

## Perfect the simple

*Refereeing Mildenhall Town v Maldon & Tiptree, Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2025, 7:45pm.*

Narrating one's own performance in real time, as Elena Ferrante knew, undercuts the fantasy that the performance engenders. Can you imagine a review of *La Traviata* at the Royal Opera House told from the perspective of Ermonela Jaho as in 'when I reach for the top note at the end of *sempre libera* it felt as if the world fell away and the thousand souls in the darkness of the auditorium were all refracted into the spotlight's glint on my uvula'? Well, no, obviously, although technology makes this kind of facial intimacy possible via other means (think Anna Lapwood yawning in high resolution). I also suspect that if you're really an expert you basically can't do it. When footballers are asked to describe how they performed some dazzling piece of skill, they often give a blow-by-blow account of its various component elements that seem to be back-rationalised from their memory of the entirely instinctive thing that just happened: for example 'I thought well I'm just sick of the ball going backwards and sideways and so I thought when I next get the ball I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna go and, yeah it worked'.

So when experts – sopranos, strikers, flow-state specialists honed on 10,000 hours of anabolic coloratura – give an account of their performance, my default assumption is that they are either (a) lying, which is an unfair term I use in this context for back-rationalising, or (b) not experts, to the extent that they have to do quite a lot of rationalising to make it sound like the performance was worth narrating at all. I'm probably in the latter camp. I don't think anyone present at Mildenhall Town v Maldon & Tiptree viewed me as an expert by the time I had finished refereeing the game. But there was something stirred by the pre-match intonation of the theme song from *Skyfall*, the mesmerising impenetrability of the advertising juxtapositions (I'm still pondering the precise reference of the interplay between #HallBall and 'Is AI the new marble?'), and the way the clouds slowly shifted over the gibbous moon like in a Harry Potter film, and this is the result.

One of the things that former creative types such as Wayne Rooney *do* do, to be fair to them, is to give you little titbits about What Things Were Really Like on the periphery of the performance itself, e.g. vomiting with nerves before scoring the winner against Charlton Athletic. But the problem with self-narrating one's performance as the referee of Mildenhall Town v Maldon & Tiptree is that unlike Ermonela Jaho or Wayne Rooney no one was really interested in watching said performance in the first place. In fact throughout the course of the game on two occasions one of the audience members (of whom on this occasion there were 176 in person, not counting the numbers not including my wife who streamed the game live on YouTube) were kind enough to offer live commentary on the relationship of my specific role to the overall performance constituted by the game, viz 'Ref it's not about you'.

Except that, weirdly, the moments when these critiques are deployed, usually in response to perceived irritation at the time taken to enforce some minor principle of the Laws of the Game (henceforth: LotG; an annual publication whose commitment to understatement is best summed up by its opening sentence 'Football is the greatest sport on earth'), are precisely the

moments when I am attempting to lay the groundwork to disappear out of potential controversy or attention later on in the game.

The spectator feedback is first delivered early on when I warn Jake, the captain of Maldon & Tiptree, about his team's early attempts to foreground Mildenhall's Time Consumption as the principal threat to fair play in this evening's encounter. The context here is Mildenhall's lowly league position and predisposition to minimise time spent with the ball in play, and this despite the plaque I observed earlier over the entrance to their changing room, namely 'there's only one rule in this jungle, when the lion's hungry, he eats'.

The effect of said warning to Jake, besides the reminder that the greatest sport on earth really isn't about me, is to intensify his protests on the same topic, and those of the Maldon & Tiptree number 4, whose name, it turns out when I ask him, is Benjamin. This is not unduly concerning, and I often weigh increased argumentation early on against the greater purpose of demonstrating that pressure applied in this way will not be successful, which encourages natural desistance. When I ask Benjamin his name he looks surprised and asks me mine, and by the end of that exchange he seems to have lost interest in Time Consumption.

My assistant referee is also called Benjamin, although as a lithe 20-year-old with aspirations to be a Premier League referee (how a decade has sharpened, and blunted, that feeling) rather than a 32-year-old central midfield player whose sculpted stubble is no doubt supposed to indicate world-weary élan, he prefers to be known as Benji. I met Benji for the first time this evening, though he and I are both coached by the same Football League referee, Neil Hair. The existence of a 'referee coach' – one of a panoply of semiotically interchangeable monikers for (former/better/injured) referees performing hortatory or correctional duties in relation to other referees in the name of Referee Development, see also 'referee observer', 'referee developer', 'referee scout' – often surprises outsiders, but in this case it simply means that Benji and I both separately had a call with Neil Hair in which Neil asked formulaic questions about the forthcoming game and told me not to over-complicate anything. Our bonding over the shared status as future failed protégés of Neil Hair was cemented in the changing room when I found a motivational sign next to the shower which said 'Perfect the simple', and Benji took a photo of it with me to send to Neil and I said it sounded like my future Pope name.

Benji didn't get this, but Ian, my other assistant, thought it was funny. Or at least, he explained the joke to Benji, who puffed his cheeks out and then exhaled air while shaking his head gently and making eye contact. Ian is 34, and is teaching part time at a local secondary school while completing a degree remotely, but hopes to leave soon to join his partner in East Virginia. I have known Ian for a number of years, which makes his impending departure sad. The system for obtaining American visas is slow, which means this is the third time I have worked on a game with Ian with the melancholy awareness that seven years of occasional shared seventy minute car journeys and intermittent eye contact across a 40m stretch of grass may come to an end at any moment without warning.

I really will be sad when this happens. Refereeing creates transitory pockets of community, where virtually everyone else in the jungle is either overtly ill-disposed or a single incorrect throw-in away from ill-disposure, and so there is relatively strong external pressure for match

officials to coexist happily even when personalities are not instantly compatible with prolonged sociability, such as intermittent eye contact across short sprint distances. I'd hang out with Ian anyway though, so the latter point is moot in this case.

Benji and Ian become relevant at this juncture of the match in relation to the aforementioned Time-Consumption dispute, because it is now Benji's task to manage the Mildenhall Town throw-in that provoked Jake's criticisms and the spectator's constructive critique of my response, while Ian needs to use his consummate people skills to defuse the escalating tension in the Maldon & Tiptree dugout on the same point. I feel the need to take charge of the situation being allowed to develop in front of Benji, where Jonny, the thrower for Mildenhall Town, has taken up a position several metres further than strictly allowable, no doubt with the intention of Consuming even more Time until someone realises and sends him back. Benji is still focused on positioning himself correctly, so I shout 'Benji, manage the throw for us' (performative colloquialism) and then Benji gestures to Jonny to walk back several metres to the correct location and then Jonny takes a run-up which covers all of the ground he had just retreated. I allow the game to continue. The change in temperature caused by shouts from several audience members of 'how far's he going ref' is not serious enough to warrant more Maldon & Tiptree frustration at stoppages in play.

As the first half progresses, the game takes the shape predicted in my pre-match phone conversation with Neil Hair. Maldon & Tiptree, as every member of the committee at Mildenhall Town (none of whom had been able to explain satisfactorily the source of the lion quote above the changing room, or the similar one in the boardroom where pre-match tea and coffee were served underneath 'if you wish to be the King of the Jungle it's not enough to act like a king. You must be The King') explained, have been taken over by crypto-money, and hence are able to pay their players much more than Mildenhall Town. Their number includes former West Ham striker Freddie Sears, whose presence in their lineup was touted by Ed who makes the tea in the boardroom, half an hour before the starting XXII was confirmed. Maldon & Tiptree play a version of football that involves lots of players exchanging positions, and keeping the ball with short fast passes, accompanied by a well-co-ordinated press (in essence a player running very fast at an opposition player who has the ball accompanied by other players running very fast at other opposition players who do not have the ball to cut off passing options). Mildenhall Town, in contrast, are in a low block, which means that they arrange their players in two lines very close to each other and try to disrupt the opposition's passing and pressing.

As I have discussed with Neil, this means that there is also very little space for the referee to perform the newly fashionable technique of standing ahead of Play (Play presumably referring here to whoever has the ball) and adapting their position based on careful observation of the movements of the other players. I try this move a couple of times, but on one occasion Freddie Sears drops deep (he runs a bit closer to Play) and I narrowly avoid being hit by the ball as it is passed to him. Neil, who has been refereeing for 25 years and is therefore sceptical of the Advanced Position in any case, has told me that in these circumstances I need to come out, which I initially thought was a bit forward until I realised that it was basically a synonym for

drop deep. The next time Freddie Sears gets the ball I'm in a perfect position, and I make a mental note to clip up the YouTube stream for Neil when I get home.

The next thing that happens is that Maldon & Tiptree lose the ball and Mildenhall Town break, i.e. one of their players runs quickly towards the other end of the pitch with the ball, taking advantage of the fact that many of the opposition have been caught in an Advanced Position as a result of their tactical approach (they are not coached by Neil Hair). The Maldon & Tiptree number 10, Tyrell, chases after the Mildenhall player, who is also number 10 and is called Jack. There is a brief period of instability where the two are side-by-side, like a lorry overtaking a car on the motorway but with more manual grappling, and then Tyrell has the ball, and is looking for the inside pass to Freddie Sears again.

'How the fuck, was that not a foul?' says Jack, who is prone on the grass. Technically, this is clear dissent (unless it is taken literally as a request for legalistic clarification) and hence according to the LotG punishable by a yellow card. But Referee Development stipulates not simply consistent and fair application of the LotG (though that is a Non-Negotiable, especially at this level), but also contextual decision making. And in context, this outburst of frustration does not cross the threshold at which a caution (me standing near him and taking a small yellow piece of plastic from my pocket and holding it up briefly) would be expected by anyone in the ground, or merit any further attention whatsoever. The game is not all about me after all.

Maldon & Tiptree lose the ball again, and this time instead of allowing the Mildenhall Town player to break, Benjamin fouls him right in front of Ian. It is difficult to describe precisely the extent or the nature of the physical contact that produces said foul, but the Mildenhall Player falls to the ground, and Ian waves his flag instinctively and I blow my whistle *squillo piccante*. Captain Jake approaches again, this time with an explicit request for legalistic clarification. 'Can you explain to me what he's done wrong there?'

I can't really. Or at least, it would require more cognitive load than I'm prepared to devote to the problem in view of the likely benefit. The contact between bodies *looked* like an infraction based on the training data of a decade looking at these kinds of physical interactions and deciding whether to do anything about them, but the instinctive action of awarding a foul is an entirely separate process from the rhetorical one of justifying why I gave it in precisely the terms outlined in the LotG. I would be back-rationalising, and I've already given my views on lying. In any case, Jake is simply trying to make the point that he disagrees with the decision, and any verbosity at this point would likely give him a further hook to hang his argument on. I settle on an explanation calibrated carefully to the needs of the moment.

'It was a foul'

'Yeah but what's he done wrong there; he's just gone down like a sack of shit'

'Yeah 'cos he's fouled him' (we're all playing pronoun games)

Jake looks performatively quizzical.

'You're having one today referee, switch on. They're easy decisions. Easy decisions.'

'No you come on. You'll get one of those in a minute'. I want to reassure him of my fundamental objectivity. He doesn't reply and runs back into position.

‘You shouldn’t let them just get away with falling over though’, observes Freddie Sears from my right shoulder. But at this point I decide that further discussion of the perceived unfairness will not be conducive to the perception of my match control, and I tell him to quit the ‘you’re just on their side’ schtick.

‘I’m not giving you stick, I’m just telling you, listen, I’m allowed to talk to you’.

‘I said ‘schtick’, not ‘stick’.

‘you what’.

‘schtick’. I lean into the fricative. Not ‘stick’.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It’s like, saying the same kind of thing again and again’.

He's grinning now. ‘I’ve never ever heard that’.

‘Well, you know, maybe I’ve made a mistake on the foul and you’ve learned something’.

‘Fair enough ref’. He’s not taking me very seriously as a person, but I don’t mind. I’ve just taught former West Ham striker Freddie Sears the word ‘schtick’.

In fairness, *re* the foul just outlined, the Mildenhall player has fallen onto the floor with enthusiasm not precisely correlated with the extent of the contact on him. But, as I explained to Benji and Ian while delivering our team-talk an hour before kick-off, in general I am much more relaxed about giving fouls to the defending team, where more serious consequence will be a reaction of the type just summarised, than to the attacking team, where the consequence could decide the final outcome of the game and hence become a talking point antithetical to the stated aim of this whole piece, namely working as hard as possible to keep things simple and to disappear completely out of view.

Low-key simplicity of the kind outlined above works well for most of the match, barring a moment in the 64<sup>th</sup> minute where my positioning fails, and I am hit by the ball. I immediately put this down to a failure of scanning. Scanning, long a commonplace in the lexicon of football analysts and professional club academies, has only recently entered the consciousness of Referee Development, and involves turning one’s head side-to-side at regular intervals to take snapshots of the movements of players around you and to build up a mental picture of the match as it develops. Academic studies have shown that the best passers not only scan very frequently – up to five or six times per second – but also time their scans carefully, always focusing on Play whenever the ball’s trajectory might be altered by someone touching it. I often think that scanning is a good metaphor for the kind of flow-state refereeing demands, where attention shifts repeatedly and involuntarily between intellectual muscle memory and robust self-justification, but I also find that it makes me slightly dizzy, especially in the latter stages of the game.

Perhaps if it had still been the first half I might have scanned appropriately and realised that a pass was about to come in my direction. The consequence of my error here – the ball dropped for the team who had the ball anyway and the resumption of play as if nothing had happened – is not significant, but it is nonetheless crucial to show my intense frustration at this failure of anticipation and judgment. I construct a frown for several minutes before equilibrium is restored.

But shortly before the end of the game, two things happen quickly. Tyrell cuts in from the right for Maldon & Tiptree and falls over. I can hear a sound that indicates leg-on-leg interaction, but the manner of Tyrell's fall generates the image of the trail a sparkler leaves when being spun, which suggests to me that play on is a better outcome (in Referee Development it is often useful to talk about better outcomes and worse outcomes, to maintain the illusion that everyone's view could be valid without obscuring truth). Ian disagrees with my assessment here, but is sufficiently self-aware not to raise his flag. Instead he presses the small button on it to give me a discreet signal in the form of a loud beep on the receiver pack I'm wearing attached to my right bicep under the shirt sleeve. Occasionally I've flirted with the idea of a second pack on my left bicep in order to facilitate a more macho appearance on the basis that it is an unacknowledged but in my view undeniable principle of Referee Development that 'refereeing with personality' entails 'being an alpha male'. Ian's restraint allows me to have the final say on the decision while still telling me what he thinks. His view could be valid, but in this case I think what I think, and the game progresses to the next thing that happens, which, inevitably, is a tackle on the Mildenhall Town striker at the other end of the pitch, inside the penalty area.

I've given the penalty before I've rationalised it, which is a shame, because everyone is looking at me and nobody is expecting a penalty. I'm in an excellent position. I put in a forty-yard sprint. I had a perfect view. The decision is not a stupid one, because the defender has kicked the ankle of the striker, which is usually the kind of heuristic used to work out if something fits the definition of a careless challenge given in the LotG as resulting in a direct free kick or penalty kick, that is 'when a player shows a lack of attention or consideration when making a challenge or acts without precaution'. But because the ball ends up changing direction, and because I'm the only one who has put in an angled forty metre sprint into the optimal viewing position, everyone else thinks the ball has been won (the kind of heuristic used to decide that a player has not shown a lack of attention or consideration when making a challenge or acted without precaution), and so is expecting a corner. And now I'm standing there with my finger trained on the penalty spot like a machine-gun sight and tensing my pectoral muscles and trying to ladder up the Ionic alphabet through breath control, and all I can hear in my head is the voice of Neil Hair saying 'don't see too much', and 'we've got to ask ourselves, what does player reaction tell us?' It is a moment that crystallises the difficulties inherent in passing instinctive judgement not only on the physical events unfolding in front of me, but also on the likely perception of those events by the various stakeholders who are currently running towards me, flapping and white, as though I'm several breadcrumbs. Time for some personality. I blow the whistle, hard this time, and shout something like 'go away', except I'm tired and it's nearly 10pm and so my voice cracks. But that, or perhaps the sudden sparkle of the floodlight's reflection on my uvula convinces all of them except Benjamin that it is not worth continuing the argument. I have to caution Benjamin, which is unfortunate because I think the penalty is questionable at best, but the task in hand now is to own the five or so minutes before I can sit down in the changing room and contemplate the likely summary of the match provided by the away team in the form of a mark of 71/100.

Back in the changing room, I ask Ian and Benji for their assessment of my performance, taking care to give a theoretical account of the difficulties people sometimes find in giving negative or constructive feedback upwards within hierarchies in order to prompt a real discussion. I am concerned that Benji has not really taken this on board when he asserts that the penalty looked fine, but then he suggests that I needed a bit more personality in key moments, and I make a mental note to buy the second receiver pack. Ian is very complimentary about my disappearing act, but in respect of the penalty at the end he refers me to my Pope name, and says the better outcome was a corner. As it turns out, the occupants of the boardroom and the bar after the game do not make much reference to the facts of the game beyond its general sterility.

Occasionally I worry that I overthink refereeing. Is it really viable that if I spend long enough cultivating instincts by repetition and observation, perfecting empathetically dismissive half-glances in the mirror and shaving articulation from my word-final consonants into a naturalistic *Schiedsrichterskunstssprache*, someone will finally decide that the game is worth 74.5 instead? I look at Benji and wonder how much of a long-term advantage being 20 will give him in Referee Development terms. Then I look at Ian whose registration forms with US Soccer are being processed and think about how he thought the penalty was wrong and whether I'll see him again before he goes. Then I look at my Diet Coke.

When I sent this procedural to Neil Hair he replied within two minutes: 'It's your way of dealing with the game. We can't change the past as long as we don't let it affect the future. That one's gone now'.

In the future, Maurice Blanchot is still dead.