

Gil Weber's Pregame Discussion Points

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These pregame discussion points were originally written in 1999, and then were updated in 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016, and now in 2017 following recent International Football Association Board (IFAB) decisions and advisories from FIFA and USSF. Here is the latest revision to include new instructions from IFAB/FIFA and USSF plus “tweaks” based on my experiences.

Pierluigi Collina was famous for his two-hour pregame discussions. He would go over the tactics typically employed by each team, and the propensities of individual players. All aspects of play and competition rules were discussed so as to minimize chances for unfortunate “surprises.”

Obviously we're nowhere near that level, and we don't have the luxury of time for leisurely pregame discussions. And so as I stated in the original preamble, adapt these instructions to your own style and temperament. **Don't try to repeat verbatim what you read here.** To cover all I discuss would probably take 45 minutes, and typically we are lucky to have 10 minutes before a game, especially during tournaments. Instead, think about the points I make, reflect on how I ask assistant referees to deal with them, and then create your own pregame discussion **addressing those points that meet the needs of your games and the experience levels of your assistant referees.**

This is particularly important when you're working with very young or inexperienced ARs. In their entirety these pregame discussion points will utterly overwhelm a young AR who's probably still trying to get comfortable switching the flag from hand to hand. (For the inexperienced or very young see my second document on pregame discussions for referees working recreational games and competitive youth games up to age 14.)

But assuming you're working with ARs who have some reasonable comfort level on the touchline then somewhere in these discussion points will be just about anything you might need to discuss. And so with that introduction, here goes.

1) *Getting Off To a Good Start*

I prefer that the three of us collectively check-in both teams. But if we have to split duties then first confirm that you get a coach/manager pass for each of the team personnel who will be on the bench. Then when collecting the player passes be certain that the jersey numbers on the team roster sheet are the same as the numbers on the shirts. Make any necessary changes on the roster. And please look at the photos on the player passes. Does the person standing in front of you bear any resemblance to the photo? If not, hold the pass and show it to me. **Do not return it to the player or a coach.**

2) *Focus and Concentration*

You'll help me most by focusing your attention inside the lines for the entire 90 minutes (or however long). Please don't turn around to see who chases the ball when it goes into touch behind you or watch to see what happens to the ball when it goes behind the goal line. Our game is between the lines, so watch the players and the field at all times.

If you're the AR on the bench side the only time you should look outside the touchline is when you need to deal with substitutions, or if you have issues with the conduct of those at the team benches. If you can manage these things quickly and politely without becoming distracted (e.g., a coach who constantly crowds the touchline blocking your view), that's great. If not, call me over and I will deal with the problem.

If you're the AR on the spectator side your only concern outside the touchline should be if those spectators crowd the line and make it hard for you to run or to see past midfield to the far corner flag. If you can deal with the crowd quickly in these cases, that's great. If they don't give you a clear view of the entire touchline ask them politely once or twice to move back a bit, but don't get into an argument or hassle with spectators. If you need help call me over and I will deal with it.

Of course both of you should be aware and let me know if spectators migrate behind the goals and create a distraction for the goalkeepers. Otherwise, forget what's outside the lines and, instead, focus on the players.

3) *Watch the Players!*

The players are smart, and if one of them is going to do anything nasty it will probably happen when he or she thinks we're not watching. If you turn to watch the ball behind you, that's when a player will look, see a chance, and elbow or punch or spit. Then an opponent is lying face down on the field and I look at you with a facial expression asking, "*What happened?*" If you then look back at me with eyes like a deer caught in headlights, we're in trouble. We can't

let that happen. We have to be aware, so watch the "hot" areas of the field at all times.

This is particularly important after a goal. If all three of us immediately bury our noses in our notebooks and none of us is watching the players then we've created an opportunity for something bad to happen. Therefore the trail AR should write first, then the lead AR, and then I'll write last. This way we always have eyes on the field. Please back me up on the score, misconduct, and time.

If I whistle for a free kick close to you and I have to come to the spot of the foul to deal with players or position the wall, do **not** watch me! **Nothing is happening where I am.** Instead, watch the players behind me, across from you in the penalty area. **That's where the problems could happen** because the players know my attention is away from them. Then they will look and see that you're watching me, and something ugly happens. If they see you watching them the nasty stuff is less likely to happen. So watch the field!!

4) Let's Watch Each Other

On dead balls the first thing we must do is make eye contact. If you have something to communicate try to tell me what's on your mind with a hand signal. For example, pointing to a player and then pointing to your eyes will be enough to tell me to watch. Or patting your badge after I've whistled for a foul will tell me that, in your opinion, a caution is in order. But be prepared with jersey numbers and specifics if I look to you but don't appear to have a clear grasp of the situation.

If it's a more serious matter that requires discussion, then motion me over. Remember that it's less than ideal if all you can say is "*Someone threw a punch*" with nothing more specific to help me deal with the "perp" or "perps." Again, please be prepared with jersey numbers, teams, and specifics.

And if I don't see you and it's really important that we deal with something **now**, then shout at me. Get my attention!

Let's be certain that for a presumed foul, a throw-in, a corner kick, a goal kick, etc., we make eye contact before you signal with the flag. For example, if you run full speed to the corner flag and you're 100% certain it's a corner kick don't immediately point to the corner. Stop a yard from the corner, come to attention, and make eye contact just in case I happen to be pointing up the field for an earlier foul in favor of the defense. That will help prevent situations where we end up pointing in opposite directions. If we make eye contact first and I don't signal then I'm looking to you for assistance – it's your decision, corner kick or goal kick, throw-in for the attackers or defenders, etc.

At each stoppage it's also important that you look across the field to the other AR. Make eye contact. If there is a flag up behind my back (e.g., for a substitution), mirror it.

If I fail to look over and make eye contact after several stoppages, don't worry. I'm not intentionally ignoring you. I've simply violated my first rule that says we must make regular eye contact. **But if I do ignore you, don't let me continue! If I fall asleep on the job, wake me up!** Give me a shout and point to your own eyes -- I'll get the message to pay attention.

5) Where I Really Need Your Help – Part 1: Offside

Offside is your primary responsibility. (Note: I'm assuming for purposes of these discussions that the officials won't have "beeper" flags or electronic headsets.) But please remember that we have specific and recently updated instructions on what must happen during play before we raise the flag. Please do not raise the flag for a player in an offside position who's doing nothing other than occupying space. If a player is in an offside position but is not participating (i.e., he is not close to the ball and will have no "impact" on play or opponents), let him be. He can set up a barbeque and roast hotdogs for 30 minutes if he wishes, but he's not to be flagged for offside until you decide he's become involved.

I'll be depending on you to judge when that player has interfered with play or with an opponent, or has gained a benefit as the result of being in an offside position. Wait just a second and see what develops, **especially if the ball is purposefully played by an opponent who misplays it onward to the passing attacker's teammate thereby resetting offside**, or if the ball was saved from going into goal by **any** opponent which, of course, does **not** reset offside.

Let's also be careful not to raise the flag too soon for a player in an offside position who has had the ball played in her direction only to have the teammate who last touched the ball run through the defense and collect her own pass. A second or two late and accurate is better than a fast but, ultimately, inaccurate flag.

Now, if you do raise the flag (and it's not a mistake that you immediately correct) then keep it raised until I blow the whistle, or wave it down ("*Thanks very much*"), or, if I've gone completely asleep, until the defense takes the ball and there is no longer a benefit to the defenders to call the offside infraction. Of course if the ball goes over the goal line for a goal kick or over the touch line for a throw-in in favor of the defense, then you can drop the flag.

However, if there is an attack in progress and I run past your flag that's raised for offside **don't drop the flag simply because I did not see it**. Stay there with the flag raised. **You're not the one who looks foolish -- I am.** And

that's my problem. The defense and its coaches will certainly let me know that your flag is up. (Oh yes, will they let me know!)

But we cannot allow a goal to be scored if you had the flag up for offside and then brought it down because I did not see it, and you decided instead to catch up to the attacking play.

Please also remember this very important point if I miss a flag. It does no good for you to stand there silently like the Statue of Liberty if I run past you or turn toward the coffin corner with your flag raised behind my back. (Note: Again these pregame discussions assume no “beeper” flags or electronic headsets.) You must find a way to **immediately get my attention**. I prefer that you shout (loudly) “*Flag up!*” or “*Gil, offside!*” Please do not yell, “*Ref!*” That’s what the coaches and spectators will be shouting throughout the game and I won’t listen to your shout of “*Ref*” any more than I listen to theirs.

But please do find a way to get my attention quickly because that silent flag held up behind my back while I continue running unaware of it only shows to everyone that we’ve had a communications breakdown within the referee crew. That is an easy way to lose their confidence in our ability to manage the game.

6) *Where I Really Need Your Help – Part 2: Ball Out of Play*

If the ball goes into touch or over the goal line and then comes back into the field, raise the flag and stand there until I blow the whistle or until the attack breaks down and there is no longer a threat on goal.

We cannot allow the ball to go off the field, come back in, and then go into the goal. If you've dropped the flag and I never saw it, and if I then award a goal we'll have big problems. So keep the flag up as long as there's a threat of attack!

7) *Where I Really Need Your Help – Part 3: Goal or No Goal*

If the ball goes in the goal and, in your opinion, it's a good goal then follow standard USSF procedures. But do not immediately run full speed up the line because if I decide it's not a goal then you have to run all the way back. So make eye contact first! (Remember... **eye contact at stoppages!**)

If I agree it's good then trot slowly up the line looking over your right shoulder at the goal line and penalty area to observe for post-goal nastiness, especially fights over the ball in the net. **Watch the players!!!**

On the other hand, if in your opinion it's not a good goal then stand there, at attention, per USSF instructions. Raise the flag **only** if the goal-scorer was offside.

I'll look over at you and realize something is not right. You can motion me over and tell me "*Number 6 clearly impeded the keeper and prevented her from getting to the ball*" (or whatever it was). If I agree we'll cancel the goal and restart for the defense. If I disagree we'll go with the goal and I'll keep the defenders away from you. Don't be offended; it's not personal and I'll take the heat.

If in your opinion it's not a good goal and I fail to make eye contact and, instead, point and run directly to the center circle, raise the flag behind my back. Again, I hate flags behind my back, but I've violated my own rule about making eye contact. Simply standing there won't do any good at that point.

You must get my attention. Shout if you have to. The other AR **must** mirror the flag. ("*Hey, dummy, look behind you.*") **But do not allow me to restart the game if I've made some fundamental error that could change the outcome of the match.** (If I do then I'll have to deal with the problem in a report to the competition authority.)

Finally, if the ball goes into the goal and comes back out, and if I did not realize it and play continues, **raise the flag to signal ball out of play and stand there.** You **must** get my attention, so do not drop the flag. Once I see you drop the flag and trot up the touchline. A goal is a goal, and my falling asleep does not negate that. If necessary shout to get my attention. This is a game-altering incident and we have to get it right.

If I've turned away from you and headed up field and have not heard your shout, the AR on the other side of the field should see your flag and should mirror it. ("*Hey, dummy. Look behind you!*")

The most important thing is that we get it right. My ego is not more important than the game, so get my attention and tell me I'm wrong if I'm wrong.

If the other AR does not see and mirror your flag, and if the game has had some stoppages and restarts it's too late to award the goal. All you can do is tell me at half time or full time and I'll have to deal with the consequences of my inattentiveness by filing a report with the competition authority.

8) *Where I Really Need Your Help – Part 4: Fouls You're Convinced I Did Not See, and Those Just Outside the Penalty Area*

We know that ARs are now expected to become more involved in managing the game than in years past: for example, with fouls much closer to them, or when the AR has a better line of sight than the referee who's shielded by a forest of bodies. Please help, but please also watch me since I tend to use advantage more than most other referees. So, early in the game, try to get a feel for my style.

Now, if you're convinced that I would have called the foul had I seen it then raise the flag **in the hand that indicates the direction of the restart** and give it a wiggle. And here comes one of your most important duties – making me look good. :o)

Remember that if you're calling a foul I did not see I won't know what you saw. And that's the time the players are sure to ask, "*What's the call, referee?*" I won't know, but I can't let them know that I don't know.

So please, every time you call a foul, give me a little hand or foot signal – something **very** subtle (e.g., shirt pull, handling, push, trip, etc.). **Remember, I may not have seen the foul, only your flag, and I have to sell the call to the players!** If you can help me avoid the deer-in-the-headlights stare when the players ask me, "*What was the call, referee?*" I'd be most appreciative. :o)

If the infraction will result in a free kick for the attackers close to the edge of the penalty area and I give you a look asking for help (inside or outside?) and it's going to be a kick from outside the penalty area, then after the whistle give me a subtle little motion with your left hand and stand still which will indicate to me that it was outside.

9) Penalty Kicks

Let's talk for a moment about penalty kicks. Please be cautious signaling for any fouls in the penalty area that would result in a PK. Now understand that's **not** saying the penalty area is exclusively mine – it's not. **We're a team.** But I'm supposed to be able to see what's in front of me, and I'll take responsibility for that. I'll also protect you from irate defenders and coaches.

Just be certain before you put yourself in everyone's sights when signaling for a PK. If you are convinced that I would have called it had I seen it, make eye contact and signal by wiggling a raised flag in the **right hand**. Don't forget the subtle little signal with the left hand to tell me what foul you saw so I can sell the PK to the defense.

After the whistle hold the flag horizontally below the waist confirming to me that the foul was inside the penalty area. (In 2017 this is still a USSF-approved signal, but other referees, especially those not from the US, may tell you in their pregame instructions not use it.) Immediately thereafter go around the corner flag and take up your position off the field at the intersection of the penalty area and goal line.

On a penalty kick be a goal judge and also watch for goal keeper encroachment. If the goal keeper moves forward early **and that early movement clearly makes a difference in her favor**, take one step across the goal line and make eye contact. That discreet movement will be a signal to me

without drawing attention to you, and it leaves me with options. But be 100% certain that the early forward movement actually made a difference.

I'll watch for encroachment into the penalty area by the field players and any issues with the kicker. If the ball rebounds from the keeper or frame of the goal back into the field do not immediately try to rush to the touchline to judge offside. You'll get caught in no-man's land and you're useless to me from there if an offside decision is necessary. Instead, stay on the goal line and be a goal judge. I'll watch for offside. Move out to the touchline only when it's safe -- when the play has cleared the penalty area and the ball is going toward the other end of the field.

10) Taking Responsibility For Penalty Kicks

There are two exceptions for fouls in the penalty area -- times when you should signal for a PK without any hesitation.

a) If a defender does his best Luis Suarez imitation by sticking a hand above the head or away from his body ("makes himself bigger") and unquestionably, deliberately handles the ball, and if I'm the only person on the planet who did not see it, then give the standard USSF signal for PK. Again, this is not something marginal. This is clearly, unquestionably handling -- a game-changing incident -- and you're convinced I was screened or had a huge mental lapse.

b) If I've turned to run up the field and a defender in his penalty area clobbers an attacker behind me you must raise the flag. That flag will be behind my back (and flags behind the CR's back should be avoided whenever possible) but we're talking a game-destroying incident if it's not dealt with promptly. So raise the flag, and the other AR should be observant enough to see it and mirror. (*"Hey ref, look behind you. There's a problem significant enough for me to flag and point past you."*)

Remember also that for violent conduct you have seen but I have not you can keep the flag raised as long as necessary -- even through multiple stoppages and restarts -- and we can still deal with the "perp." This is a special exception to the usual standard that once the game has restarted the referee cannot go back and address misconduct. But you **must** keep the flag raised until I see it if we're to deal with violent conduct in such circumstances.

Finally, at incidents in the penalty area you have one more opportunity to preserve the integrity of the game even if it means mine is diminished. (Remember, I said previously that my ego does not matter -- the only thing that matters is getting it right.) If I whistle for a PK, caution and show a defender a yellow card, and you're **absolutely convinced** I was fooled by a dive, or that there was no contact, or that the attacker fouled the defender, then do not move

quickly toward the corner flag. Instead, make eye contact, stand there, motion me over, and explain what you observed.

You'll be telling me I was fooled and mistaken, and clearly the mistake I've just described is a major error for the referee. It's so significant that USSF now says even if the error is corrected after consultation with the AR (i.e., no PK given, no caution, and restart with dropped ball) any assessment for the referee will be considered a failure -- maximum possible score 69 no matter the game is rated competitive, difficult, or very difficult.

So this is a very big deal **if you're absolutely certain**. But right is right, and integrity is everything.

11) Keep Calm and Think!

Manage the game as best you can when play is nearby. Handle encroachment on free kicks close to you and on corner kicks. Come into the field if you need to. But keep an eye on the attackers and read the game. They may want to take a quick free kick, and if you're standing next to the wall 10 yards inside the field when they put the ball into play then we all look bad when I have to blow the whistle and restart again after you've retreated to the touchline. So use common sense here and try to stay at the touchline if you can.

Talk to the players when they're at the corner arc and you just know one player is going to kick the other player's ankles. ("*Play the ball ladies, not the ankles.*") If the player then kicks the ankles you intervene -- raise the flag. Talk to the players -- politely, respectfully, but we're in charge. They are not.

If they complain ("*Hey, linesman, that was offside*") don't be bothered. Players will complain and disagree. **They're allowed to disagree** and vent a little emotion. That's part of an emotional game. **But they're not allowed to dissent and disrespect you**. You must decide when disagreement turns into dissent. When you have had enough, call me over. But don't be overly sensitive.

Of course if they tell you to stick the flag where the sun doesn't shine (or something equally colorful) then call me over. Anytime you call me over it has to be for something that you could not manage yourself. So you must be prepared to tell me, "*White number 6 spit at blue number 12,*" or whatever. Do not call me over to say that green number 5 is complaining about offside. I don't care about that and you should not be over-reacting to that sort of stuff.

So hear what needs to be heard and ignore what can be ignored. Stay calm and in control.

Work the same way with the coaches, other bench personnel, substitutes, substituted players, and spectators. They're allowed to disagree as long as they

don't get out of line, or become disruptive to the game, or interfere with your running on the line. Try to manage things as best you can, politely but firmly. If you've tried but cannot deal with elements outside the touchlines, then call me over. **I will take out the trash!**

If you see something on or off the field involving players or substitutes or substituted players that in your opinion needs a caution or send-off then in addition to raising your flag to get my attention please give me a subtle, private signal. To recommend a caution put a hand over your badge. For a send-off you can touch your back pocket. If I see either of those signals I'll know you need to speak with me. Be prepared with jersey numbers, teams, and specifics.

Again, please remember to back me up on score, misconduct, and time. All basic positioning and flag mechanics are to standard USSF teachings (for corner kicks, throw-ins, goal kicks, substitutions, etc.). Just follow what you were taught and you'll be fine.

12) Deal With What's Important. Don't Be a Micromanager!

One last thing I'd like you to remember. I'm not picky about the exact blade of grass for free kicks far from goal, for offside restarts, etc. If the player is close, let her play. Show a player where to take a throw-in, and if she gets close let it go. But if she ignores your direction and goes 10 yards away after you pointed to the proper spot, then raise the flag.

In the same vein, I don't care if the ball is placed a few inches outside the goal area for a goal kick when the nearest opponent is 40 yards away. Who cares? Certainly not the opponents. Please don't raise the flag and motion with your hand to tell me that the ball has to go back a few inches after it's been kicked 60 yards into play!

Or if the keeper is punting the ball and reaches, barely, a few inches outside the penalty area just before kicking (clearly handling outside the area) **don't raise the flag** if the nearest opponent is many yards away. Who cares? It's utterly trifling, so let them play.

Instead be game-smart and give a shout. "*Keeper, watch your line when you're punting the ball.*" He'll appreciate that bit of humanity. Then if the keeper persists we have the option to act after we've provided a reasonable warning.

On the other hand, if the keeper comes out to challenge and handles outside the area thereby preventing the opponent an opportunity to play the ball, then of course you flag it. That handling is unfair. **But let's not micro-manage trivial offenses that don't matter in the long run. Being technically correct when it's not necessary only causes preventable irritation for the players, coaches, and spectators.**

Finally, let's discuss what to do if there is a fight, a mass-confrontation, or other incident bordering on or becoming bedlam. If things seem at a level where I can control things and settle the situation on my own then stay on the touch lines and observe. AR1 should move quickly to the bench area and do everything possible to avert escalation of the situation by keeping apart those on the benches, and also preventing anyone coming into the field from that touch line. AR2 should observe, take numbers, and do whatever is reasonably possible to prevent any spectators from entering the field from that touch line.

On the other hand, if things seem to be spinning out of control (a mass-confrontation or full-blown fight), then come into the field and let's set up the USSF "Triangle of Control." Get close enough to do what you reasonably can to calm the situation, but don't get into the middle of things, and certainly not so close that you might get hit.

Let's not all focus on the same hot spot. Do observe and make mental or written notes as the situation allows. And look for ways to prevent other players from joining in as they can easily turn a manageable situation into chaos.

Once things settle down we can get together to compare notes and, as circumstances require, deal with players, coaches, substitutes, substituted players, spectators, etc.. Above all, remain calm and observant. And if you see anyone getting behind my back give me a **really loud** warning shout.

Now, any questions on things I covered, or are there things I did not cover that you'd like to discuss?

OK, let's have fun! :o)

Gil Weber is a National Referee Emeritus, State Assessor, Referee Instructor, and Assignor. He was also a contributor to the USSF's *Advice to Referees* (first 11 editions), *Laws of the Game Made Easy*, the *Guide for Fourth Officials*, the *Women's World Cup '99 Fouls and Misconduct* video, *You Make the Call*, and other Federation referee educational programs.