

Through the Referee's glasses

Monday, 24th November. The ping of my phone going off immediately grabs my attention, in the subdued hope that someone actually wants to talk to me. But instead I get a request. "Hi Callum, would it be possible that u could ref my girls game on Saturday at Horsford Park, 10:30 KO".

Now I'm not one to be picky, in fact I am as laid back as a ruler, but I just don't like text slang. It was cool a few years ago, a few years ago when Match Attack cards were still in fashion. But, a game like that could possibly be classed as the easiest £10 I could ever earn. A calm 80 minutes where I only have to blow the whistle a maximum of 4 times, mainly because of the wrong team taking a throw in. Girls are often a lot calmer and cleaner than men, which is always handy, although sometimes not particularly exciting. But, a game is a game. Money is money. Refing is refing. Although a "please" on the end of the message next time would go a long way.

Friday, 28th November, a day marred by a series of frantic emails trying to organise my second game on Saturday. But finally, it eventually arrives: Anglian Combination Division 6, UEA Reserves vs Corton Seltic. My first Anglian Combination game. Not bad for a guy who only qualified in February.

Saturday, 29th November. 8:30am. I hate the body clock. But the motivation of earning £35 in less than 3 hours of work does manage to drag a 16 year old out of bed, despite his best attempts to play "the floor is made of lava" game. Breakfast. 1 episode of Family Guy. Changed. Gone. But the bus coming late signals the immediate difficulties faced by someone who is currently unable to drive. However, I do manage to get to the pitch in half decent time. The game begins, and unbeknown to me, it would be a boring 0-1 game with about three chances, two of which ended when a player missed the ball and fell flat on their arse. Presumably that is as painful as me trying to hold in my laughter and just passing it off with a customary "unlucky good effort". In fact this game was comparatively feisty (by that I mean, one player pushed another off the ball). A quick "I will happily book you, it makes no difference to me, keep your hands off her next time and we will get along just fine" quickly dispels this incident, which, in the context of this game is like the London riots.

Final whistle. Praise the lord. Get in the car. Get home. Get changed (suit and tie for adult games, it's all very fancy). Devour a packet of chicken McCoy's. Out the door, and with renewed optimism thanks to the dream of a hopefully more interesting game (although they can be just a boring as the one I had in the morning), I arrive at the UEA pitches.

Get changed. Get out. Find which pitch I am actually supposed to be on with about 10 minutes left before the start of the game. Shake hands. Toss a coin. Tell them to keep their gobs shut because when I have made a decision I can't change it anyway. Blow the whistle. Go.

The UEA score within about five minutes. As a referee, my opinions on football have become a lot more neutral and unbiased, and I know what a good goal is and what a good goal isn't. The goal the UEA scored wasn't bad, but it was just pure pace. A clear advertisement of the benefits of youthful young adults compared to a group of mostly out-of-shape middle aged men who are probably playing the game simply to assert their dominance over 'vulnerable, weak, and cheating' young refs like me and to escape their moody wives and their annoying mothers-in-law. If not that, then simply so they can say to people that they play football, and can feel satisfied that at least they are trying to burn off the already irremovable beer bellies which they started nurturing when they were 28.

No complaints though. Good. Not that I can't deal with it, in fact I enjoy dishing out cards (you feel so powerful it's unreal). But Corton hit back... two in about 10 minutes, the first just some very shoddy defending from the UEA, an unmistakable sign of some younger, naïve guys who think that the other team will be a pushover because they are older. One quick winger doing some legwork, cross, bang, goal. Simple *meerkat noise*. Then a booking (as I run over to the player guilty of kicking the ball away, I am secretly jumping for joy inside). Dan Corner, C4 (Delaying the restart of play), yellow card. Then Corton just score a very good individual goal, smacking it from about 25 yards. A couple more bookings to follow, one for C4 again, the other for C1 (Unsporting Behaviour), as the Corton captain decides to deliberately tangle legs with Corner, who has very cleverly been winding the Corton captain up all game. James Fairweather goes into the book, my third yellow in about 25 minutes.

Two more yellow cards for Corton accompany another goal; a very scrappy UEA corner that wasn't cleared which somehow finds its way into the net. This therefore prompts the traditional post-goal goalkeeper anger routine, which simply involves a very angry man shouting as loud as he can and making funny gestures at every single player who failed to stick his foot in, with these gestures showing much more flexibility from the goalkeeper compared to when he was trying to save the ball. Refereeing does have its laughs too. Although five yellow cards (in a single half) beats my all-time record for yellow cards in a whole game, which stood at four.

The Corton captain then starts moaning about me being 'inconsistent', when the UEA don't really do much wrong in the second half. I do ask myself sometimes, why do I do it? My philosophy has always been if I make a decision, I will piss off at least 11 people. That's fine, that's normal, that's just part of football. But to be fair, a 16 year old boy, against 22 fully grown men (or women)... Not the greatest odds are they? If I don't make the "right" decision, one team will shout, if I do make the "right" decision, the other team will shout. How can I win?

Two more yellows, and me having to shout very loudly at a player that "I don't give a damn" whether his opponent supposedly left his foot in, which he didn't, marks a comparatively bland and scrappy second half. But, it has a nice aftertaste. With three minutes left, a quick counter attack leaves Corton 2-on-1 against the UEA keeper, and four seconds later the Corton number 9 reels away with delight and a loud cheer, suggesting that the after-match will be a much less depressing affair.

The noise of the final whistle pierces the little thought bubble that I am engrossed in for the last couple of seconds, mostly thinking about food. Shame that it ended really, I enjoyed that match. Seven bookings, five goals. Very entertaining. My christening into the Anglian Combination went

very well as far as I was concerned, but two games in the space of five hours do take their toll. I was knackered. Ah well, that's not a bad thing. Shake some more hands; get my money (£26 for an hour and a half of work... Try and find those wages in a shop), take the occasional compliment, and then get in the car for the drive home (whilst at the same time trying to figure out which compliments were sarcastic).

Refing shows you proper football: rain, dissent, awful excuses for a 'pitch', aggressive middle age men who are much larger than you are, and a nickname from every team, which varies depending on which swear word they decide to use to describe you best. However, it gives you good money, in less time than most other teenagers earn the same amount. Your fitness improves no end, you grow the skin of a rhinoceros and you meet good people.

And, at the request of every person you referee, you will get a free pair of glasses.