

Biased ref cost Boks dearly

Payback time when we host All Blacks at home

IT WAS always going to require a perfect match for the Springboks to complete a historic Antipodean double in Auckland on Saturday. Unfortunately, a mammoth task became insurmountably steep as a result of referee Roman Poite's double-tap that saw arguably the game's most influential player, Bismark du Plessis, sent off with almost the entire second half remaining.

The first yellow card tilted a 55-45 match (the home team has an advantage) into a 60-40 match in New Zealand's favour. Only the most blindly patriotic rugby supporter could argue that Du Plessis deserved the card, but Poite did (despite access to a big screen replay himself), and enacted the first of his game-changing decisions.

The second decision, arguably more justified than the first, led to an unjust red, and the contest was effectively ended. As a result 60-40 became 80-20, and that's being generous, because 14 men, away from home, chasing a seven-point deficit, was always going to produce one result only.

Poite has been rightly criticised, with inevitable calls for sanction and forced retirement from refereeing. It has long been a huge frustration that referees (and television match officials — they all must take blame for the weekend's failures) appear unaccountable for poor performance. This perception is not entirely true, but their evaluation and sanction is always "clandestine", which doesn't help.

There is a reason for this — imagine how difficult it would be to find willing referees if they were not to some extent "protected" from official public floggings to compound those already handed out by fans. One can equally appreciate the frustration at the imbalance of action-consequence, and this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

There are also accusations of deliberate bias and "fixing", as happened in 2011 when Bryce Lawrence produced 80 minutes of the most continuously poor officiating possible. I find it difficult to agree with conspiracy theorists, who are motivated by understandable emotion. That said, sport teaches us to rule nothing out, but I suspect that there is a more innocuous, though equally frustrating, reality in play here.

It is, simply, that referees are susceptible to external influences that affect decision-making. Consider an interesting scientific study from the UK. Top-level football referees were shown videos of a number of

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50-50 contests for the ball, and asked to adjudicate foul play or not. Some tackles were watched with the sound on, some with it muted.

The finding was that with crowd noise on, the majority of calls went the way of home teams

— visiting teams were penalised or home teams granted leniency.

No sound, however, saw an equal split in decisions between home and away teams. In other words, a referee making a split-second decision factors in what he sees, but cannot completely factor out external noise.

This happens at a subconscious level, and so collective cries from 40 000 fans might be enough to tilt decisions in favour of the home team.

Poite's first yellow card call may also have been subconsciously influenced by noise and

the players' immediate reactions, which suggested a worse situation than the reality.

This subconscious bias from referees is likely the main driver of home-ground advantage, more powerful than travel, familiarity and player attitudes when home or away. This is scant consolation for Bok supporters, but the cycle turns, and we will have our opportunity, at home, to turn the tables.

I was encouraged that the players are taking responsibility for the defeat, and hope this is more than just a public relations ex-

ercise. It's important, in such situations, not to be dragged into wasting time and energy on a factor you cannot control, even when you have a viable case.

The whistle, like the weather, remains beyond the preparation or execution of any team, and sometimes the reality is that you have to "win" matches away from home by five points just to be equal!

What we should be doing is channelling frustrations into a bonus point win against Australia and then a showdown for the championship against the All Blacks, on our turf, with our advantage, and, hopefully, with 15 players.

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'Fire captain and coach'

FORMER Pakistan cricket greats and fans demanded a new national team captain and coach yesterday after an embarrassing defeat against minnows Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe, who only started playing Tests again in 2011 after a six-year exile, pulled off an upset 24-run win against number four-ranked Pakistan in the second Test in Harare on Saturday, squaring the two-match series.

Former captain Ramiz Raja said Pakistan needed to replace Misbah-ul Haq.

"Misbah gave stability to the team but he seems to have run out of ideas, so we need someone with fresh ideas," Raja told AFP. "I think Misbah's shelf life is over and with these ideas we will stand nowhere in front of South Africa."

Former express paceman Shoaib Akhtar said Pakistan need a vibrant coach to replace Dav Whatmore, the former Australian batsman who took over last year.

Fans showed anger over the team's embarrassing defeat, hoping a local coach could solve the problems. — Sapa-AFP

TV HIGHLIGHTS

TODAY
Basketball: Eurobasket, Italy vs Spain at 5.35pm on SS6
Cricket: Fifth ODI, England vs Australia, from Southampton, at 3pm on SS3
Cycling: Tour of Britain at 2.30pm on SS6
Gridiron: NFL, Cincinnati Bengals vs Pittsburgh Steelers at 2.30am (tomorrow) on SS1
Soccer: Telkom KO draw at 8pm on SS4; English Premier League, Swansea vs Liverpool at 9pm on SS3; Italian Serie A, Parma vs Roma at 8.45pm on SS6; Spanish La Liga, Athletic Bilbao vs Celta Vigo at 10pm on SS5; varsity games, women's final, Tuks vs UJ at 4.15pm, men's final, Tuks vs NMMU at 6.45pm, both on SSSelect