Review and Analysis of Referee Performance in the 1998 EChs

Selection criteria: The referees appointed to the 1998 EChs had already been on the IHF's elite list or on the list of prospective referees or had been noted for their outstanding performance in the 1997/98 season. Appointments had been made about 3 months before each event, leaving referees ample opportunity for getting prepared.

Mini-course: Mini-courses consist of an educational part, an informational part, and an examination.

The aim of Part 1 is to

- assist referees in adopting and demonstrating "uniform standards" for the guidance of all parties involved - players, officials, spectators, and the media.
- Top referees are expected to be able to "read" the game. Their aim should not be to impose sanctions but to take preventive action.
- According to the rule that "advantage shall have priority but shall end where rules are violated", referees should be able to recognise and tolerate defensive action that is in conformity with the rules, even if it involves body checking. In assessing offences, the same standards must be applied to defence and attack players.
- Referees must realise that their conduct, appearance, courage, self-confidence and style are key factors determining the acceptance of their decisions = display self-confidence but don't give the impression of being arrogant!!

Part 2 requires the referees to take a Rules test and physical performance tests.

Rules test: All of the referees experienced problems in answering questions deviating from the 175 standard questions (IHF Catalogue of Questions), particularly when presented with multiple-choice items; language problems were also highly obvious! Pursuant to an IHF Council resolution adopted in February 1999, both referees must be able to communicate in one of the official languages. Referees not complying with this requirement will receive no further appointments!

Physical fitness tests: In the EChs in Italy (Men's) and in the Netherlands (Women's), participants had to take "shuttle run" tests. The results were, overall, positive. In the majority of referees, the anaerobic threshold was around or above 9.0 km/h, which means that they met the requirements laid down by the IHF PRC for participation in the 1999 WCs. Some, however, would have been sent home on account of their failure to reach the 9.0 km/h standard.

In the Men's Junior ECh (Austria) and the Women's Junior ECh (Slovakia), physical fitness was tested by means of the Cooper run. While in Slovakia, all referees appeared to be in excellent shape, some of the young referees tested in Austria were in poor physical condition and failed to pass the test. Beside the referees, the respective nations also have to be held accountable for this state of affairs.
Analysis of Referee Performance

3.1. Underlying idea/advantage
Correct application of the advantage rule is of special significance in assessing referee performance. It requires, as an essential prerequisite, a knowledge of playing tactics. Following intensive training in this area during recent years, our top referees are now able to anticipate how a player in possession of the ball, or his team, may or might still take advantage of a given situation (passing the ball to a player of the same team standing free, getting ready for a numerical superiority situation, etc.) - see Table 1 A1. A negative finding in this area was that inappropriate application of the advantage rule led to the recognition of too many goals following more than four steps.

ASSESSMENT OF ADVANTAGE SITUATIONS:
ADVANTAGE HAS PRIORITY BUT ENDS AS SOON AS THE ATTACKER, AFTER A VIOLATION OF RULES COMMITTED BY A DEFENDER, COMMITS A VIOLATION HIMSELF (TOO MANY STEPS, ENTERING THE GOAL AREA, ...)!)

In proper one-to-one frontal situations the attacker must be able to rely on the referee's judgement (steps).

3.2. Attacker’s foul
Based on observation results - Table 1 A2, the assessment of attackers' fouls has also seen improvement in recent years. Coaches, however, have complained that "petty offences" were repeatedly left unpunished, including
- forcing a player into the circle
- using elbows
- restraining
- pulling along
- shoulder check
- stumbling away (blocking position)

The unfair practice of provoking fouls must be detected more effectively and punished. "Hollywood-style playacting" including
- falling without contact to the opponent (swallow)
- stretching the arm
- refusing to throw
- "screaming before the contact"

must be assessed equally in attackers and defenders. A better distribution of duties within the team must lead to more effective detection of offences committed by attackers without the ball. This is an area where training deficits are highly visible!

3.3. Progressive punishment
The requirement of "demonstrating uniform standards providing guidance to all the parties involved" was unfortunately not met in all 1998 EChs on account of wide divergences in rule interpretation among different pairs!
Some of the teams observed the instructions/recommendations issued in the mini-courses while others showed no willingness to implement given standards and/or adopt the interpretation of the newly formulated Rule 8 (language problems?).
"Frontal fouls" committed with great tactical skill and interruptions of playing moves were too often subject to progressive punishment. When the attacker’s timing is not right, the referees must have the courage and the judgement not to resort to "petty decisions" = awarding free throws. Using one's arms as "shock absorbers" to receive, move with or hand over an opponent is part of normal defence action. A line must be drawn, however, between legitimate toughness on the one hand and senseless, and frequently brutal, physical assault on the other. The bad practice of hitting the thrower’s neck, face or body just as the ball has left his hand, must be correctly detected and punished with due severity. Intensive training is required for an effective sharing of duties in a team. In this area we unfortunately had to accept justified criticism from all parties involved! - See Table 1 A3.

3.4. Steps
As already mentioned under 3.1., too many goals following walking violations were recognised as a result of misinterpreted advantage. As Table 1 A4 shows, referees find it particularly difficult to interpret steps in women’s matches. Owing to the different length of steps and different "starting speeds", the "stepping rhythm" is not the same in men’s and women's events but, despite the difference in distance covered, four steps are still four steps!!! Excessive differences in interpretation were also found with regard to the assessment and identification of so-called "0-step contact" situations.

Where the implementation of revised rules is concerned, major problems were reported consistently in connection with the assessment of "passive playing". A correct assessment takes into account the playing rhythm followed in mounting attacks and the duration of attacks. The referees must be able to recognise whether players are preparing and executing attacks using group and team tactics, whether their aim is to remain in possession of the ball, or whether they are just "running about without any sense of purpose". Significant factors in such situations may be the current score, numerical inequality, etc.

NEW INSTRUCTION: When free throws are awarded or the game is interrupted for other reasons, the court referee should repeat a warning signal already displayed once before during the same attack "for the guidance" of the attacking team.

General notes

4.1. Protests - neutrality
Inferior referee performance has unfortunately led to some justified protests, which could be rejected only for formal reasons. In some of the matches, referees also exhibited a "bias" in favour of specific teams. These referees have been "withdrawn" and will not be re-appointed to similar EHF events.

4.2. Referee observation by participating nations
Attempts started in Italy and in the Netherlands with "observation and assessment of referee performance" by the nations involved have, overall, been positive. The assessments made by neutral observers (EHF observers) and national observers were almost identical - see Tables 2 + 3.
Unfortunately, however, some of the nations apparently are not guided by the observation principles or make the result (score) dependent on the outcome of the match (win/defeat). As the proceedings in technical meetings are subject to absolute confidentiality and anonymity, these nations unfortunately cannot be named ..... 

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