

Video Assistant Refereeing: Friend or Foe?

Max D'Ercole

On September 30th of this year, discourse erupted in the European Football community. Tottenham Hotspur, a team on the rise after several disappointing seasons, took on Liverpool, in a game that would result in a 2-1 score-line favoring Tottenham.¹ The game was eventful to say the least, with 36 shot attempts and nine yellow cards shared between the two teams.² The real controversy took place in the 34th minute when Mohammed Salah put Luis Diaz through the goal by striking the ball into the back of the net. Diaz however, only spent about one or two seconds enjoying it before turning to see the assistant referee holding up the offside flag.³ Now a few years ago, this would have been the end of the dispute; play would have resumed, and even if the referee had made an error, there was nothing anyone nor anything could do to change it. What if there was some form of technology that could be used to review the play, which would solve the issue, right?

For the unaware, offside is a foul in football⁴ that occurs when a ball is passed to any player in any “offside position.”⁵ The English Football Association (FA) defines the offside position as occurring when “any part of the head, body or feet is in the opponents' half (excluding the halfway line) and any part of the head, body or feet is nearer to the opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second-last opponent.”⁶ In simple terms, if a player is behind the defenders but in front of the goalkeeper and receives the ball, they are offside. Whether or not Diaz was offside was a close call since it was difficult to see if Diaz truly was in an offside position. Because of the difficulty posed by calling offside, a new process in European Football called “Video Assistant Refereeing”, or “VAR” is utilized. Acting similar to plays being reviewed in American football, VAR involves specific eligible plays to be reviewed after the fact by referees observing the game from a separate location via monitors.⁷ When a “clear and obvious error” is detected, they summon the on-field referee to the sideline to review the play themselves and makes the call of whether to give the foul.⁸

While the review happens, footage of the review is displayed on the broadcast.⁹ For situations involving offside calls, a digital line is drawn for both the second-to-last defender, and the allegedly offside attacker.¹⁰ If the attacker is found to be beyond the defender, offside is given.¹¹ This would mean in the situation at hand, since the on-field call was for offside, VAR

¹ ESPN (Sept. 30, 2023), https://www.espn.com/soccer/match/_gameId/671100.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ That's English Football, not American.

⁵ *Law 11: Offside*, THE FA (2023), <https://www.thefa.com/football-rules-governance/lawsandrules/laws/football-11-11/law-11---offside#:~:text=Offside%20position&text=A%20player%20is%20in%20an,and%20the%20second%2Dlast%20oppoient.>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *VAR – Frequently Asked Questions*, PREMIER LEAGUE (Jun. 1, 2020), <https://www.premierleague.com/news/1293321#:~:text=The%20VAR%20is%20constantly%20monitoring,card%20incidents%3B%20and%20mistaken%20identity.>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

would review to see whether Diaz was truly offside. The VAR review began immediately following the offside call for Diaz and displayed the drawing of the lines on both Diaz, as well as the Tottenham defender. The lines are complete and low and behold Diaz is visibly not beyond the defender by a considerable margin.¹² Clean and simple, overturn the on-field call. Right? Much to the fervor of Liverpool fans, unfortunately that wasn't the case. The call stood, and Liverpool went on to, well, collapse. Following the call, two Liverpool players are given red cards, kicking them out of the game.¹³ Even minus two players, Liverpool still held on to a 1-1 score-line. That is until they conceded an own goal in the dying minutes of the game. With the loss coming from a single goal difference, the importance of that offside call was only magnified. Social media was rampant with angry Liverpool fans, and a furious Jürgen Klopp, Liverpool's manager, who went as far as to call for a replay of the entire match.¹⁴ Fans immediately began to question whether VAR, a once-sought-for piece of technology, should be abandoned and stripped away from the sport.

VAR first came into the English Premier League (EPL) during the 2019-2020 season after a growing demand.¹⁵ FIFA, the organization responsible for football across the world, including the FIFA World Cup, first instituted VAR rules the year before during the 2018-2019 season.¹⁶ The usage of the technology is subject to different rules in different leagues, with the EPL possessing guidelines outlining when exactly VAR is to be used.¹⁷ Specifically, VAR may only be used when there are "clear and obvious errors" or "serious missed incidents" that involve four of the following situations "goals; penalty decisions; direct red-card incidents; and mistaken identity."¹⁸ Even though clubs were in favor at the time, many fans immediately began scrutinizing the system, citing a worsened in-stadium experience due to uncertainty whether goals would be given, incorrect decisions, and an overall lack of consistency.¹⁹ Fans were quick to criticize any incorrect decisions, with media often creating top ten lists of the worst VAR errors given in the league.²⁰ The Liverpool-Tottenham match is a particularly outrage inducing

¹² *Referees Darren England and Dan Cook Stood Down Amid Ongoing VAR Controversy*, SKY SPORTS (Oct. 3 2023), <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/12975580/referees-darren-england-and-dan-cook-stood-down-amid-ongoing-var-controversy>.

¹³ ESPN, *supra* note 1.

¹⁴ Dan Quarrell, *Jurgen Klopp Calls for Replay After VAR Mistake in Liverpool's Premier League Defeat to Tottenham*, EURO SPORT (Oct. 10, 2023), https://www.eurosport.com/football/premier-league/2023-2024/should-be-a-replay-jurgen-klopp-reacts-to-obvious-var-mistake-in-tottenham-v-liverpool_sto9823171/story.shtml#:~:text=Jurgen%20Klopp%20has%20said%20the,the%20goal%20overturned%20for%20offside.

¹⁵ James Robson, *VAR Was Supposed to Cut Out Errors. Now the Integrity of the Premier League is in Question*, ABC NEWS (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/wireStory/var-supposed-cut-errors-now-integrity-premier-league-103659823#:~:text=VAR%20was%20introduced%20to%20the,the%20use%20of%20video%20replays>.

¹⁶ *Video Assistant Referee (VAR)*, FIFA, <https://www.fifa.com/technical/football-technology/football-technologies-and-innovations-at-the-fifa-world-cup-2022/video-assistant-referee-var> (last visited Nov. 1, 2023).

¹⁷ Premier League, *supra* note 6.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Paul McInnes, *VAR Given Thumbs Down by Fans for Premier League Study*, THE GUARDIAN (Jun. 2, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/jun/02/var-given-thumbs-down-by-fans-for-premier-league-study>.

²⁰ Dale Johnson, *The VAR Review: The Most Controversial Games of the Premier League Season*, ESPN (Jun. 5 2023), https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37772717/the-var-review-most-controversial-games-premier-league-season; Matt O'Connor-Simpson, *VAR Is Useless! The 10 Worst Decisions Since the Technology Was Introduced to the Premier League - Ranked*, GOAL (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://www.goal.com/en-us/lists/var-worst-decisions-premier-league-ranked/bltc091041f327e8c83>.

situation, particularly once the FA released the audio of the VAR officials reviewing the incident, with one of the officials audibly questioning the call asking “are you happy with this image ... the image that we gave them is onside” before going on to curse expletives when the match begins again.²¹

Regardless of highly publicized incidents in the sport, VAR has been shown to be highly successful. Across the world, following VAR’s first usage in several major leagues, the accuracy of calls improved without increasing the overall penalties given.²² In the EPL itself, the percentage of correct calls given in-game increased from 82% to 91% during the inaugural season of VAR.²³ As VAR technology is tweaked and improved, further statistics show a trend of improvement across numerous metrics. The net number of goals disallowed has decreased to the point of VAR now creating more goals than it disallows, while overall involvement decisions being overturned remain quite similar across the years.²⁴

While outrage will continue to boil every time an incorrect decision results from VAR, any movement to remove the technology is premature to say the least. Particularly when statistics are indicating better and better results from VAR every year, it’s hard not to argue that with further tweaks, the technology’s results will continue to improve.²⁵ Refereeing has and always will be a highly controversial and publicized aspect of English football. Long before VAR, Didier Drogba was practically dragged off the pitch, screaming into the camera how the officiating of his match was, excluding the profanity, a “disgrace.”²⁶ To remove a tool that has statistically improved the accuracy of calls would be an error, especially when the technology is still in its infancy. Though imperfect in its current state, VAR is here to stay, and even at the cost of social media firestorms and fiery manager press conferences, the sport will be better for it.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *VAR Increases Refereeing Accuracy, But Not the Total Penalty Count*, THE ECONOMIST (Jun. 25 2018), <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/06/25/var-increases-refereeing-accuracy-but-not-the-total-penalty-count>.

²³ Mark Critchley, *Premier League Reveals Four Decisions Incorrectly Overturned by VAR*, THE INDEPENDENT (Nov. 23, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/premier-league-var-four-incorrect-decisions-arsenal-man-utd-everton-chelsea-a9214721.html>.

²⁴ Dale Johnson, *How VAR Has Changed the Premier League, From Penalties to Offside and Handball*, ESPN (Jun. 6, 2022), https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/37628835/how-var-changed-premier-league-penalties-offside-handball.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *It's a Disgrace': How Drogba's Barcelona Outburst Anointed Him a Legend Long Before Bayern Heroics*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (Nov. 22, 2018), <https://www.si.com/soccer/2018/11/22/its-disgrace-how-drogbas-barcelona-outburst-anointed-him-legend-long-bayern-heroics>.