

## To VAR or not to VAR?

That's the hot question in football at the moment which [Patrick Hook-Willers](#) explores

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Video Assistant Referee, or VAR as its more commonly referred to, is the hottest topic in English football at present, given the start of a series of experimental uses of the technology in selected competitive matches in the FA and Carabao Cups.

The system is used for four types of incident: goals, penalty decisions, red cards and mistaken identity. The current guise of VAR works at the referee's discretion, with the first step of its in-game use being the referee requesting a review of an incident. The second step involves the incident review being undertaken by the VARs, who then advise the referee about what the video shows. The referee then has the option to either review the footage themselves, or to accept the information given by the VARs, following this step, they implement their informed decision.

Currently there is no challenge system for players to request the use of VAR, nor are there concrete plans to do so, which has proven to be a point of anger and confusion among fans.

The declining standard of refereeing in key moments, attributable to the speed and intensity of the game at the top level increasing, has been cited by many as the main argument for the implementation of VAR.

The Professional Game Match Officials Limited group (PGMOL) say that refereeing decisions are correct 98% of the time, though it has been increasingly clear to spectators and pundits that key decisions are often clearly incorrect upon video review. The use of VAR

clearly comes in to alleviate the 2% of incorrect and often match changing decisions that are called wrongly by referees.

The assistance given by the system also boosts the integrity and authority of referees, as difficult calls can be assessed and, in theory, confirmed either way, removing player protestations.

The success of goal line technology and the immediate acceptance of goal line decisions must be taken into account when discussing technology in football officiating, as that has been an immense success in the Premier League, and proves that there is a viable place for technology assisting officials in top level football.

However, it can easily be argued that goal line technology proved so successful as the incidents in question have an absolute answer, it is either over the line or it isn't. Many of the decisions that are under the jurisdiction of VAR are still uncertain even after review, as there remains a matter of interpretation, especially with close and unclear incidents.

As well as the inability to get complete clarity, many believe the impact on the game itself would detract from the product that the Premier League has become, making it too sanitised and predictable; large numbers of those same fans also believe that incorrect decisions provide important talking points and are major parts of what people enjoy about football, and removing them removes some excitement from the game.

The one minute and eight seconds needed to overrule the offside decision and award Kelechi Iheanacho a goal in the FA Cup replay between Leicester City and Fleetwood Town was judged by pundit Robbie Savage to be too long, and the lack of communication to supporters on what was being done added even more confusion, rather than easing it.

Despite this, the decision was correctly overturned, and the goal allowed to stand, which presenter Jake Humphrey and former referee Graham Poll praised, posing the question that getting correct decisions is more important than having one minute of non-action.

The matter of continued uncertainty was highlighted during two of the tester matches in the FA Cup, with Brighton striker Glenn Murray scoring a controversial goal in their match with Crystal Palace, the first game in English football to use VAR. Rio Ferdinand questioned the methods used by the VARs, who opted not to use a crucial angle available to them which appeared to show Murray using his arm to guide what proved to be the crucial goal into the back of the net.

In the third-round replay between Chelsea and Norwich, the use of VAR came repeatedly into question, with two red cards and a rejected penalty decision being eligible for VAR to be used. Chelsea forward Willian was brought down in the penalty area by Norwich defender Timm Klose, only to be booked for diving. Upon review, the VAR informed referee Graham Scott of what the video showed, and the original decision was upheld despite the video showing clear contact, again raising the question of how best to use VAR for matters where there is a subjective interpretation to be made.

The debacle surrounding the Willian incident stirred up a number of strong opinions from those in and around the game, as well as with fans. One twitter user called it "pathetic" and stated that "VAR fans like their steak well done", Premier League record goal-scorer Alan Shearer labelled the system a "shambles", while BBC 5 Live commentator Connor McNamara was more forgiving, recognising that the system is still in its early stages of development. McNamara said to blame the officials and VARs for the Willian failure was the right way to go on this occasion, writing that "if the human operation of the technology is not right yet – don't blame the technology. If you get a fancy new coffee machine but don't make a perfect cup first time, it doesn't mean the machine is useless."

Its clear that there are still many flaws, but like McNamara, it is important to recognise that the technology is still in its infancy, FIFA themselves acknowledging that the system will need around 10,000 individual tests to get it near perfect, or as near to perfect as is possible.

The tentativeness of many about VAR's impeding on matches, as well as the confusion of when it can actually be used, could be removed by using a Tennis style challenge system. Tennis is a similarly fast paced, momentum based sport, and by placing the discretion of when to review in the hands of the players, many of the system's problems could be eradicated. Fans still get to moan about something in the concourses, the confusion on when it can be used is gone and the referee's lives are made infinitely easier.

Although its fair to say that the VAR technology will change the game somewhat, it is an essential development in an era where so much is at stake to the clubs involved in the game. I firmly believe that once it is perfected, the issues addressed and the best method of requesting reviews found, the technology will be embraced by those who have chastised it, and will improve the game that so many of us love.



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