

To all national football associations,
and confederations

Circular no. 29

New trials approved

- Participant behaviour
- Time-wasting by goalkeepers
- Referee announcement after
VAR 'review' or lengthy VAR
'check'

Zurich, 22 March 2024
SEC/2024-C429/bru

Dear Sir or Madam,

At its Annual Business Meeting (ABM) on 28 November 2023, following extensive consultations with key football stakeholders from across all regions and levels of the game, The IFAB Board of Directors approved a number of trials with a view to improving participant behaviour on and off the field of play.

These measures, which were confirmed at the 138th Annual General Meeting of The IFAB held on 2 March 2024, are expected to have a positive impact on the game but may need to be fine-tuned during the respective trials to ensure that they address the relevant issues in the most effective and appropriate ways. It was agreed that the approved trials will be available only to competitions that do not involve teams from the top two domestic levels or senior 'A' international teams. This will prevent scenarios in which teams have to play under different Laws in different competitions.

Once the initial trial phase has concluded and the results have been analysed, The IFAB will decide whether the trial protocols need refining and whether the trial can be extended to top competitions, including international competitions.

In addition to the new trials, the members agreed to extend the ongoing video assistant referee (VAR) decision communication trial, in which the referee announces and explains the final decision after a VAR 'review' or lengthy VAR 'check' (see item II).

It was also agreed to study the current use of temporary dismissals (sin bins) in grassroots and youth football to determine whether any further amendments to the guidelines are needed and whether temporary dismissals could be extended to higher levels.

I. Participant behaviour trials

It has long been evident that poor participant behaviour negatively impacts the game in many ways, especially by hindering the recruitment and retention of referees and diminishing the attractiveness of football to players, coaches, administrators, spectators, broadcasters and sponsors, amongst others.

The IFAB therefore undertook wide-ranging research to identify possible ways to effect change and take action during and after matches (through the Laws of the Game, education and disciplinary measures, inter alia) to make the game safer, more enjoyable and more attractive.

On-field measures are largely covered by the Laws, while post-match action is the responsibility of the bodies organising and/or approving competitions (local, regional and national FAs, the confederations and FIFA). Only a holistic approach involving all parts and levels of the game can bring about clear and lasting positive change.

We believe that action is urgently needed to deal with unacceptable behaviour in the game, reverse the growing shortage of referees and reduce the risk of young people not seeing football as part of their future, be it as participants or spectators.

As part of The IFAB's research, we sought observations and suggestions from stakeholders at different levels of the game around the world. The feedback unanimously recommended and

supported the view that The IFAB should take immediate steps to combat the concerning trend of poor participant behaviour.

While this is a challenging task, The IFAB believes it has a clear responsibility to introduce measures, through the Laws of the Game, that could potentially be implemented at all levels.

The ABM approved two trials to improve participant behaviour (see below) and one to combat time-wasting and tempo disruption by goalkeepers. The protocols for each trial are enclosed and can also be found online at www.theifab.com.

Competitions interested in participating in the trials must apply, with the approval of their national FA, to The IFAB for permission to do so.

A summary of each of these trials is outlined below.

1. Only the captain can approach the referee

Match officials are regularly subjected to players running at, surrounding and/or mobbing them. This behaviour shows a lack of respect for the referee, harms the image of the game and can be intimidating and upsetting.

In this trial, only the captain (wearing an identifying armband) can enter an 'invisible' zone within 4 m of the referee once the (new) signal has been given. Any other player who approaches the referee within this distance risks being sanctioned.

2. Cooling-off periods

Referees have the authority to stop, suspend or abandon a match because of undue outside influence, e.g. spectator misbehaviour. However, the behaviour of the players and team officials can lead to significant confrontations which can threaten the safety of the players and the match officials.

In such situations, the game may benefit from play being officially suspended to allow tempers and emotions to settle down. This trial will empower the referee to initiate an official cooling-off period (with a new signal), which may be helpful in preventing further confrontations and the need for a match to be abandoned. The use of cooling-off periods will focus responsibility on the captains and coaches to encourage their team's players and officials to behave responsibly.

3. Goalkeeper holding the ball for too long

Goalkeepers holding the ball for too long is considered by many to be a means of unfair time-wasting and tempo disruption, which causes frustration as the opposing team has no chance of regaining possession of the ball.

A goalkeeper controlling the ball with their hands for more than six seconds is currently punishable by an indirect free kick (IDFK). However, this is rarely enforced, because IDFKs in the penalty area are very difficult to manage and many consider them too strong a punishment, as they give the opposing team, who did not have possession of the ball, a good chance of scoring.

This trial will:

- increase the time for which goalkeepers can hold the ball to eight seconds; and
- punish offences with a more appropriate restart, namely a corner kick **or** a throw-in (to be taken in line with the penalty mark); competitions must choose one of these restarts for all matches.

As in futsal and beach soccer, the referee will use a raised hand to visually count down the last five seconds.

The IFAB strongly believes that each of the above trials could make a significant contribution to improving the game.

In addition to these trials, The IFAB will continue to explore other possibilities and strategies to combat participant misbehaviour.

II. Referee announcement after VAR 'review' or lengthy VAR 'check'

At its 137th Annual General Meeting in 2023, The IFAB gave FIFA permission to conduct a trial in which, following a VAR 'review' or lengthy VAR 'check', the referee publicly announces and explains the final decision to the spectators in the stadium and the television audience to provide greater clarity in the decision-making process.

Following the successful use of such announcements in FIFA competitions in 2023, the trial is now being extended to other competitions that would like to take part. Participation will require permission from The IFAB and a commitment to following the refereeing and technology guidelines produced by FIFA.

For further information and/or to apply to take part in any of the above-mentioned trials, please contact trials@theifab.com. Please note that competition organisers must apply through, and with the support of, their national FA or confederation (whichever is appropriate).

The IFAB greatly appreciates the support of the football world in ensuring that the Laws of the Game continue to evolve to make football, from grassroots to international level, fairer, more accessible and more enjoyable. These trials represent a significant stage in this evolution.

Thank you for your attention. Please contact us if you have any questions or enquiries.

Yours faithfully,

The IFAB



Lukas Brud, Secretary

Cc: FIFA

Encl.: as mentioned

Trial information

Only the captain can approach the referee

- Protocol
- Permission, organisation and feedback

Version 1, March 2024

Background

Law 5 – The Referee, 2. Decisions of the referee states that:

‘Decisions will be made to the best of the referee’s ability according to the Laws of the Game and the “spirit of the game” and will be based on the opinion of the referee, who has the discretion to take appropriate action within the framework of the Laws of the Game. The decisions of the referee regarding facts connected with play, including whether or not a goal is scored and the result of the match, are final. The decisions of the referee, and all other match officials, must always be respected.’

Despite the expectations underpinning Law 5, decisions by referees and other match officials are regularly subjected to verbal and/or physical dissent and sometimes result in players running at the referee and surrounding or mobbing them. This behaviour shows a lack of respect for the referee, harms the image of the game and can be intimidating and upsetting. It is a common reason given by match officials for resigning. Action is needed to reduce such behaviour and to protect referees.

Communication between the referee and players is important, and where a player oversteps acceptable levels of verbal communication, the referee already has the power to caution (YC) or send off (RC) the offender.

The emphasis of this protocol is on stopping players physically approaching the referee, as this can be very intimidating, especially when a number of players are involved and get very close to and/or surround the referee. This intimidation may be prevented by creating a secure and calm zone around the referee which can only be entered by each team’s captain.

Creating a captain-only zone will focus responsibility on the captain to encourage their team-mates to behave appropriately. The captain will be able to approach the referee but must take responsibility for helping ensure that their team-mates respect the captain-only zone.

The protocol outlined below will be trialled with the aim of protecting referees and the game’s image, whilst also assigning greater responsibility to the captain.

Protocol

The following procedure will apply:

- The referee can initiate the ‘only the captain’ protocol at any stage, but it is most likely to be used following major decisions and to prevent major confrontations
- The referee will blow the whistle and initiate the ‘only the captain’ protocol by using the following new signal:

- Raising both arms above their head and crossing them at the wrists
- Uncrossing their arms and moving them in front of their body with their palms open in a forward pushing motion to indicate that the players must not approach



- Where appropriate, the referee may move away from the players to create the captain-only zone
- The captain-only zone extends for 4 m (4.5 yds) around the referee
- No player is permitted to enter the captain-only zone except each team's captain, who should wear an identifying armband
- The captain has a degree of responsibility for encouraging team-mates to respect the captain-only zone and remain at least 4 m (4.5 yds) away from the referee
- If one player other than the captain enters the captain-only zone, the offender should be cautioned (YC) for dissent by action
- If more than one player from a team enters the captain-only zone, at least one player must be cautioned (YC) – this will usually be the first unauthorised player to enter the captain-only zone or the player whose approach is most aggressive
- Any incident in which more than one unauthorised player from a team enters the captain-only zone must be reported to the appropriate authorities after the match*
- The captain must approach and interact with the referee in a respectful manner; failure to do so may result in disciplinary action
- After interacting with the captain(s), the referee may decide to delay the restart of play to give the captain(s) time to speak with their players to explain a decision, demand proper conduct etc.

**It is strongly recommended that competition organisers have sanctions in place to deal with situations where more than one player from a team enters the captain-only zone.*

Permission, organisation and feedback

This trial is available only to competitions that do not involve teams from the top two domestic levels or senior 'A' international teams.

This protocol must be used in its entirety. No variations are allowed, unless approved in writing by The IFAB.

Competition organisers must apply to The IFAB, through their national FA or confederation (whichever is appropriate), for permission to take part in the trial, indicating which competition(s) will be involved. Other information may be requested by The IFAB.

Permission to take part will usually be given by The IFAB, as long as competition organisers complete the necessary undertakings, which will include a requirement to supply feedback and information/data (whenever requested by The IFAB) to allow the evaluation of the trial.

For further details or to apply to take part in the trial, please contact trials@theifab.com.

Trial information

Cooling-off periods

- Protocol
- Permission, organisation and feedback

Version 1, March 2024

Background

Law 5 gives the referee the authority to stop, suspend or abandon a match because of undue outside influence, e.g. spectator misbehaviour. Sometimes, however, the behaviour of the participants (players and team officials) is such that a significant confrontation occurs which threatens the safety of the players and the match officials.

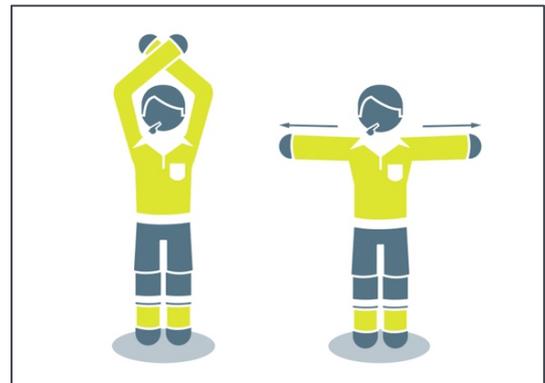
In such situations, the game may benefit from play being officially suspended to allow tempers and emotions to settle down. Empowering the referee to initiate an official cooling-off period may therefore be helpful in preventing further confrontations and the need for the match to be abandoned.

The use of cooling-off periods will focus responsibility on the captains and coaches to encourage their team-mates and team officials to behave appropriately.

Protocol

The following procedure will apply:

- The referee will blow the whistle and initiate a cooling-off period by using the following new signal:
 - Raising both arms above their head and crossing them at the wrists
 - Uncrossing their arms and moving them away from each other at shoulder level in a sideways pushing motion to indicate that the players must go to their respective penalty areas (or another area indicated by the referee for safety reasons)
- Following this signal, all players must move to, and remain within, their own penalty area to prevent negative interactions with spectators and opposing team officials
- A player who does not respect the requirement to remain within their penalty area may be cautioned (YC)
- The two captains, the two coaches and any other appropriate person(s) approved by the referee, e.g. delegate(s), security/safety official(s), will meet the referee and the other match officials in the centre circle, where the referee will explain why play has been suspended and the next steps
- All other team officials, substitutes and substituted players must remain outside the field of play and inside the technical area if there is one, except for one team official who may take drinks to their own players and/or assess or treat any injured players
- The referee will inform the captains and coaches of the likely duration of the cooling-off period, which will be decided by the referee based on the nature and extent of the



confrontation and other factors, e.g. the weather (in cold or wet conditions, a shorter cooling-off period will usually be more appropriate than in warm weather)

- The referee will ask the captains and coaches to speak to their players about the need for proper behaviour and calmness when the game resumes, to avoid injury and/or the match being abandoned
- When the referee judges that play can resume, the captains will be called back to the centre circle and informed by the referee as to when play will restart – a short warm-up period may be deemed appropriate to help prevent injury
- A maximum of two cooling-off periods are allowed in any given match
- The match will be abandoned if, at any time after two cooling-off periods have been called, the referee deems that the conditions are not conducive to continuing the match
- If deemed necessary, the referee may abandon a match without there being any cooling-off period or during/after one cooling-off period
- The referee will include details of any cooling-off period(s) in the post-match report

Suspension for outside interference (non-participant behaviour)

- If the referee decides to suspend a match because of outside interference, the first part of the new signal outlined above may be used to indicate that the match is suspended, i.e. by raising both arms above their head and crossing them at the wrists
- The referee should then indicate where the players should go – for safety reasons, this may be the changing rooms or tunnel area and not the penalty areas

Permission, organisation and feedback

This trial is available only to competitions that do not involve teams from the top two domestic levels or senior 'A' international teams.

This protocol must be used in its entirety. No variations are allowed, unless approved in writing by The IFAB.

Competition organisers must apply to The IFAB, through their national FA or confederation (whichever is appropriate), for permission to take part in the trial, indicating which competition(s) will be involved. Other information may be requested by The IFAB.

Permission to take part will usually be given by The IFAB, as long as competition organisers complete the necessary undertakings, which will include a requirement to supply feedback and information/data (whenever requested by The IFAB) to allow the evaluation of the trial.

For further details or to apply to take part in the trial, please contact trials@theifab.com.

Trial information

Goalkeeper holding the ball for too long: increased limit of eight seconds and alternative restarts for offences

- Protocol
- Permission, organisation and feedback

Version 1, March 2024

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Background

Law 12 allows a goalkeeper to control the ball with their hand(s) for no more than six seconds before releasing it into play. As well as wasting time, a goalkeeper holding the ball for too long is an unfair tactic because the opposing team has no possibility to regain possession, as the goalkeeper cannot be challenged when in control of the ball with the hand(s). This behaviour often also leads to frustration for spectators.

A goalkeeper controlling the ball with the hand(s) for more than six seconds is punishable by an indirect free kick (IDFK). However, this is rarely enforced by referees, primarily for the following reasons:

- Managing an IDFK in the penalty area is often extremely difficult, especially if it is to be taken from 9.15 m (10 yds) from the goal or closer, when the defenders have to be on the goal line between the goalposts
- Some feel that an IDFK gives the non-offending team too great an advantage, as the chance of scoring is high, whereas they had no possibility of scoring when the offence occurred, as they did not have possession of the ball

Goalkeepers hold the ball for more than six seconds to waste time, delay releasing the ball into play and decrease the risk of their team losing possession. Thus, losing possession when there is an offence is a strong deterrent. Consequently, the systematic enforcement of the prohibition on the goalkeeper holding the ball for too long, coupled with a restart that results in the goalkeeper (and their team) losing possession without giving the opposing team too big a benefit, could be effective in eliminating this offence or reducing its frequency.

Law 12 defines when the six-second limit starts:

A goalkeeper is considered to be in control of the ball with the hand(s) when:

- *the ball is between the hands or between the hand and any surface (e.g. ground, own body) or by touching it with any part of the hands or arms, except if the ball rebounds from the goalkeeper or the goalkeeper has made a save*
- *holding the ball in the outstretched open hand*
- *bouncing it on the ground or throwing it in the air*

In terms of goalkeepers holding onto/releasing the ball, analysis indicates that there are three typical situations:

- the goalkeeper quickly releases the ball into play to start an attack – in these instances, the goalkeeper usually holds the ball for well below six seconds
- the goalkeeper attempts to release the ball into play to start an attack but is unable to do so for a variety of legitimate reasons, e.g. attacking players are not available/in position or other players

(of either team) interfere with the goalkeeper's movement – in these instances, the goalkeeper usually holds the ball for around six to eight seconds

- the goalkeeper decides to waste time, often unnecessarily falling to the ground and staying there before slowly standing up – in these instances, the goalkeeper holds the ball for considerably more than six seconds, sometimes reaching 20 seconds or more

Consequently, to accommodate the second situation, a limit of eight seconds will be trialled, the idea being that this will not penalise those goalkeepers who genuinely want to release the ball into play in a timely manner but, through no fault of their own, are unable to do so.

Protocol

Restarts

Competitions taking part in the trial must opt to use only one of the following restarts for all matches:

- Corner kick
- Throw-in (to be taken in line with the penalty mark)

Procedure

The following procedure will apply:

- The referee will start counting the eight seconds when the goalkeeper has clear control of the ball with the hand(s)
- The referee will use a raised hand to clearly show the countdown from five seconds to zero (as per the four-second count in futsal and beach soccer)
- The corner kick/throw-in resulting from an offence will be taken from the side of the field of play closest to where the goalkeeper was positioned when penalised
- The goalkeeper will be warned for the first offence and cautioned (YC) for any subsequent offence(s)

Permission, organisation and feedback

This trial is available only to competitions that do not involve teams from the top two domestic levels or senior 'A' international teams. This protocol must be used in its entirety. No variations are allowed, unless approved in writing by The IFAB.

Competition organisers must apply to The IFAB, through their national FA or confederation (whichever is appropriate), for permission to take part in the trial, indicating which competition(s) will be involved. Other information may be requested by The IFAB.

Permission to take part will usually be given by The IFAB, as long as competition organisers complete the necessary undertakings, which will include a requirement to supply feedback and information/data (whenever requested by The IFAB) to allow the evaluation of the trial. **For further details or to apply to take part in the trial, please contact trials@thefab.com.**