THE GOAL THAT WAS AND WASN'T

Regan Lance Reitsma and Gregory Bassham

Reitsma and Bassham introduce a sporting paradox.

It's the 2008 Champions League Final. The score is tied, 2-2. In the waning seconds of stoppage time, PSV Eindhoven's Phillip Cocu whips a low, curving shot toward the right corner. Arsenal keeper Jens Lehmann dives, deflects the shot against the post, then smothers the ball with his body just as it appears to cross the goal line. The referee's whistle blows, a goal. PSV win! The crowd roars. But the referee, noticing his linesman frantically waving his flag, runs to the sideline and after a moment's consultation indicates his final decision, no goal. Arsenal score in extra time and are crowned champion. Although ESPN television replays are inconclusive, a photo published in the next morning's London *Times* reveals that the ball *had* completely crossed the line. PSV were robbed! They did score a goal and win the game. And they are the true champions.

Or are they? What determines whether a goal is 'scored' or a match 'won'? Are sports facts (goals, runs, baskets, fouls, wins, etc.) determined by what *really happened* (the Facts View) or by what referees or other officials *say* happened (the Refs View)?

Philosopher Thomas P. Flint has recently offered an interesting new take on this long-running debate.[1] He claims that both sides are partly right and partly wrong; and in the end, he defends a qualified Refs View.

As Flint points out, a simple, unqualified Refs View seems to imply, absurdly, that referees can't make mistakes. For if a referee is a 'fact-maker,' and his calling a shot a goal makes it a goal, how could his call possibly be wrong? As a conceptual matter, it can't be, since his call brings the relevant sports fact into existence. But it seems

doi:10.1017/S1477175608000109 © 2008 The Royal Institute of Philosophy
Think 19, Vol. 7 (Summer 2008)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press

patently obvious that a referee's calls can be mistaken. The *Times* photo reveals that Cocu's shot met the definition of 'goal' in FIFA's rule books. Not to mention, the referee in our fictional case made an initial call – a goal for Cocu – but went to the sideline to consult with his linesman. This behaviour makes perfect sense, but only if we reject the idea that the referee is an unqualified 'fact-maker.' If the referee's call 'goal' makes a goal, then the facts are already set and his jog to the sideline to make sure he is 'correct' seems unmotivated and misguided. Also, FIFA has an interest in evaluating the quality of referees – as do many fans, for whom it seems a favorite pastime. If referees are the architects of sports facts and their calls are always, by definition, correct, then there would seem to be no grounds for counting some referees very good and others very bad. So, the Refs View, if unqualified, has silly implications (What we call the 'Facts View' Flint calls the 'Goofy View', and what we call the 'Refs View' he calls the 'Tyranny of the Zebras'. His essay considers basketball examples, and 'zebras' is a reference to the uniforms standardly worn by basketball referees).

Why not accept the Facts View, then? Here is what Flint says. The Facts View claims that sports facts exist independently of the decisions of referees: "Facts are facts no matter what people (or referees, for that matter) say" (Flint, p. 245). In some contexts, this seems right. As mentioned a moment ago, the referee who consults with a lineman is assuming, properly, that he is fallible and can make mistakes. Also, if we do not account for the discrepancy between the referee's call and the indisputable facts of the case, how do we make sense of the PSV fan's indignation? (Or consider the England fan who recalls, painfully, Maradona's "Hand of God.") Certainly, such a fan has some grounds for feeling aggrieved.

On the other hand, as Flint points out, the Facts View has implications that are highly curious – he thinks dubious. Every serious football fan knows that Italy won the 2006 World Cup. But on the Facts View, does he know this? Is it

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even true? How do we know that Italy 'really' won all the games necessary to get to, and through, the World Cup Final? To raise only one real-life controversy, was the penalty call made against Australia in stoppage time of their final sixteen game with Italy legitimate? (Tumbling Fabio Grosso's bemused glance at the referee, we think, suggests not.) If Italy did not really earn a penalty at the end of the Australia game, then they did not really score a goal. And if they did not really score a goal, then they did not really break the tie at the end of regulation, did not really win the game, and did not really meet the official criteria necessary to move on in the tournament. If Italy did not really win the Cup, who did? Was there no real champion?

Flint doesn't emphasize this further point, but it would aid his case against the simple Facts View. Think of the revisionary-minded historical investigation necessary to determine who really won the PSV-Arsenal game. On the Facts View we ought to correct the official statistics and award Cocu and PSV a goal. But to declare the real winner, we can't simply pay attention to controversial or mistaken calls at the end of a game. To be consistent, we'd need to check any such calls in the midst of the game. (Did Arsenal, for example, have a legitimate penalty appeal waved off?) To be warranted, then, in naming PSV the victor, it would be necessary to take a close examination of the many consequential decisions made by the referee throughout the game and determine that none of them were mistaken. If some were mistaken, as is inevitable, given that such calls generally have an effect on subsequent play, we would be forced to factor out these effects. For various reasons, practical and theoretical, that's not possible, and we would not be able to make a warranted judgement about who really won in the 'factual' sense. Considerations such as these might incline us to abandon the Facts View, especially about 'real winners'. But what, then, to adopt?

Flint's theory, as mentioned, is a qualified Refs View. A referee's calls are 'fact-making': what makes a goal a goal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is that the referee has awarded one to a team. Thus, Cocu didn't score – despite the physical facts and the official rules. But to escape the silly implications of the simple Refs View, Flint is quick to point out that a referee's calls are subject to various criteria. A referee is a fact-maker with the responsibility to, as best he can, make into reality what should be so made, and the physical facts and official rules determine what he should call. Flint distinguishes between a referee's calls and his judgments. His judgements ought to be impartial, grounded in a knowledge of the official rules, and sensitive to the physical facts, and he ought to make his calls in accordance with his best judgements. But in the end his calls create sports facts; his judgements do not. In the PSV-Arsenal game, the referee's call determined what the score 'really' was, but his judgment is in error. In this case, because he relied (justifiably, perhaps) upon the mistaken testimony of a (well-placed) linesman, he failed to make 'what should have been' into reality. There is a lack of normative fit between 'is' and 'ought'.

An analogy is central to Flint's solution to the paradoxes. A referee is akin to a judge in a contest (such as Olympic gymnastics) and his decisions, Flint tells us, are akin to *awards*. A good judge is a judge who impartially applies the relevant official criteria to the physical facts and declares a winner accordingly. When a judge in an essay contest declares one essay to be the 'best', he is effectively awarding first prize to that essay. Similarly, when a football referee signals 'goal' for one team, he is effectively awarding that team with a goal. No call, no award. No award, no goal.

Flint's view does explain neatly how fans can know that Italy were winners. They really did win. Despite all the uncertainties and imponderables about possible bad calls, it is clear the respective referees did decide, among other things, to award Italy a penalty for Grosso's spill, enough goals to defeat France, and so on.

However, there are a number of problems with Flint's view.

First, many referees' decisions cannot be analogized to awards. Sports officials often make decisions that don't

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reward or penalize any particular player or team. A football referee might rule that a field is playable, a ball is underinflated, or that two and a half minutes of extra time should be added to a game. None of these rulings can usefully be described as, or compared to, awards. These are simply game management decisions.

Also, we think there is a simpler and more intuitive solution to Flint's paradoxes. Consider another important area of rules-governed behavior: the law. Many legal terms are notoriously ambiguous. Take the term 'murder', for example. If we ask a prison warden how many murderers are incarcerated in his prison, we are plainly thinking of *convicted* murderers. If, on the other hand, we ask a city police chief whether many murders go unreported in his city each year, we are speaking of *actual* murders, not reported or adjudicated ones. There isn't any point in asking what 'really' counts as a murder; we simply need to be clear about whether we are discussing convicted or actual murders.

Precisely the same ambiguity occurs in sports talk about 'fouls', 'off-sides violations', 'goals', and so forth. A fan who returns to her seat and asks "How many yellow cards does Marco Materazzi have?" is clearly asking how many cards have been *officially given* to him. Similarly, a fan who asks how many goals Thiery Henry has scored in his career isn't asking how many goals he ought to have been granted, or how many he would have scored if all his games had been flawlessly refereed. By the same token, however, fans do often speak of 'fouls', 'goals', etc. in a realist, factual sense. For example, basketball fans who complain of 'phantom' or 'ticky-tack' fouls clearly aren't using 'foul' in any referee-dependent sense.

So if we were asked whether PSV really scored, part of our answer is that it is necessary to disambiguate the question: "Yes, they did" if you are using 'score' in a realist, factual sense. "No, they didn't" if you are thinking of these terms (as fans often are) in an official, statistical sense. There are two senses of 'really' scored, an official, statistical sense and a factualist, realist sense.

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Thus we agree with Flint that there is a sense in which referees are 'fact-makers': their calls determine official statistics. PSV have to live with the cold, hard truth that they are not, and will never be, in the official record books as the 2008 champion (Consider Hall of Fame baseball umpire Bill MacGowan's remark to a skeptical player: "If you don't think you were out, read the morning news paper"). That said, we feel that describing referees as 'fact-makers' – constructors of the truth – could easily mislead; it seems to grant them a special, mysterious power, which is strained. This concern is alleviated by pointing out that the justifications for giving referees final authority are pragmatic. Think about what a game would be like if we did not grant referees this authority. How many plays would have to be reviewed? Games would get choppy and overly long. And would we have to replay each game that, in hindsight, we recognize was refereed imperfectly? To avoid such consequences, we make referees' calls, by convention, *final*. Thus, referees are 'fact-makers' in the trivial sense that their final and official calls are, in fact, final and official. But no human convention can make refs infallible. They are often, in an important sense, 'fact-mistakers'. And this is the sense often uppermost in fans' minds and pub arguments.

Gregory Bassham and Regan Reitsma are professors of philosophy at King's College, Wilkes-Barre.

Note

[1] Thomas P. Flint, 'The Basket That Never Was,' in Jerry L. Walls and Gregory Bassham, eds., *Basketball and Philosophy: Thinking Outside the Paint* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 244-55.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press