

FA plot to end millionaire lynch mobs

By Henry Winter



Forget white balloons and old Goldenballs: the most significant development in the Wild West of English football unfolds in eight county FA leagues where the Football Association are trying out a rule that permits only the captain to speak to the referee. If the 10-week pilot scheme is successful, the FA will work with the PFA, Premier League and Football League to introduce the rule into the professional realm next season.

Just imagine it: no more millionaire lynch mobs surrounding an official, trying either to distract him from a colleague's offence or pressurising him into punishing an opponent. Shameful episodes like the hounding of Andy D'Urso by Roy Keane and an enraged Manchester United posse will be outlawed. United players will not be allowed to gang up on Mike Dean as they did after Chelsea's John Obi Mikel clattered Patrice Evra in September. Clubs will agree in advance that the lines of communication can flow only between captain and referee. Anyone else attempting to join the inflammatory appeals process will be told first to "back off" and then be cautioned (as is permissible, although rarely enforced, under current Laws).

In adopting an idea which the FA cheerfully admit they have borrowed from their rugby union cousins, only John Terry will be able to plead Chelsea's case to Howard Webb, Mark Clattenburg and friends. Steven Gerrard will be Liverpool's

sole appointed conduit. Only William Gallas can fight Arsenal's corner. Ditto Ryan Giggs at United. And so on.

The brat-packs are being disbanded. Opinionated characters like Wayne Rooney, Didier Drogba, Ashley Cole, Jamie Carragher and Cesc Fabregas must learn to hold their tongue, to leave disputes to the men with the armbands. It works in other sports. "We can definitely learn from rugby union where only the captain can talk to the referee," said an FA spokesman yesterday.

Graham Poll claimed in his autobiography that Aston Villa players took it in turns to question his decisions during the 2000 FA Cup final, even mentioning a newspaper report alleging the Tring referee supported Chelsea, Villa's Wembley opponents. "Villa players repeatedly made snide remarks inferring that I was biased," wrote Poll (in fact a lapsed QPR fan). Such contact would be prohibited if the professional game embraces the FA initiative.

Barnet, commendably, are ahead of their more celebrated peers in addressing the curse of dissent. The League Two club boast a vastly improved disciplinary record since taking striker Adam Birchall's advice to cede all debating responsibilities to the captain. Dissent has disappeared. Referees, who are human, are known to respect Barnet more.

From next season, Barnet should be joined by the 91 other professional clubs if Soho Square gain a positive reaction to their nationwide pilot scheme which began

on Saturday.

As well as the one team, one voice rule, the chosen grass-roots leagues involving thousands of players of all ages will benefit from a roped-off area for spectators, who often ruin the enjoyment of players and other onlookers with their aggressive reactions.

The touchline tantrums scar too many games at this level, forcing children and referees out of the sport. "Improving respect between players and between spectators is the No 1 priority within grass-roots football," added the FA spokesman.

Urging amateurs to behave, when they see their Premier League idols continuing to rant and rave at officials, may appear the wrong order of action, but logic pervades the FA's line of attack. Soho Square wants to compile evidence before facing the professionals and tackling dissent amongst the glitterati.

After five weeks of the county scheme, players, officials and spectators will be asked to fill in an online questionnaire giving their verdict. The FA will also collate feedback from leagues which are similar in quality and location but are not taking part in the project. A comparison will be made in terms of dissent and off-field trouble.

Armed with statistical evidence of how discipline can be improved by the captain/referee rule, the FA will be in a stronger position to convince the PFA, Premier League and Football League of the merits of the rule. A working party is planned. Respect may be making a comeback.