkelbach and Memmert came to the conclusion that game management and calibration are not mutually exclusive phenomena. Game management requires the more automatic

process of calibration. At the base of the discussion about decisions is the question as to whether refereeing is an art or a craft (Plessner and Betsch, 2002).

Additional evidence that referees rather apply game management than sticking to the Laws of the Game comes from Brand and Neß (2004). Brand and Neß questioned basketball, handball, and ice hockey referees about self-perception. Referees regarded themselves as game managers rather than administrators of the Laws of the Game.

If we look into the Laws of the Game, there is no evidence of the term *game management*. It only appears once in the addendum (Interpretation of the laws of the game and guidelines for referees) where it is mentioned in the context of persistent infringement (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2009/2010, p. 117). To sum up, although game management is not part of the Laws of the Game, previous research repeatedly found evidence that referees not only apply the Laws of the Game but also use game management.

To date, verbal abuse in soccer as defined in Law 12 has not been analyzed. There is no study whether referees apply this law as mentioned in the Laws of the Game. The existing published literature (Kaissidis and Anshel, 1993) shows that players' verbal abuse of referees is perceived as one of the most irksome situations in a game. These include words or phrases expressed with the explicit purpose of offending the referees' intelligence. In the present study we investigated referees' judgments under laboratory conditions.

The Laws of the Game instruct the referees as to how they should respond when players, substitutes, substituted players, or team officials use abusive language. According to Law 12, a player, substitute, or substituted player using offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures is to be expelled from the game (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2009/2010, p. 35). The referee shows the red card to the offender, regardless of whether the word or phrase was addressed to an opponent, a team mate, the referee himself, an assistant referee, or any other person.

Law 12 defines the consequence of sanctions and specifies the significance of the cards. The yellow card is a warning issued to a player, substitute or a substituted player while the red card calls for expulsion from the game. Two yellow cards would result in a red one. The blue card is only used in juvenile teams to caution the player, who is then asked to leave the field of play for ten minutes.

According to Law 12, the user of a swear word is to be assigned a red card. In the present study referees were asked to pronounce their judgment about the use of individual swear words in a specific situation. The purpose was to determine whether referees would respond to swear words in accordance with the Laws of the Game. As we are not aware of any questionnaire assessing the insulting content of swear words, we first developed an instrument for the evaluation of swear words (Study 1). In the main study (Study 2) we then tested whether referees are inconsistent in their judgment of swear words in terms of their issuance or non-issuance of a red card.

STUDY 1

Methods

Participants

Thirteen German speaking adults with various living backgrounds and from different parts of Austria participated (46% women; age range 28 to 45 years).

Materials

A self-developed questionnaire by the authors, consisting of 100 swear words, had to be rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all insulting*) to 7 (*highly insulting*). The questionnaire can be obtained from the corresponding author via email. Furthermore, participants had to rate the insulting content of each swear word. Does the swear word concern the person's power of judgment (e.g., blind person), intelligence (e.g., fool), appearance (e.g., fatso), sexual orientation (e.g., bugger), or genitals (e.g., crap)? Finally the swear words were rated as to whether they are used for men, women, or both.

Procedure

Evaluators were recruited through the authors' personal contacts. To avoid order effects, two randomized lists of swear words were made. After written consent had been obtained, the evaluator filled in the questionnaire. All evaluators participated on a voluntary basis and received no remuneration. They were ensured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and were verbally debriefed after they had returned their questionnaires.

Results

Depending on its degree of offensiveness, each swear word was assigned a mean score. The assignment of each swear word to one of the five insulting categories (e.g., intelligence) was determined by using the highest percentage of assignment. For the final questionnaire of the study, we chose 5 to 6 swear words from each type of insulting content according to the mean rating of its offensiveness (highly, moderately, or mildly offensive). In all, 28 swear words were chosen and balanced against the degree of insult and content categories' affiliation.

STUDY 2

Methods

Participants and Procedure

All male soccer referees ($n = 198$) from Vienna were invited by postal mailing. A prepaid envelope was enclosed. To obtain a balanced sample in respect of gender, female soccer referees across Austria ($n = 32$) were also invited to participate. Prior to the main study, referees in Vienna were informed by the board of referees about the forthcoming survey. Female referees across Austria were pre-informed by the Austrian Soccer Association. A reminder was sent out one week after the initial invitation. In all, 113 (response rate: 49.1%; 82.3% men) referees returned the questionnaire ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.3$, $SD = 12.2$; range 17 to 65 years; duration of work as a referee: $M = 10.8$

years, SD = 9.4; range 1 to 44 years). Both male and female referees had a variety of professions and had served as referees for a wide range of competition levels from type 1 (children's leagues) to type 7 (international matches) (M = 3.9, SD = 1.7; median = 4 [sixth division], range = 1 to 7).

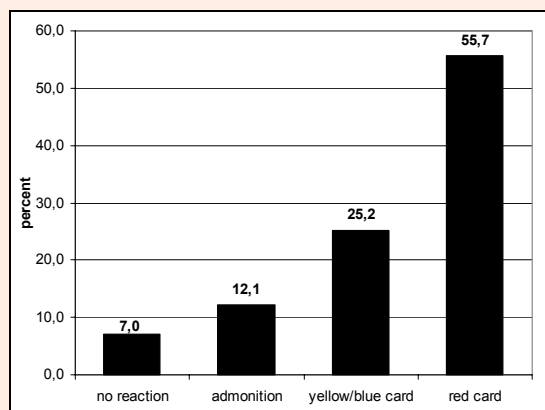


Figure 1. Referees' (n = 113) reactions to swear words (n = 28) in percentages.

Materials

Swear word questionnaire. Referees were asked to read a short account of a common situation worded as follows: "Up to the thirtieth minute, the game was played fair by both teams. The referee did not have to caution anyone or show a yellow or red card. While a goal was being shot, a defending player of the visiting team was hit by the ball on the shoulder. The ball was deflected. You as referee observed this event at close range and decided to continue with the game. You observed that the arm of the defending player was not involved. Specifically, the arm did not move towards the ball. Besides, from your point of view the defender was hit by a player of the home team. When the ball is out of game after this occurs, the captain of the home team comes up to you and says: 'Sir/Madam, it occurred in the penalty area and clearly calls for a penalty kick. The defender's upper arm did move towards the ball.' You explain that the player was hit on the shoulder. Hereupon the team captain says ... (the swear word mentioned below), turns around and walks away." (*For the reader's information, the defender's hand or arm did not move deliberately towards the ball. Law 12 need not to be applied because the defender was hit on the shoulder. The situation occurred in the penalty area. If the defender's hand or arm had moved deliberately towards the ball, Law 12 would result in a direct free kick. Since it happened in the penalty area, the result would have been a*

penalty kick, which would have signified a major scoring opportunity. Thus the referee's decision was in keeping with the Laws of the Game).

The referees had to rate all 28 swear words as to how they would respond to them (red card, yellow/blue card, admonition, not at all).

Results

Analyzing all swear words independent of their offensive nature, it was found that 55.7% of the swear words would have received a red card, although Law 12 would have prescribed a red card in all cases (Figure 1).

This effect was independent of the referee's qualification (i.e., the highest league the referee had served in; Kruskal-Wallis: $\chi^2 = 8.7$, df = 8, p = 0.37) or the duration of his/her having served as a referee (r = 0.12, p = 0.21).

Furthermore, we found that the decision to assign any card was dependent on the insulting content of the swear word (Table 1). Referees would have issued a red card for sexually inclined words or phrases rather than for terms insulting one's appearance (Table 1).

Discussion

According to Law 12, any kind of disregard (including gestures) should be penalized with a red card. This would include any swear word, independent of the severity of the insult. The current study showed that only 55.7% of referees would have chosen the accurate response to a verbal offence. In other words, Law 12 of the Laws of the Game would not have been followed. This effect was independent of the referee's qualification and his/her duration of serving as a referee. The findings are in line with our hypothesis that referees do not apply Law 12 correctly when it comes to swear words.

Referees are inconsistent in their responses to verbal offences and this fact poses a difficulty for players and team officials. Addressing the same word to two referees might elicit different reactions, although the Laws of the Games may be unequivocal in respect of the situation itself. This may cause a player to feel he/she has been treated unjustly. One aspect of the different reactions to swear words is probably the different personal degree of insult, which may well constitute the basis of the decision but is not necessarily incorporated in Law 12.

To evaluate this further, we performed a post-hoc analysis and found that only eleven referees pronounced judgments in accordance with the Laws of the Game, i.e., they chose the red card for all of the pronounced swear words. Two of them scribbled that an offence of that

Table 1. Mean percentage of given cards to swear words depending on their insulting content.

	Insulting content of swear words					Kruskal Wallis χ^2 (df = 4)
	Intelligence	Appearance	Genital area	Sexual orientation	Power of judgment	
No reaction	2.1%	11.5%	4.0%	3.6%	10.6%	8.5 †
Admonition	5.9%	20.4%	5.9%	5.9%	19.3%	11.0 *
Yellow/blue card	31.2%	31.5%	12.1%	14.4%	31.4%	12.0 *
Red card	58.8%	33.8%	80.7%	73.7%	39.9%	12.0 *

† p < 0.10, * p < 0.05.

nature must lead to a red card. In contrast, seven referees wrote that verbal abuse would lead to a red card, but did not issue one in all cases. This suggests that although referees know how to apply Law 12, they do not consistently do so. Two referees added that verbal offences in the soccer field do not influence them in any way.

Should referees now apply the letter of the law or the spirit of the law (Mascarenhas et al., 2006)? What can we learn from the results and the argument about game management? Clearly, we are faced with a dilemma. On one hand, we have the Laws of the Game which referees are supposed to follow to the letter. On the other hand, we have a highly complex and dynamic situation (a soccer match). Referees seem to solve this dilemma by applying game management. They balance their decisions by being sensitive to various influences (e.g., the minute of play). Game management appears to be a necessary prerequisite for applying the written Laws of the Game to specific situations during a match. Numerous studies showed that you get different decisions if you separate a game situation, which should be judged, from the context of the game (e.g., Brand et al., 2006; Nevill et al., 2002). Brand et al. (2006) stated that, in real life, an appropriate decision should be given preference over an officially correct judgment. For the present study this could mean that some referees, who regarded the study as a test whether Law 12 is applied appropriately, marked a red card for every swear word. Other referees indicated the actual situation on the soccer field and reacted therefore differently by not always marking a red card.

The Laws of the Game constitute the foundation of every type of sport. Players should know them and referees should supervise their adherence in a game (such as basketball) or pronounce judgments within the scope of the given parameters (such as figure skating). However, once a referee is in charge of a game, which includes opposing teams and possible contact (e.g., soccer, handball), he/she claims to exercise tolerance. The referee's task is rendered difficult by the fact that every facet of a law cannot be explicitly written (e.g., Law 12). Referees have to control a match, which includes social and psychological interactions (i.e., factors such as group dynamics and leadership). Possibly, a game like soccer requires game managers rather than referees.

Strengths and limitations

The strengths of the study are the large number of participants and the fact that the sample could be balanced in respect of the referees' careers and gender. The final questionnaire was developed on the basis of a first initial study (Study 1). The fact that referees participated in a study addressing the sensitive subject of swear words was commendable.

The weaknesses of the study were that the data were derived from self-disclosure and were not collected in real-life situations. In addition, the study might have highlighted the fusion of the perceived intensity of the insult and the expected reaction as a referee. Furthermore, a person's understanding of the insulting content of swear words might be subject to significant regional differences.

For example, some swear words might be common in eastern parts of Austria but not common in western parts. We were aware of this problem during the development of the questionnaire (Study 1) and therefore only used widely known swear words. However, if some swear words had been unknown to participants in the main study, there would have been a significant quantity of missing data, which was not the case (on average < 5 per swear word).

Further research

The Laws of the Game appear to apply to games for men and women alike. The player's gender may well influence the referee's reaction. Coulomb-Cabagno and colleagues (2005) showed that male referees tended to penalize female players behaving aggressively (such as irregular tackling) more often than male ones. This is in line with the data reported by Souchon and colleagues (2004). For future studies, it would be interesting to view video sequences of situations involving verbal abuse expressed by male and female players, and male and female referees' responses to these.

In general one should pay attention to the context of a decision (situations before and afterwards) because, under laboratory conditions, referees do not have to take subsequent judgments into account (Memmert et al., 2008).

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Key points

- Lack of consistency in referees' response to a verbal offence.
- Referees' qualification as well as the duration of serving as a referee did not influence the effect.
- The insulting content is crucial for a red card.

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