

Soft Skills Training for Referees Manual



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1 Introduction

This manual aims to provide a guideline for the development of a specific training for the referees, based on the **transmission of skills and abilities** that are transversal to the figure of the referee within different sports disciplines.

There is a critical element in referee training: **soft skills development**. It is a fundamental part of all refereeing and training programs, and the main goal of this intellectual output is to **design a training module** to be introduced in referee courses of different disciplines and intended for young referees. This training module contributes to provide referees with **competences** that are not strictly related to the game rules, but **soft skills intrinsic to the job** itself and concerning the way in which the referee acts on the field, his/her approach to the players, coaches and public, how to embody the role and fully interpret its spirit.

The Soft Skills Training for Referees have been designed based on the "**4 Insights for the Modern Referee**", which is a Dutch government educational product aimed at promoting good sporting habits "Together towards a safer sport environment". It works on several levels, including the promotion of the figure of the referee as fundamental to create desirable behaviors in the sports field. The educational material related to the 4 Insights is composed of three products:

1. Explanatory Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yXf53BsU0o&t=5s>
2. Explanatory Document (see Annex 1).
3. Web page: https://sportplezier.nl/180821_4-inzichten-arbitrage

This work is structured around four fundamental circumstances that must be worked on by modern referees in their educational and training processes.

1. **Provide structure**, so that all players, coaches and the public have a clear idea that the type of refereeing they are going to see is based on the rules of the sports federations.
2. **Stimulate**, creating a favorable sporting climate in the pitch is fundamental to the refereeing process, thus, reinforcing the appropriate behaviors and fair play of the players during the match can be of great help.
3. **Give personal attention**, as far as possible, each player should have information about the type of game he is doing, and as far as possible without entering into personal considerations but directed exclusively to the task, this attention should be as neutral as possible.
4. **Share Responsibility**, sharing the responsibility with other referees, coaches or captains, can be highly recommended, so that the person who warns may not be the referee himself but another person of authority for the player, this can create a more fluid game and above all reduce the pressure of the referee on the decisions taken.

In the next chapters, this manual provides an explanation about what soft skills are, which ones are the most relevant for refereeing and how to teach them.



2 Soft skills and refereeing

Soft skills are **personal qualities** that influence the ability to function or communicate with others. These skills facilitate **building relationships** with people, **building trust** and **leading teams**. Essentially, they are important to a referee's success during competition, since most **interactions with players** require a certain level of soft skills. Referees use interpersonal skills during competition, and learning them will help them to become better at their job.

Soft skills also help referees to fully utilize their hard skills. Abilities such as conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, time management or working well under pressure are essential during matches, hence referees with soft skills are **efficient managers**.

On the other hand, a **lack of soft skills** can restrict their own ability and even be detrimental to their job opportunities. Therefore, by practicing good leadership, delegation, teamwork and communication skills, referees will be able to produce outcomes that please everyone, having a positive effect on their personal life by enhancing how they communicate with others. In this way, soft skills such as communication can also be useful to create friendship groups and to meet potential partners.

There are several soft skills that could be useful for referees, differentiated between psychological skills, interactional skills and physical skills (Table 1). The most relevant for the performance of a referee and the ones that are addressed in this manual are **coping strategies**, **emotional management** and **verbal and non-verbal communication**.

Table 1

Psychological skills	Interactional skills	Physical skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-efficacy.• Emotional management (dealing with frustration).• Credibility.• Coping strategies• Consistency.• Cognitive flexibility.• Concentration.• Resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Verbal communication (feedforward and feedback).• Non-verbal communication.• Leadership.• Problem solving.• Teamwork.• Time management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positioning in the field.• Warm up knowledge.• Resistance.• Reading the game.

2.1 Coping strategies

This soft skill refers to the ability to **not taking things personally**. When people disrespect you or do not treat you well, it is easy to take their behavior personally, to blame yourself and think you have anything to do with someone else's behavior. Taking things personally is emotionally draining, and an unnecessary, constant reevaluation of your self-esteem.

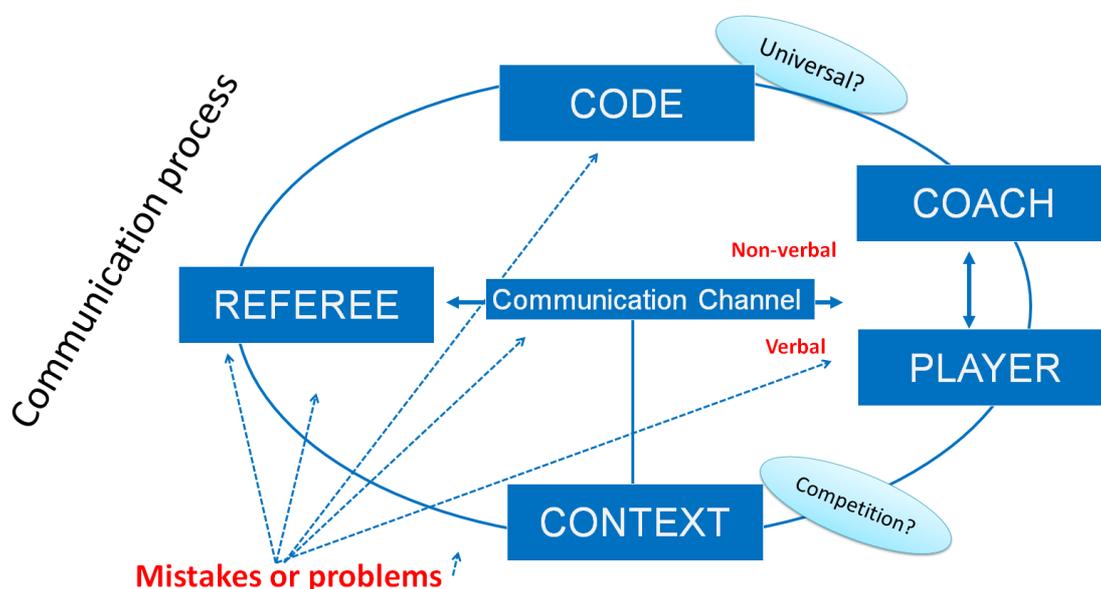
2.2 Emotional management

This soft skill is related to being capable of **dealing with frustration**. Frustration is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage, and it is important to be able to deal with those negative emotions.

2.3 Communication

This soft skill alludes to **effective interpersonal communication**. The communication process (Figure 1) is required for a successful refereeing. Within the communication process, there can be different mistakes or problem (e.g. **noise, language, emotions, or lack of empathy**) that must be taken into account when communicating.

Figure 1



There are two different types of communication: **verbal** and **non-verbal**.

2.3.1 Verbal communication

Verbal communication is about **language**, both written and spoken. In general, verbal communication refers to our use of words. The 40% of the communication of a person comes from verbal communication (15% verbal and 25% para-verbal, which refers to the elements of voice).

2.3.2 Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication refers to any kind of communication that occurs through means other than words, such as **body language, gestures and signals**, and **silence**. A 60% of the total amount of communication in a person comes from non-verbal communication.



3 Development of soft skills in referees

Unlike hard skills, which are learned, soft skills are similar to emotions or insights that allow people to “read” others. These skills are much harder to learn, at least in a traditional learning format. They are also much harder to measure and evaluate.

Within refereeing, soft skills are non-technical skills that are influential during a match. Referees are likely to already have soft skills from their experience, and they can also develop them during their work and by participating in specific soft skills programs.

The key to soft skills acquisition is to practice them in real contexts, since those skills are learned as competencies. Therefore, several **case studies** have been developed in this manual, aiming to help referees to acquire soft skills through **hypothetical real-world scenarios** in which referees must reflect on real situations related to each soft skill.

3.1 Case studies

In this section, different case studies will be shown in order to facilitate the acquisition of the different soft skills previously stated: **coping strategies**, **emotional management** and **verbal and non-verbal communication**. In each case study, different questions and reflections are suggested to enhance soft skills learning.

3.1.1 Coping strategies

3.1.1.1 Charlotte and the aggressive coach

Charlotte is a young ice hockey referee, not by age but by experience (6 months). During her first year of officiating, she was assigned on ¼ finals for U15 (tournament) and she had to deal with a impolite coach. The coach was a parent of one of the players. After she called a penalty against the home team, suddenly the coach appeared on the ice and scream “*retourne faire la vaisselle et du tricot*” (go back to do the dishes and go knitting). It was a big fault to come on the ice, in addition it was a discrimination against her because she was a woman.

She turned to the coach, she stayed calm, and she took few seconds to explore in her mind all possibilities by applying the rules. She approached him slowly with confidence and control. He was very surprised by her body language, which was natural authority. He stopped to yell, and she took the moment to announce to the coach the penalty “it is a game penalty for misconduct”. He tried to argue the decision, but she repeated the decision and showing the way to leave the ice and to go to the stand. She went to the officials’ bench to register the decision and the penalty. She continued the game without thinking about the incident. After the match, she allowed the coach to come in the locker-room to receive apologize.

Questions for solving the case study

For this situation, identify:

- a) What coping strategies has Charlotte employed?
- b) Are the coping strategies she has used adaptive/useful for her work as a referee?
- c) Could she have used other more adaptive/useful strategies, which ones?
- d) Design an exercise that you could work on with Charlotte to train some effective coping strategy in a situation like the one she experienced.

Reflection questions associated with the case study

- a) In what categories do you think these situations are most common?
- b) In what aspect does the training of the referees allow them to face these situations?
- c) What is the relationship between coping strategies and the abandonment of the refereeing activity?

3.1.1.2 Marcela and the decisive mistake

Marcela has just signalled the end of the match she refereed today. On her way to the dressing room, she tries to hold back her tears so as not to break down in front of everyone. It was a very tough match....

The match changed completely when she wrongly called that penalty. She thought she clearly saw the foul and pointed it out, but the reaction of the players and spectators was so overwhelming that only a mistake on her part was possible. She looked to her assistant for support, he signalled her to take a deep breath, but her heart was pounding, and the air seemed unable to reach her lungs, at that very moment, she wished she were anywhere else in the world!

He could no longer go back on the decision, so he moved a few meters away from the athletes and asked for the penalty to be taken; although his legs were trembling and his voice came out with an extremely high-pitched tone, he stuck to his decision. The images of that situation came to her mind repeatedly during the rest of the match, she felt chained to that moment, she tried to control her head and focus on the game, but it was evident that she had been hooked on the mistake she had undoubtedly made.

After the match - already in the locker room - her teammates tried to analyze with her what had happened. They told Marcela that she had made the right decision, that the foul had happened just as she pointed out... but that did not help her, she simply wanted to forget that day, go home and go to bed.



Questions for solving the case study

For this situation, identify:

- a) What coping strategies has Marcela employed?
- b) Are the coping strategies she has used adaptive/useful for her work as an arbitrator?
- c) Could she have used other more adaptive/useful strategies, which ones?
- d) Design an exercise that you could work on with Marcela to train some effective coping strategy in a situation like the one she experienced.

Reflection questions associated with the case study

- a) In what categories do you think these situations are most common?
- b) In what aspect does the training of the referees allow them to face these situations?
- c) What is the relationship between coping strategies and the abandonment of the refereeing activity?

3.1.2 Emotional management

3.1.2.1 *Fighting racism on the tatami*

On that hot summer day, Lawrence, the karate referee, observes the athletes fighting, pair by pair. His job is to watch for their wrong moves, adherence to the rules, balance, and well-being of the athletes during the match. However, at yet another match of the day and given the sweltering heat, it is difficult to keep clear-headed and focused.

The karate sporting event is going to finish, with only a few matches left on the tatami. The pair of karateki formed by Hans and Amir is the last one and they arrange themselves in position: they greet each other according to traditional rules and the match starts.

Since the beginning, Lawrence notices an unusual eagerness in the blows from Hans. Although he does not hurt his opponent, he delivers the moves in a very quick and powerful manner. To an untrained eye, they would look like the blows of an expert young athlete, but the referee, looking better, realizes that they are driven by something else: there is something in those gestures that is not dictated by knowledge of karate and confidence in mastering the moves. Therefore, Lawrence issues an initial warning to Hans: he tells him to control himself more because he could have hit Amir violently.

The fight continues, but Hans shows no sign of abating his fury. Amir gets distracted and does not see Hans's hand, which, powerfully, comes on his side and then the other on his neck. Amir falls to the ground and Hans begins beating him and hurling racist insults at him: "go back to your country, Arab!" he hisses. Lawrence, surprised and appalled, immediately intervenes, expelling Hans. The

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match thus ends: Hans storming away from the tatami and Amir, on the ground, gasping and shaken by the episode that has just occurred.

Lawrence, still in shock, at the end of the match, also bids farewell to his colleagues and retreats to his room. On the drive to the hotel, all he does is think about what happened: his professionalism led him to notice and perceive immediately that there was something different about that match, about those moves, but probably the fatigue and stress accumulated during the day slowed him down. He wonders if he should have suspended the match from the beginning or sent more warnings to Hans or should have done something even more impactful to protect Amir and prevent the occurrence of that unpleasant racist incident. Perhaps he should have leveraged more of his problem-solving skills, quick and critical thinking; he could have put more effort into recognizing the warning signs of racism.

Upon entering the room, Lawrence decides to call Angela, his manager. He confronts her, mainly to understand what the karate regulations provide for such cases. Angela reassures him by telling him that he was right to apply the shishakku rules: he suspended the match and expelled Hans since he did something wrong towards Amir, but he also damaged the image of the karate. Relative to his prompt action, Angela explains to him that his reaction was understandable: in his career, it was the first time that he had witnessed such an incident and advises him to think about it, but not to blame himself so much.

Hanging up the phone, Lawrence continues to think about Hans and Amir, Angela's words and the sense of frustration that inhabits him.... He opens Google and decides that he wants to improve himself: he wants to learn more about racism, how it manifests itself, in what forms, and decides to take a course or read in-depth articles to learn how to deal with similar events should they arise again either in his profession or in his personal life.

Questions for solving the case study

For this situation, identify:

- a) What emotional intelligence strategies has Lawrence employed?
- b) Are the emotional intelligence strategies he has used adaptive/useful for her work as an arbitrator?
- c) Could he have used other more adaptive/useful strategies, which ones?
- d) Design an exercise that you could work on with Lawrence to train some effective emotional intelligence strategy in a situation like the one he experienced.



Reflection questions associated with the case study

- a) In what aspect does the training of the referees allow them to face these situations?
- b) What would you have done differently than Lawrence during the match?
- c) What kind of solution would you have implemented to solve your personal conflicts?
- d) Have you ever faced a racist episode? If yes, how?
- e) What kind of knowledge and soft skills are necessary to face this phenomenon in your opinion, as a professional in the personal life?
- f) In stressful situations, how do you manage your emotions?
- g) If you were Angela, what would have you tell Lawrence? What kind of advice would you have provided?

3.1.2.2 The fight against unsportsmanlike conduct in handball

In one handball tournaments, the referee Georgi was a judge in the final match. He was given the task of refereeing the match between the two best teams, Levski and Lokomotiv. Levski's team played rougher and unsportsmanlike, thus aiming to deny their opponent Lokomotiv and win the match.

The match is already coming to an end, Georgi's goal is to prevent the unsportsmanlike behavior of some players from the Levski team in the last seconds of the match, thus not giving the rough playing team the opportunity to win the match. At the same time, Georgi realizes that these rules facilitate the lagging Lokomotiv team, which plays sportsmanship, giving it a chance to score one or more goals, while keeping the attention of the spectators until the last second of the match.

At this moment, a player from the Levski team obstructs the throw at the goal in the last seconds of the match and hits a player from Lokomotiv, the referee must award a 7-meter throw and according to the rule, a 7-meter throw is awarded against the team whose player or official is disqualified for a ball-play offense in the final seconds of the match. Georgi awards a 7-meter throw against Levski's team and removes a player from their team. In this way, the Lokomotiv team scores the 7-meter throw and wins the title.

After the meeting, on the way to the hotel, Georgi thinks about the situation, whether he judged correctly by punishing the unsportsmanlike behavior and whether the Lokomotiv team won or damaged the Levski team in the last seconds.

Entering his room, Georgi decides to call the president of the judges, Svetla, and comment on what happened and whether he did the right thing. Svetla tells him that he did the right thing by following the rules of unsportsmanlike

conduct. Closing the phone with Svetla, Georgi opens the Internet and decides to look at similar situations and convictions in order to learn how to deal with similar events if they occur again in his profession or in his personal life.

Questions for solving the case study

For this situation, identify:

- a) What emotional intelligence strategies did George use?
- b) Are the emotional intelligence strategies he used adaptable/useful to Georgi's work as an arbitrator?
- c) Can George use other more useful strategies?
- d) Create an exercise you could work on with George to practice an effective emotional intelligence strategy in a situation like the one he experienced.

Reflection questions related to the case study

- a) Does the training of the referees allow them to handle these situations in the last seconds of the match?
- b) What would you have done differently from Georgi at the end of the match?
- c) What kind of solution would you apply to resolve your personal conflicts?
- d) In stressful situations, how do you manage your emotions?
- e) If you were in Svetla's place, what would you say to Georgi? What kind of advice would you give?

3.1.3 Verbal communication

3.1.3.1 Ela the “(B)ela”

During her volleyball career, she played volleyball professionally and successfully in many clubs. During her career, Ela, who came to the fore with her ambition, talent and reactions as well as her abilities, soon was called as (B)ela-“trouble” in a humorous way within the referee community.

One day, when she was again very ambitious and was bringing her team success in a championship match, Müge-who was one of the best referees of her time-was the first referee. Just when Ela thought that she had won a point for her team with a great spike, she was suddenly shaken by the decision that the ball was out. Then, Ela, who became famous for her extreme reactions against the referees, began to verbally attack Müge. Müge explained the position to Ela with the help of her common sense and the abilities gained by experience. Ela, who never intended to be satisfied, could not control her reactions, and cursed at the referee. Then, she was shown a red card by the referee and was sent out of the field. Ela, who was out of the game in an extremely important match such as the championship match, was so angry and kicked the bench so fast that she injured



herself. She didn't realize that she was going to end her volleyball acting career. While being interfered with on the field; Ela's father, Mehmet, who was one of the best international referees in the country, was watching her sadly from the stands. The interesting thing is that Mehmet also agreed with the referee's decision. The ball was really out. Ela, whose volleyball life ended after her injury, secluded herself for a long time. Realizing that she can't live a life other than volleyball, Ela decided to follow her father's advice and pursue her volleyball career as a referee. She attended the first refereeing course available and finished the course with the first place. It was undeniable that Ela's talent was hereditary. After receiving her certificate, Ela managed many successful matches. Her harmony with her fellow referees, her reading of the match and her harmony with all the delegations helped her become a successful referee in a short time.

It was a May evening. A finals night just like the day Ela got injured... The two most important teams in the league face to face and the first referee of the match is Ela... It is the tie-break set and young volleyball player Ahmet spikes and all the spectators stand up. Ela's decision is "out". Ahmet was also one of the most popular volleyball players of his time. Just as he was getting ready to celebrate, he ran towards Ela with a fury. While he puts his objections in a loud voice, Ela begins to experience a complete flash-back. Ela, who has attended soft skill programs before, counts to ten first. She relaxes a little and just like in the flash-back she has, she explains Ahmet the position with all the details in an appropriate language. By empathizing with both Ahmet and the referee whom she objected to in the past (by managing the crisis), and also by keeping a young star like Ahmet on the field without breaking the spell of the match, Ela showed that leadership does not require force, but instead it requires empathy and accurate forms of verbal communication. During this time, she never avoided listening to Ahmet. Meanwhile Ela's father, Mehmet, who was watching from the tribune, was so proud of Ela.

Ela became a referee who could read the game really well and who had the capacity to be in contact with all actors on the field. Ahmet's coach, Beyza, was aware that the ball was out. By chance, she caught sight of her former teammate Beyza. Ela, who came to the eye with Beyza, told Beyza with her eyes what she had to do. Beyza called out to Ahmet and the game continued from where it left off. At the end of the match, the winning team was Ahmet's team. Ahmet went to the first referee and apologized for his objections, and they shook hands.

Questions for solving the case study:

- a) What verbal communication strategies has Ela developed?
- b) Are the verbal communication strategies she has used adaptive/useful for her work as a referee?
- c) Could she have used other more strategies?

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- d) What verbal communication strategies would you adapt if you experienced a situation like the one she experienced?

Reflection questions associated with the case study:

- a) In what aspect does the training of the referees allow them to face these situations?
- b) What would you have done differently than Ela during the match?
- c) In stressful situations, how do you manage crisis?
- d) If you were Mehmet, what would you tell Ela? What advice would you give her?
- e) How do you think the soft skill educations she has had helped her to cope with crisis?
- f) What do you think has helped Ela become a successful referee?

3.1.4 Non-verbal communication

3.1.4.1 Marcolito, his good decision and his nonverbal communication

Little Marcolito made a very good decision as a basketball referee. He then called the fault in a soft and timid way, with narrow gestures, not enough adapted, while swinging from one foot to the other. The players of the sanctioned team, who had no reaction at first, then came forward and began to challenge the decision by approaching Marcolito.

Marcolito stepped back away from the players, turned his head, and then turned back them. The players insisted. The spectators, silent until then, began to manifest themselves and to support the players. Marcolito didn't seem to know how to react. He bent his head, sinks, then made the game to resume timidly under the whistles of the spectators. Blushing and turning eyes to the ground, his worries were read on his face. Then, he began to doubt his initial call and, less focused and more hesitant, he made other mistakes. The match ended badly.

He returned home disappointed and called his instructor to tell him that he would stop refereeing, in order to resume his other passion as a tennis player. His instructor offered to analyze with him his communication on the situation.

Questions for solving the case study:

- a) What great type of communication is mainly described in Marcolito's situation?
- b) What image can be returned by a referee? And what image is returned by Marcolito?
- c) What elements could have used Marcolito in his non-verbal communication to limit the challenges and the deterioration of the situation.



Reflection questions associated with the case study:

- a) What gestures can referees make? In which categories can you classify them?
- b) What kind of look can the referee use?
- c) What facial expression can a referee have?
- d) What communication distances do you know?
- e) How does distance affect the quality of communication?
- f) What orientation can we have in relation to the interlocutors? What impact does this have on communication?
- g) What posture / speed / movement and what impact does it have?
- h) What indirect messages can convey the following postural outfits? Head down, head up, head back, arched back, bomb chest.
- i) What parasitic gestures can impair non-verbal communication?
- j) Based on the photos in Annex 2, what elements can you observe regarding the non-verbal communication of the referees/coaches? What interpretations can you make of them?

3.1.4.2 Johan and the compliance with the new rules

Each change in the rules involves a huge effort to educate athletes, the new rules of the International Sport Shooting Federation (ISSF) included some crucial changes for future competitions such as the ban on the use of electronic devices. Therefore, in the Weapons and Equipment Control Sheet for the previous control that all shooters must fill out to participate in the European competition, a reminder of Articles 6.7.4.3. and 6.7.4.4. that prohibit technological support to the athlete was included.

Johan was appointed as Gallery Judge-Referee for the second sector, so one of his duties was to ensure that the athletes complied with the current competition rules. During the usual review in the Preparation Phase, he identified many of the athletes in his charge using noise-cancelling and Bluetooth hearing protectors, wearing smartwatches, placing Tablets or smartphones at their post... Had they not studied the regulations before going to the championship, had they not read the reminder of the Weapons and Equipment Control Sheet?

In this way, he went athlete by athlete reminding them of the rules and requesting that all electronic devices be removed. Increasingly frustrated, he reached the end of his line and set out to repeat the same message in desperation. He came within inches of the athlete with his back to him, tapped him on the shoulder with his fingers and, raising his voice very high, recited Article 6.7.4.4. at full speed without pause, making energetic hand movements. The

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athlete turned to him offended and reproached him for his attitude. Johan, who couldn't believe it, started pointing his finger in front of his face and shouting at him that he should have read the rules and that he didn't have to remember every article of the rules.

As expected, at the time we were living in, the video of the incident ended up posted on social networks. In it you could see Johan with his whole body tense and leaning forward, frowning, clenched fists while talking to the athlete and very sudden movements of his whole body.

Questions for the resolution of the case study

For this situation, identify:

- a) What non-verbal elements (paraverbal, postural and gestural) can you identify?
- b) Is this nonverbal language adaptive/useful for your work as a judge/referee?
- c) Are there other elements of nonverbal language that you could have used, which ones?
- d) Design an exercise that you could work on with Johan to train his nonverbal language.

Reflection questions associated with the case study

- a) What impact does nonverbal language have, compared to verbal language, on the effectiveness of the message that referees send?
- b) How could the training of referees in the effective use of their verbal and nonverbal language be improved?
- c) How does nonverbal language relate to escalations of violence in conflicts during competition?



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5 Annex

Annex 1: 4 Insights for the Modern Referee

The action plan ‘Together towards a safer sport environment’ (*‘Samen naar een veiliger Sportklimaat’*, VSK) is a national program that stimulates desirable behavior in sports and prevents unacceptable behavior. Referees are an important link to ensure that practicing sports is safe and that players have fun.

The society changes and, in this respect, the role of the referee as well. This booklet will give you guidance to actively engage in this new role.

Good luck!

Why 4 insights for the modern referee?

Each sport, whether it be grassroots sports or professional sports, requires enthusiastic referees. People who are passionate about the sport, who ensure that the rules are adhered to and that players enjoy a fun sports experience. Because that’s what it’s all about: having fun together!

Sport is emotion

However, having fun in sports is not on top of mind in the heat of the moment at times. Decisions by the referee sometimes evoke much emotion. The referee is confronted with criticism – or even worse: swearing or physical threats – by players, coaches, parents or other spectators. It used to be in the past, and it is still the case right now.

Empowered players

In a society that is changing rapidly, we observe that the referee is under more pressure. People are used and trained to stand up for themselves because of the individualization. This is also shown in the rising empowerment by the athlete, which conflicts with the referee’s role. How can you address this empowerment as a referee?

From ‘police officer’ towards ‘facilitator’

In the past, people had the perception of the referee’s role as a ‘police officer’ and the referees learned topics in their training like: ‘Keep them at a distance’, ‘Do not start a conversation’ and ‘Show them a card’. The referee’s role has seen a rapid development throughout the years, focusing more and more on communication. This development continues to evolve now into empathy and searching for solutions together. The modern referee is a ‘facilitator’.

The modern referee

As a facilitator, you try and keep interruptions in the game to the minimum, so as to enable that the players enjoy the game to the maximum extent possible.



In this changing perception of the referee, you do not only bear the responsibility for a respectful continuation of the game, but you do so together with other officials, trainers, coaches, captains and players. When it goes wrong, you ask the question: 'How are we going to solve this together?'

What are the 4 insights for the modern referee?

'Have a great game!' These are often your words as a referee at the beginning of a game to coaches, captains or players. But how do you ensure that practicing a sport is a positive experience for all individuals involved?

The ideal sport environment

Research has shown that an ideal sport environment fulfils two conditions. First, it is an environment in which each athlete feels socially safe. Everyone feels welcome, valued and everyone can practice sports feeling carefree and having fun. Secondly, it is important that players in this environment can learn, grow and develop themselves. Not only in practicing sports, but also in other fields, such as fulfilling agreements, respecting others and building resilience and self-confidence.

Pitfalls of sports

Practicing sports may also have a negative impact. A hierarchical order may develop or even worse: players are bullied and develop negative self-esteem. Or the focus is only on winning. This is a pitfall for many coaches, parents and spectators as a result of which players become tense and develop fear of failure. Practicing sports whilst having fun vanishes and the athlete quits sports, sometimes even forever.

Having fun in sports and refereeing

Players who are having fun in sports obtain the best possible development results, which is shown in their performances. When the focus is on having fun, then progress is made by itself: players improve themselves, learn new competences and show more dedication and discipline. As a referee, you play a key role in creating a pleasant sport environment. So, how can you apply the rules of the game whilst maintaining fun in sports and keeping the momentum of the game?

Benefits of the 4 insights for the modern referee

The four insights for the modern referee may support you:

Provide structure

You provide clarity and structure. You fulfill all obligations from the sports federation which apply before, during and after the game. This way, everyone knows what is expected from them and everyone feels they are being treated fairly.

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Stimulate

You stimulate players to show desirable and sportsmanlike behavior. You motivate, applaud and focus on all what goes well.

Give personal attention

You ensure that every athlete feels noticed, valued and respected. You show understanding for emotions. You align your instructions with the individual players without benefiting anyone.

Share responsibility

You closely involve coaches, captains, players and other officials in creating a safe and fun sport environment. You clarify that you share responsibility in the process and progress of the game.

Provide structure

Players need structure and clarity to enjoy practicing sports. Confusion and unhappiness arise in the absence of clear norms, rules and regulations: what is allowed and what isn't? Who is responsible for what and when?

Before, during and after the game

Clarity and structure are not only needed during the game, but before and after it as well. If you clearly state your expectations to other officials, captains and coaches before the game, then they will know what they agreed to and you can more easily refer to that during and after the game.

Let the game flow

Apply the rules of the game in a consistent, clear and impartial way, so that everyone feels they are being treated fairly. But that does not mean that you have to whistle for every offense. When you make the right choice to stop the game or let it continue, you give the game the space it needs to develop and flow.

Practical tips

- Apply the rules of the game following the agreements reached by your sports federation.
- Prepare the game with all individuals involved: co-referees, coaches and captains. How do we tackle this? Who is responsible for what? What do we agree on when an incident takes place?
- Confront players or their coaches in time when they overstep the bounds, to ensure that everyone feels they are being treated fairly.
- Be consistent, accurate and clear in your decisions.
- Reach decisions in a neutral way, show that you are impartial.
- Postpone blowing your whistle at times, know when continuing the game has a greater positive effect than intervening.



- Clarify decisions by clear communication, expressed through words and gestures, so that everyone can understand – also the players further away in the field.
- Suspend the game when needed and invoke the agreements reached, creating a safe sport environment.

Stimulate

You can stimulate players to show acceptable and sportsmanlike behavior by giving them compliments and to focus on what goes well. A positive climate draws the best out of players and of course, you as a referee too!

Focus on what goes well

'Don't lose the game, OK?', 'What a bad cross!', 'No, don't do that!' On and around sports venues, you see players and coaches talking a lot about what is not going well and what players should not do. By nature, people tend to emphasize what goes wrong. While the effect of this is completely counterproductive. It is precisely positive encouragement that brings out the very best in an athlete and ensures desirable behavior.

Giving compliments

Of course, you have to intervene in case of unwanted behavior, but you can also reward desirable behavior with a compliment or a simple nod and smile. When you do this for both parties, you remain neutral, with the advantage that the self-confidence of athletes increases and they immediately learn what behavior you do like.

Practical tips

- Be positive, respectful and sporty with everyone, because good example follows.
- Radiate energy and positivity before, during and after the match: you clearly feel like it! Also show during the game that fun and enjoyment is part of the game.
- Emphasize the desired behavior and also the progress, for example, imagine that you think it's good that a player honestly indicates that the ball is out.
- Give compliments aimed at the effort of an athlete instead of the result, for example, indicate that someone has solved a situation well or has tried to solve it well.
- Also think of non-verbal communication as a simple way to approve behavior of athletes, for example with a nod or smile.
- Formulate points of improvement in the form of a concrete assignment or tip, so not too general 'Hurry up!', but specific 'Throw in faster!'.

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- Always be sincere, because athletes see through fake compliments, tricks and double messages.

Give individual attention

Every player wants to be noticed and valued, especially by someone who is of great importance, like the referee. Treat each player in a respectful way, because all what you give personal attention will grow. And you will receive it back!

Giving attention is receiving it

Highlight during and after the game the positive impact of each athlete. It goes without saying that you do so with the captains and players who catch your attention, but also try to acknowledge and appreciate other players as well. Ask for feedback yourself at times as well. It is a learning experience for you and you give someone the chance to praise you.

De-escalate in your response

Keep the – mostly good – intentions from each player in mind. Some players will remain calm whilst others will become agitated. It doesn't always help to apply the rules strictly, because this can cause the situation to escalate. It could help to ask what is going on which will often help to calm the situation and it may give you new insights.

Practical tips

- Choose a quiet moment for a short chat with a player, for instance during a time-out or injury.
- Also connect with players by showing small gestures during the game: a smile, eye contact or a simple nod can already make the difference.
- Make contact with a player who is in pain or who is agitated, because players appreciate to be heard.
- Also focus on more modest or quieter players, because you may expect quite some mutual appreciation and respect from them in particular.
- Be sensitive to the different emotions from players. When the tension rises, emotions can run high and sometimes it may be better to ask a question first, such as 'What is going on?'
- In case of a dispute, ask direct, but also open questions to the players. For instance, 'How can we prevent this from now on?'

Share responsibility

Share the responsibility with other officials, coaches and captains, so that you closely involve them in creating a fair course of the game. This contributes to their motivation and fun in sports and to yours as well.



Space for their own solutions

As a referee, you do not have to carry all the responsibility alone. Involve players and coaches, so that they experience the space to find their own solutions. This will allow you to blow your whistle a little less and you will notice that the game will run more smoothly.

Sharing responsibility is taking responsibility

If you explicitly give someone responsibility, it is far more likely that this person will take responsibility. Thus, think about which situations you would expect from a coach or captain to take responsibility and discuss this beforehand. This way, you can ask them to cooperate during the game.

Practical tips

- Agree upon taking responsibility at a quiet moment, so that you can take a moment to discuss and agree upon this, and avoid having to do this later on in the heat of the game.
- Make a list of important concerns and risks before the game, so that you set up a 'responsibility-checklist' for yourself.
- Agree upon the communication process as well, for instance whether the captain is the only individual who may ask questions and which are the limits of the coach in communicating to the players.
- During the game, ask the cooperation from players and coaches for the result to be achieved, because players will change their behavior more quickly when their coach or teammate asks them to.
- Take a moment occasionally to evaluate after the game how the individuals involved experienced sharing responsibility. For instance, discuss a specific situation which you found difficult, so that you can learn from this for future games.

The modern referee

Each referee is driven by a passion for his sport and a drive to work together with players. Use the 4 insights to ask yourself how you can improve your refereeing and how you can get even more enjoyment from your role.

Be true to yourself

Whoever you are as a referee, it is important to do what suits you as a person. Some referees are better in providing structure, stimulating, giving personal attention, or sharing responsibility. Some referees use their experience and strictly apply the rules whilst others benefit more from their charm and contacting players. There is no right or wrong. The most important thing is to keep an open mind to learn.

Ask questions

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If you want to learn, you must ask questions. As a referee, you are confronted with all kinds of questions and dilemmas nowadays without instant answers:

- How can you be a facilitator and stimulate fun in sports if you also must maintain the rules?
- How can you give compliments to a player and be neutral at the same time?
- How can you manage the game ... and cooperating and handing over responsibility to others at the same time?

Dare to look in the mirror

You are the best teacher for yourself. So, reflect on games and discuss your dilemmas with others. Ask yourself how you can become an even better referee. What are your development points? What is difficult for you? And which steps could you take to improve this?

This way, you continue to learn and have fun in refereeing!

Questions/ notes about providing structure

How can I clarify my decisions even more for all individuals involved?

How do I determine the right moment to blow the whistle?

How do I stay firmly on the ground in this respect?

Questions/ notes about stimulating

How do I radiate positivity and energy?

Do I pay enough attention to desirable behavior – and how do I show this?

What have I already accomplished in this respect?

Questions/ notes about giving individual attention

How do I find out which athlete needs more attention?

How do I react when players/ coaches are agitated?

What is your need to improve yourself?

Questions/ notes about sharing responsibility

How can I stimulate the involvement of the coaches in sharing responsibility?

How do I start the conversation when the game has ended?

What do I want to change next time?