

September 2006

These pregame instructions were originally written in 1999, then were updated in 2002, and updated again in 2005 after International Football Association Board decisions and advisories from FIFA and USSF. Here now is the latest revision to include new instructions from USSF plus "tweaks" based on my experiences over the past few years.

As I stated in the original preamble, adapt these instructions to your own style and temperament. I urge you not to repeat verbatim what you read here. Rather think about the points I make, reflect on how I ask my assistant referees to deal with them, and then create your own pre-game spiel to meet the needs of your games and the experience levels of your assistant referees.

This is particularly important when you're working with very young or very inexperienced ARs. In their entirety these pregame instructions will utterly overwhelm a young AR who's probably still trying to get comfortable switching the flag from hand to hand.

But assuming you're working with ARs who have some reasonable comfort level on the touchline, this should cover just about everything. And so with that introduction, here goes...

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You'll help me most by focusing your attention inside the lines for the entire 90 minutes (or however long). Please don't turn around to see who chases the ball when it goes into touch behind you. Don't watch to see what happens to the ball when it goes behind the goal line. Our game is between the lines, so watch the players and the field at all times.

If you're the A/R on the bench side the only time you should look outside the touchline is when you need to deal with substitutions, or if you have issues with the conduct of those on the team benches. If you can manage these things quickly without becoming distracted, that's great. If not, call me over and I will deal with the problem.

If you're the A/R on the spectator's side your only concern outside the touchline should be if those spectators crowd the line and make it hard for you to run or to see past midfield to the far corner flag. If you can deal with the crowd quickly in this case, that's great. If they won't give you a clear view of the entire touchline don't get into a hassle repeatedly asking them to move back. Call me over and I will deal with it.

Of course both of you should be aware and let me know if spectators migrate behind the goals and create a distraction for the goalkeepers. Otherwise forget everything other than the players.

The players are smart, and if one of them is going to do anything nasty it will probably happen when he thinks we're not watching. If you turn to watch the ball behind you, that's when a player will look, see his chance, and elbow or punch or spit. Then an opponent is lying face down on the field and I look at you with a facial expression asking, "What happened?" If you then look back at me with eyes like a deer caught in headlights, we're in trouble. We can't let that happen, we have to be aware, so watch the "hot" areas of the field at all times.

If I whistle for a free kick close to you and I have to come to the spot of the foul to deal with players or position the wall, do NOT watch me! Nothing is happening where I am. Watch the players behind me, directly across from you in the penalty area. That's where the problems could happen because the players know my attention is away from them, and they will look and see that you're watching me. Then the nasty stuff starts, so watch the field!!

Every time the ball is dead the first thing we must do is make eye contact. If you have something to communicate then try to tell me what's on your mind with hand signals. If it's a more serious matter that requires discussion, then motion me over. If I don't see you and it's really important that we deal with something now, then shout at me. Get my attention!

On each stoppage it's also important that you look across the field to the other AR. Make eye contact. If there is a flag up behind my back (e.g., for substitution) then mirror it. If I don't look at you don't worry. I'm not ignoring you. I'm simply violating my first rule that says we must make eye contact. I'm allowed to violate my own rules! But don't let me get away with that.

If I don't look at you several times then give me a shout, wake me up, and point to your own eyes -- I'll get the message to pay attention.

Offside is yours, but please remember that we have new instructions on when to raise the flag. Please do not raise the flag for a player in an offside position who's doing nothing other than occupying space. If a player is in an offside position but is not participating, let him be. He can set up a barbeque and roast hotdogs for 30 minutes if he wishes, but he's not offside until he becomes involved. You be the judge of when that player has interfered with play or with an opponent, or has gained an advantage as a result of being in an offside position when the ball was played by a teammate. Wait just a second and see what develops.

Let's also be careful not to raise the flag too soon for a player in an offside position who has the ball played into his general area only to have the teammate with the ball run through the defense and collect his own pass. A second or two late and accurate is better than a fast but, ultimately, inaccurate flag.

Now, if you do raise the flag (and it's not a mistake which you immediately correct) then hold it up forever -- until I blow the whistle, or wave it down ("thanks very much"), or if I've gone completely asleep until the defense takes the ball and there is no longer a threat of attack.

Never, never pull the flag down with an attack in progress simply because I did not see it. Stand there forever if you have to -- like the Statue of Liberty. You're not the one who looks foolish -- I am, and that's my problem. The defense and their coaches will certainly let me know that your flag is up. (Boy, will they let me know! :o)

But we cannot allow a goal to be scored if you had the flag up and then brought it down because I did not see it and you decided you had to catch up to the attacking play.

Similarly, if the ball goes into touch or over the goal line and then comes back into the field, raise the flag and stand there forever until I blow the whistle or until the attack breaks down and there is no longer a threat on goal. I'm the one who looks foolish, not you. We cannot allow the ball to go off the field, come back in, and then go into the goal. If you've dropped the flag and I never saw it, and if I then award a goal we'll have big problems. So keep the flag up as long as there's a threat of attack!

If the ball goes into the goal and comes back out, and if I did not realize it and play continues, raise the flag to signal ball out of play and then stand there. Do not drop the flag. A goal is a goal, any my falling asleep does not negate that. As a last resort, shout to get my attention -- this is a game-altering incident and we have to get it right.

If I've turned away from you and headed up field and have not heard your shout, then the AR on the other side of the field should see your flag and should mirror it. ("Hey, dummy. Look behind you!")

The most important thing is that we get it right. My ego is not more important than the game, so get my attention and tell me I'm wrong if I'm wrong.

Now, if the other AR does not see and mirror your flag, and if the game has had some stoppages and restarts, then it's too late at that point to award the goal. All you can do is tell me at half time or full time and I'll have to deal with the consequences of my inattentiveness.

If the ball goes in the goal and in your opinion it's a good goal then follow standard USSF procedures but do NOT dash up the line because if I decide it's not good then you have to run all the way back. Make eye contact! If I agree it's good then trot slowly up the line looking over your right shoulder at the goal line and penalty area to observe for post-goal nastiness (especially fights over the ball in the net). Watch the players!!!

If in your opinion it's not a good goal then stand there, at attention, per USSF instructions (with the flag raised only if the presumed offense was committed by the goal-scorer). I'll look at you, you can motion me over and tell me "#6 clearly impeded the keeper and prevented her from getting to the ball" (or whatever it was). If I agree we'll cancel the goal and restart for the defense. If I disagree we'll go with the goal and I'll keep the defenders away from you. Don't be offended; it's not personal.

Now, if in your opinion it's not a good goal and I fail to make eye contact (instead, I point and run directly to the center circle), then raise the flag behind my back. Again, I hate flags behind my back, but I've violated my own rule that says make eye contact. Standing at attention won't do any good at that point. So you need to get my attention. The other AR must mirror the flag. ("Hey, dummy, look behind you.")

Next, we know that ARs are now instructed to become more involved in managing the game, for example with fouls. Please help me, but please also watch me since I tend to play a lot of advantage if the players have the sophistication to understand it. So early in the game be just a little bit hesitant popping the flag until you get a feel for my style.

However, if you're convinced that I would have called the foul had I seen it then don't hesitate to raise the flag. Be sure to give me direction. And now comes one of your most important duties - making me look good. :o)

Remember that if you're calling a foul I did not see I won't know what you saw. And that's the time the players are sure to ask "What's the call, referee?" I won't know, but I can't let them know that I don't know. And I have to sell the call to those players.

So please, every time you call a foul give me a little hand signal - something very subtle (e.g., shirt pull, handling, push, etc.). Remember, I may not have seen the foul, only your flag, and I have to sell the call to the players! If you can help me avoid the deer-in-the-headlights stare when the players ask me, "What was the call, referee?" I'd be most appreciative. :o)

So those are your two most important duties as AR: First is offside, and second is keeping the referee out of trouble. And come to think of it maybe the order of those should be reversed. :o)

I'm going to ask you to be careful flagging for any fouls in the penalty area that would result in a PK. Now understand that's NOT saying the penalty area is exclusively mine - it's not, and we're a team. But I am supposed to be able to see what's in front of me, and I'll take responsibility for that. I'll also protect you from irate defenders and coaches, so don't worry about them. Just be certain before flagging for PKs. When you are certain then give me the signal and get to the corner flag.

Now there are two exceptions for fouls in the penalty area -- times when you should flag for a PK without any hesitation.

1. If a defender does his best Diego Maradona imitation by sticking his hand up above his head or far from his body and unquestionably, intentionally handles the ball, and if I'm the only person on the planet who did not see it, then raise the flag and give the standard USSF signal for PK. Again, this is not marginal handling -- this is clearly, unquestionably intentional handling when you're convinced I was screened or had a huge mental lapse.
2. If I've turned to run up field and a defender cold-cocks an attacker behind my back then you must raise the flag. Now that flag will be behind my back (and flags behind the CR's back should be avoided whenever possible) but we're talking a game-destroying incident if it's not dealt with promptly. So raise the flag, and the other AR should be observant enough to see it and mirror. ("Hey ref, look behind you. There's a problem significant enough for me to flag and point past you.")

If I whistle for a PK then come around the corner and take your position off the field at the intersection of the goal line and penalty area line. Be a goal judge and watch for keeper movement forward from the goal line. I'll watch for encroachment into the penalty area by the field

players. If the ball rebounds from the keeper or goal do NOT try to rejoin play to judge offside. You'll get caught in no-man's land and you're useless to me.

Stay on the goal line and be a goal judge. I'll watch for offside. Move out to the touchline only when it's safe -- when the play has cleared the penalty area and the ball is going toward the other half of the field.

If the keeper moves forward off the goal line and the kick is not successful then move your left foot into the field so that you are straddling the goal line. That tells me there was goalkeeper movement. In my infinite wisdom (or lack thereof) I may choose to ignore that subtle signal from you. Again, do not be offended; it is not personal.

Now at PK incidents you also have one more opportunity to keep the referee out of trouble. If I whistle for a PK and you're absolutely convinced I was fooled by a dive then do not go to the corner flag. Instead, turn and walk a few steps up field, toward the halfway line. That's your subtle signal to me saying "Hey, ref. You bought that dive? I don't think so!"

When I look you can give me a very subtle hand motion to show dive (but I emphasize VERY subtle).

Now of course these are unauthorized signals, but remember that we have to get it right, and the game is more important than my ego. The defenders will respect the officials a lot more if we get it right even after a short delay than if we force an unfair PK upon them. And if the attackers are honest with themselves they surely will know that their teammate took a dive.

Manage the game as best you can when play is nearby. Handle encroachment on free kicks close to you and on corner kicks. Come into the field if you need to. But keep an eye on the attackers and read the game. They may want to take a quick free kick, and if you're standing next to the wall 10 yards inside the field when they put the ball into play then we all look bad when I have to blow the whistle and hold the restart while you retreat to the touchline. So use common sense here and try to stay at the touchline if you can.

Talk to the players when they're at the corner arc and you just know one player is going to kick the other player's ankles. ("Play the ball guys, not the ankles.") If the player then kicks the ankles you nail him -- raise the flag. Talk to the players -- politely, respectfully, but we're in charge. They are not.

If they complain ("Hey linesman, that was offside") don't be bothered. Players will complain and disagree. They're allowed to disagree and vent a little emotion. That's part of an emotional game. But they're not allowed to dissent and disrespect you. You must decide when disagreement in your direction turns into dissent. When you have had enough, call me over. But don't be overly sensitive.

Of course if they tell you to stick the flag where the sun doesn't shine (or something equally colorful) then call me over. Anytime you call me over it has to be for something that you could not manage yourself. So you must be prepared to tell me, "White #6 spit at blue #12" or whatever. Do NOT call me over to say that green #5 is complaining about offside. I don't care about that and you should not be over-reacting to that sort of stuff.

So listen and hear what needs to be heard and ignore what can be ignored. Stay calm and in control.

Work the same way with the coaches, substitutes, and spectators. They're allowed to disagree as long as they don't get out of line or become disruptive to the game, or interfere with your running on the line. So try to manage things as best you can -- politely but firmly. If you've tried but you cannot deal with elements outside the touchlines then call me over. I WILL TAKE OUT THE TRASH!

All other mechanics are to standard USSF teachings (for corner kicks, throw-ins, goal kicks, substitutions, etc.). Just follow what you were taught and you'll be fine. When you check-in the players be certain that the jersey number on the lineup is the same as the number on the shirt. And please look at the photos on the player passes! Does the player standing in front of you bear

any resemblance to the photo? If not, hold the pass and show it to me. Do not return it to the player or coach.

One last thing. I'm not picky about the exact spot for throw-ins, goal kicks, offside, etc. If the player is close let her play. Show the player where to take the throw-in, and if she's within a few yards let it go. If she goes 15 yards away after you pointed to the proper spot then raise the flag.

I don't care that the ball goes on the exact blade of grass for offside or for free kick restarts, particularly those far from goal. Let them play. I don't care if the ball is placed an inch or two outside the goal area for a goal kick and the nearest opponent is 40 yards away. Who cares? Certainly not the opponents. Please don't raise the flag and motion with your hand to tell me that the ball has to go back a few inches after it's been kicked into play!

If the keeper is punting the ball and reaches a few inches outside the penalty area just before kicking (clearly handling outside the area) don't raise the flag if the nearest opponent is many yards away. Who cares? Let them play. Give a shout "Keeper, watch your lines." Then if the keeper persists we have the option to nail him after we've provided a reasonable warning.

Now, if the keeper comes out and challenges an opponent and handles outside the area then of course you flag it. That handling is unfair. But let's not micro-manage technical offenses that don't matter in the long run. That only causes preventable irritation for the players and coaches and spectators.

Flag what needs to be called. Let inconsequential stuff go. Talk to the players ("Keeper, watch your line when you're punting the ball").

Now, any questions on things I covered, or are there things I did not cover that you'd like to discuss?

OK, let's pluck this turkey. :o)