

Kevin Dodelande: how VAR needs to change its face in football

Video refereeing must be profoundly improved to avoid fiascos like the recent Premier League match Tottenham vs Liverpool. And in this area, Artificial Intelligence has its say according to Kevin Dodelande, founder of iMi.

Paris, France Oct 7, 2023 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Tottenham Hotspur Stadium is packed to the rafters for the eagerly-awaited clash with Liverpool. In the 34th minute, just as the two teams were drawing level, the match turned on its head. After a fine counter-attack by the Reds, who were already down to ten men, Mohammed Salah sent a silky pass to Colombian striker Luis Diaz, who beat Italian goalkeeper Vicario. The assistant referee pointed to an unobvious offside position. On television, slow motion quickly confirms the refereeing error. Luis Diaz is one meter behind the last defender. The goal must therefore be validated by VAR (Video Assistant Referee) referees Darren England and his assistant Dan Cook.

Reds coach red with anger

For some obscure reason, the two men do not intervene. Play resumed at 0-0 and, ironically, Tottenham opened the scoring two minutes later. A fiasco visible on television around the world, forcing real soccer lovers to take a closer look at the laws surrounding VAR (Video Assistant Referee). Liverpool coach Jürgen Klopp is no different. Speaking to the post-match microphones, he declared "They didn't do it on purpose, I know that, but mistakes still happen. If we want to talk about it do it properly and not with creating headlines with emotional managers." (<https://www.bbc.com/sport/articles/c72r544j8dno>). When VAR was first introduced in 2018, its objectives were threefold: the universality of refereeing, speed of decision, and lastly, the elimination of the sense of injustice that could be felt by players, coaches, and fans.

Artificial intelligence serving the game

It's undeniable that the advent of artificial intelligence in soccer has led to greater reliability in refereeing decisions. One of the main advantages of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is that it can process information much faster than humans. This means that AI systems can be used to review incidents in real time and provide instant feedback to referees. This helps to reduce the number of errors made by referees, and consequently the fairness of the game.

Another advantage of AI is that it is not subject to the same prejudices as humans. Referees' decisions can sometimes be influenced by factors such as the reputation of the players involved or the atmosphere around the match.

Towards the end of assistant referees?

Today, AI can potentially replace assistant referees, whose main role is to point out offside situations. In 2022, FIFA (International governing Body of Association Football) already used a semi-automated offside detection system that works with a ball containing sensors that track its position and movement. The sensors transmit data to the central computer 500 times per second. A process that relies on twelve cameras installed under the stadium roof that film the game from different angles and send data 50 times per second. Special software combines the data streams to clinically monitor the positions of potentially offside players.

Football between two waters

At present, soccer, by its very nature a very conservative sport, is still reluctant to embark on this all-AI path, giving the feeling of being caught between two stools. For example, UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) uses semi-automatic offside alerts in the Champions League, knowing in its heart of hearts that it could do without assistant referees. After the incidents at Tottenham Liverpool, PGMOL (Professional Game Match Officials Ltd.), the refereeing body for professional matches in England, promised to draw up a new protocol for the use of VAR. Yet another of football's secret storytelling tricks? Still, the controversy is growing by the day, with the Liverpool coach even calling for the match to be replayed.

Eliminate feelings of injustice with a challenge

What's needed is a simple, fast solution. To eliminate the feeling of injustice, it would be pragmatic to follow the example of tennis with the Challenge, where the coach could request the use of VAR exclusively on the disputed action. It's a safe bet that Jürgen Klopp would have used it in the Tottenham match. Critics will say that this gives even more power to the coach. But so what? As well as being easy to apply, this measure would give the coach an extra asset. One condition: he would still have to be limited by the number of challenges he can claim. This would certainly breathe new life into the game. The ball is now in the camp of the sporting authorities.

Kevin Dodelande, 31, a specialist in artificial intelligence, is the founder of iMi, a French company dedicated to data processing and analysis.

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