

Fair play is not a discovery of modern-day associations in their fight against unsporting behaviour on the field. The ideal is as old as organised football itself. The following article deals with the questions why and how "Fair Play" came into being and how the ideal of fair play has developed under diverse outside influences.

BY: PROF. DR GUNTER A. PILZ

is a sports sociologist at the Institute of Sport, University of Hannover, Germany.

Fairness means play fair, but foul if you have to" (quote from a youth player). "It's a total waste of time and in no way the right preparation for a serious match, if I have to shake hands with my opponent and wish him well. We are professionals, and this idea of harmony is total hypocrisy" (quote from a professional). The statements of the young German player and the reaction of the Scottish international to the prescribed welcoming procedure before a match illustrate clearly the problems with which today's sport is confronted. Is fair play in the modern professional game a sincere moral code of conduct? Can it possibly be so?



For many in the game, the need to succeed and the classical understanding of fair play just do not go together. Picture: FIFA Museum Collection ("Tackled" by E. Prater, 1910)

Sport as a leisure activity

Fair play as we know it today took form and shape in Victorian England. The aristocratic English "Gentleman of Leisure" regarded sporting competition as a means in itself. To the aristocrat, winning was not only unimportant, it was perhaps even something to be despised. To be mentioned and praised in the press (apart from the Royal Bulletins) was considered improper. The result was much less important than the taking part in the game. The English sociologists Dunning and Sheard summarise the principles behind this amateur code of honour in the following way:

1. The game is played as an end in itself, participated in simply for the joy of taking part. Attitudes which involve going for victory at all costs are correspondingly despised.
2. Self-control and above all the control of one's feelings whether one wins or loses.
3. The idea of "Fair-Play", i.e. the equal chances of both sides, combined with a total respect for the rules of the game, and a knightly approach of "friendly rivalry" between the opponents.

Social control

Fair play meant more than just keeping to the rules. In the ideal situation, sport had one simple aim: to provide one with fun, enjoyment, pleasure. Inherent in this situation was the clear delineation between work and leisure. It was believed that professionalism would turn a game that was sport into work, thus destroying its very reason for existing. The historical development of the Laws of the Game show how agreement on the rules was closely linked to a social control which was both strict and there for all to see. The "Cambridge Rules", the ancestors of our present Laws of the Game, reflected the social attitudes of the middle and upper classes of Victorian England.

Fun becomes serious

Social control over the behaviour of the players thus had an important influence on the "Honour of the Gentleman" and the spirit of fair play. There were no rules or regulations about free kicks, the referee or sending off a player. The idea of the referee, as an external and effective social control, was only introduced in 1871, when entry to the FA Cup was opened to all clubs, including those of the working classes. This required new forms of control. The "Honour of the Gentleman" no longer held for all concerned. Football was no longer played just for fun. Success at the game became a part of the war between the classes. For the one, it became a way to move up the social or economic ladder; for the other it became a way to demonstrate superiority in the political set-up. Obviously, in this situation, the old rules of fair play were no longer valid. Fair play had lost its social foundations. As a German sociologist remarked clearly: the social basis of the "desire to win according to the rules, according to the fair play of the old knightly order" , was replaced by a "crude desire to win at all costs", as a French colleague so succinctly put it.



With the spread of football (here a scene from the FA Cup Final of 1891, between Blackburn Rovers and Notts County) the original spirit of fair play began to decline, and the need for Laws of the Game became more urgent. Picture: FIFA

The pressure to succeed

Two more important decisive turning points reinforced this trend: firstly, the rise in the social value attached not only to success at sport, but to the very sport itself, and, secondly, the presentation of sporting occasions as media spectacles. The need to be effective in the electronic media circus became essential, and this led to the further commercialisation, professionalisation and marketing of the game, blossoming into a situation where the demands and the pressure to succeed became almost a sport in themselves. The young players' understanding of fair play became far removed from the classical understanding of it, and the more performance- and success-orientated they became, the more this was replaced by the moral of "the acceptable foul": "Fair play to me means to foul an opponent fairly". Fair play was reduced to the view of "an acceptable foul", meaning one which avoided as far as possible injuring the opponent. The idea of fair play moved from being a matter of attitude to a question of expediency, a weighing up the costs and effectiveness: how much can I (still) allow myself to play fairly? Sport had adapted itself to the norms and values of modern society, more precisely, to those of a society where success means everything.

Surrender to the trend?

The above analysis presents a gloomy, resigned picture of the possibility of educating for fair play. Is there nothing that can be done about it? If it is really true that fair play is first and foremost a matter of weighing up cost and effectiveness, then the penalties for unfair play must be made so high that it does not pay to play unfairly. Rule-breaking should thus be more effectively and more strongly penalised. FIFA's experiences at the World Cup 1994 in the USA confirmed this. It is not enough, however, to tighten up on the laws or to penalise offenders more strongly. It is also essential to aim at education for fair play and to point out the importance of playing fairly - especially at younger levels.

Cultural differences

At the same time, one has to be aware of different attitudes in different countries. Our research has shown not only a movement of the understanding of fair play in the direction of the "acceptable foul". We have also found different approaches to the value attached to fair play in different cultures. Players in Germany consider a revenge foul, for instance, much more unfair than players in France do. On the other hand, French players consider a deliberate foul to prevent a goal being scored as more unfair than a German player does. And a player from England considers trying to influence the referee by simulating fouls or injuries as much more unfair than either his German or French counterpart.

The need for education

The characteristic values and norms of fairness in football were essentially those of the English middle and upper classes: they took shape and were defined in Victorian England, and they are in essence the basis of the present [FIFA Code of Conduct](#):

- Equal opportunities
- Voluntary acceptance of the Laws of the Game
- Respect for the opponent.

The essence of fair play can be summarized in the following four sentences:

- A fair player accepts the Laws of the Game
- A player does his utmost to win within the Laws of the Game
- A player, to produce his own best performance, looks for the best possible opponent, and allows this opponent to produce his own best performance
- A fair spectator must be impartial.

One thing is clear: fair play will not appear on its own, it has got to be established, demanded and experienced in everyday practice. The stars of the game must be the models for the young, but the daily pressure to succeed does not make this an easy task for them. The fact that different cultural interpretations of fair play come into being here, increasing the emotional involvement of both players and spectators, means that the efforts of national and international associations towards a better observing and a more sensitive awareness of fair play become even more important. They must be continued and strengthened. FIFA, continental confederations and national associations would be well advised not to relax their efforts in these directions, both in terms of sanctions and of education. The aim must be to rid international games of unnecessary emotion by working towards an international and all-embracing understanding of the meaning of fair play.

Situation A: A player grabs the shirt of his opponent, who has passed him, before the half-way line. Situation B: A defender sees no alternative, if he is going to prevent a goal being scored, but to kick the attacker in the legs from behind. Afterwards, he apologises to his opponent. Situation C: A team attempts to provoke a particularly temperamental player in the opposing team. Situation D: A team plays for time, to ensure victory.

Results based on this year's questioning of 1330 youngsters in Niedersachsen, Germany, between the ages of 9 and 15 (average age 13), of whom more than 80% have played for more than four years in a club team, and who regard the Fair Play Cup as "good". (Source: Fair Play Cup Niedersachsen/Prof.Dr. Gunter A. Pilz).



Niedersachsen Fair Play Cup

Simple ideas are often the best. Proof of this can be seen in the way the young footballers of Niedersachsen, in Northern Germany, go about dealing with fair play. For ten years now, the Football Association in Niedersachsen, in an effort to stress the importance of fair play, has arranged an event which is both exemplary and unique in the world. The event, with the title "Niedersachsen Fair Play Cup", was inaugurated, with the help of sponsorship, as a competition for players in the 12-14 age group.

The aim of the event is to get the youngsters involved in thinking about fair and desirable ideas. The competition is based upon actual games, but attempts to alter behaviour through the learning process. This distinguishes it from the normal fair play initiatives, which are usually reduced to simple requests for fair attitudes and behaviour. In the "Fair Play Cup", however, there is a conscious effort to put educational aspects first: awareness through action. At the heart of the competition are the games played over the season by the 200 teams involved, organised in local leagues in Niedersachsen according to talent. After each match, usually through discussion in the dressing rooms, points from 0 to 15 are then awarded to players, trainers, other involved adults and the referee, similar to a school report. The points awarded are based on a set of guide lines. The discussions involve not only what happened during the actual match, but also general impressions of the occasion, including the behaviour of the spectators. But what is special about this process is the fact that each team awards points to THEIR OPPONENTS.

In this way, as well as the usual league table, a Fair Play Table is compiled for all the teams in the four area leagues. But this list is kept secret until the end of the season, at the end of which the 20 fairest teams are rewarded with a small financial prize. The four area winners qualify for the finals, which take the form of a camp lasting several days, at the Niedersachsen Sports School in Barsinghausen. As well as having lots of fun together, the four teams are given

special topics dealing with fair play, which they discuss together, and they are then asked to present their findings to the full group. To conclude, the players award points, which decide the overall winner.

Bernd Stöber, trainer of the German Football Association's youth teams which won one and took third place twice in the Under-16 European Championships, has often been present on these occasions. He has summarised clearly the praise of the worlds of politics and sport as follows: "Fair play is more important than success at any price. Youngsters actively involved with ideas of fair play are laying a solid foundation for the future." This view is supported by the results of the scientific research which goes hand in hand with the other aspects of the project.

[Return to Table of Contents \[TOC\]](#)

[Copyright](#) © 1994-97 FIFA. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1997 [En-Linea, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.