The Subconsciousness of Referees

By Petre Ivanescu / ROU

For the duration of 60 eventful minutes, referees encompass the power of judgment on the Handball court, the power to make decisions that directly affect players’, coaches’, clubs’, and national teams’ destinies in the blink of an eye. As is the case in all professional sports, it is success and performance alone that can be effectively sold and promoted. Thus, such negative occurrences as unjustly lost games, result not only in human psychological desolation, but also in potentially severe detrimental effects on prize earnings and promotional success.

I firmly believe that the complex job of a referee is one that can only be carried-out with the utmost precision when handball competence and knowledge are mixed with a supreme degree of self-discipline. Often I have wondered how two referees can make identical decisions from two different viewing positions on the field; such coherence is surprisingly often displayed, with the case of contrary opinions only occurring rarely. Surely, a significant portion of this must be down to pure instinct that inevitably comes with experience.

As is widely known, our subconscious has a considerable influence on the conscious decisions that we make. In active competition in particular, in situations of high tension, much depends upon the absolutely vital neutrality and competence of refereeing decisions. Ideally, these decisions are made free of any kind of sympathy, aversion, medial or crowd induced pressure, which can certainly have its effect. Yet unfortunately this is not always the case. Only with this notion in mind can one explain some of the decisions made at the crucial final moments in a match. Typically, the pressure on the referees is affected by the moods of thousands in the crowd as well as frequently vicious criticism voiced by journalists following the matches. This most definitely alters the equilibrium between the conscious and the subconscious of referees.

On top of that, the rules of the game of Handball still show many loopholes, and consequent room for interpretation. Said more poignantly, the reigns are simply not strung tight enough! In my opinion, referees require a specialized educational programme in order to actively learn how to handle the many challenges that arise in high intensity match situations, and to maintain full control over one’s emotions and subconscious on the field.

An additional point of improvement could possibly be to follow Football’s example in employing one chief referee along with two goal line referees. The last two of which could closely follow the rapid action at the goal area line, at which one must remember twelve skilled players are at work. It is here at the goal area line that most fouls are committed due to infraction such as reaching around, holding, pushing, or stepping over the goal area line. At the goal area line in particular the game often turns quite violent, and consequently loses out on rhythm of play and attractiveness.
The Subconsciousness of Referees - The continuation

They are on the Handball court together. For 60 minutes the two of them decide on goals, wins and losses. When the starting whistle blows “friendship” on the court no longer exists. They must now rely solely upon themselves, their decision making ability and their personality. From the sideline they are scrutinized and watched, with coaches and trainers ready to vocally protest at any moment, should they disagree with any decision. On top of that there are the crowds, the many thousands for which it is not uncommon to vent their personal aggression by attacking the referees.

All these above mentioned factors play a part, they influence and stress out those two people on the court, who execute what it says in the rule book. Inner strength and stability, along with experience and personality are the most vital characteristics, that a referee requires in order withstand the “avalanche” of conflict situations that arise.

The degree of mental balance that should be attained can be summarized in one sentence: "never overestimate yourself, but don’t underestimate yourself either!" A deviation from this sentence inevitably leads to failure. In other words, the exact opposite of the desired result.

Often, the crossing of that fine line results in a struggle with one’s own personality, that can even end in a form of self destruction and a negative influencing of others.

Never before has the world-wide criticism of referee performances in professional Handball been as harsh and vocal as it is today. Compared to the rapid development of the actual game of Handball, the rules and regulations are developing comparatively slowly, and therefore they are becoming easy to subjectively exploit.

For at least 25 years, together with Hans Schneider ( Gummersbach ) I have closely analyzed Bundesliga games and our opponents. We wanted to identify such things as stereotypical movements and tactical measures of our opponents. In the process, many situations of false decisions and inexplicable referee behaviour became evident. We then used these insights to actively adapt our style of play.

In the following paragraph I describe one such example:

A few years ago we, Richard Reinholz ( Dormagen ) and myself, saved the VfL Gummersbach from relegation from the Bundesliga. In a game in Kiel against THW, at which our tactics had been to keep the play as tight as possible, the two highly experienced referees penalized us with a 7 meter throw, and a red card for our defensive head, Oliver Plohmann. A potentially crucial decision! I hadn’t seen any kind of foul and “protested my way” which promptly led to a yellow card. One of the referees showed me a movement, which indicated that Oliver Plohmann had supposedly pulled the opposing player down. The game was covered on Television, and later on exactly that particular situation was shown during an interview with me. We all were able to see very clearly that Oliver Plohmann had in fact not even touched the opponent! How could the referee make such an indicative gesture towards me showing the “pulling down”, what had he really seen and what was the basis for his decision?!
It is fact that two people watching one and the same situation, still will have two different perceptions. I have always wondered how two referees can make identical decisions from two different viewing positions on the field; such coherence is surprisingly often displayed, with the case of contrary opinions only occurring rarely.

We know that human behaviour can be categorized into conscious, subconscious, but also preconscious. The preconscious in particular is an interesting phenomenon. It is a storage chamber for information of sorts. In instances in which we must solve a problem, we pass the information that is consciously acquired on to the so-called preconscious. Here, the information is processed into a solution, which is then passed on yet again to the conscious. The direction of processing and the selection of relevant information is given by the so-called “sensor”, which is a filter that has been formed by environmental influences, education and experience.

This sensor is a helpful tool so long as the entire system is truly stable. In the event of typically external potential danger however, these sensors often react poorly and become so rigid that they continue to do simply what was done previously without adapting as they should. Flexibility and a certain degree of dominance over the sensor can be trained, and must be actively worked on particularly in work areas that require resilience against pressure and outside influences. Neurobiologists believe that decisions that allow for more than three options cannot be made “rationally”, but rather that the subconscious emotions play a large role in personal preferences. The brain stores the emotional content of what was experienced in the previously explained preconscious. These then go on to help to make complex decisions, in which positive and negative incentives are judged, while still allowing the person to feel “free”.

This brief introduction into the rather complicated interaction between various levels of consciousness, displays just how intricate the decision-making can be.

But now let’s come back to the sport of Handball. Handball is considered one of the quicker sports, in which the decision for an action is made just as the situation in question ends, as is the case with the whistle blown for a goal or a foul.

Therefore it is invaluable for a referee to possess a truly perfect knowledge and understanding of the rulebook, while always making sure to further develop his own personality. So much so that firstly, he obtains some control over his preconscious and consequently is able to resist being guided subconsciously by previous experiences and the resulting information that was stored- regardless of whether it is to be viewed positively or negatively. Secondly he must then train his ability for anticipation. The last point in particular, is of great importance to professional athletes, as the anticipating of the next move or play by opponents is often a path to victory. Just take the goalkeeper- who in a split second must react in order to reach the ball in the right corner. Often we witness thoroughly opposite movements that prove that anticipation was the root.

If a referee is educated and in understanding of these points, his ability to make adequate decisions is considerably more stable and less prone to questioning. In that context, it goes without saying that honesty and morality are the ultimate requirements.
Games in which the score is likely to become close, are particularly reliant on the last moment neutrality and competence of the referees’ decisions. Sympathy, antipathy, and respect for either of the teams must be ignored along with the behaviour of the crowd.

A referee should have innate ability, as professional athletes should, to train themselves. I myself spent years successfully integrating physical and psychological preparation. This, I feel can certainly also be made use of on referees- as one can test the decision making ability by after an anaerobic exercise, showing them at least twelve tricky scenes ( from European Championships, World Championships, Champions League etc. ) and allowing them to make up their own mind- without informing them of the actual decision that was made in those situations. The sequence of scenes should be showed in a rapid speed of 10 second intervals, in order to simulate the stress situation on the court. Under such pressure, it is easier to evaluate the personal error rate, as well as the harmony amongst the two referees as a pair.

As a player and a coach by means of mental training, I managed over the course of many years to achieve a psychological state, which allowed me to focus only on the court and the task at hand, while completely ignoring all outside influences. I have since realised through conversations with colleagues of mine all around the world, that they too were able to achieve such a state when necessary. I am absolutely certain that this would also be a promising method in further perfecting referee performances.