

Match of the Day

Reflections on an unfair football match



Today I refereed a football match. It was a five-a-side game and was the most one-sided match I have ever refereed. The team in blue scored at a rate of one goal every thirty seconds for the first two minutes. Of course it was meant to be a one-sided match as it was part of the 'Blow the Whistle' campaign organised by the Micah Challenge. The game was supposed to be a light-hearted reflection of the unfair world in which we live.

The UK Government, along with governments across the world, has made promises to tackle this unfairness and 2007 marks the half-way point to meeting their goal of halving global poverty by 2015. Some progress has been made but there is still much to be done on issues like trade justice, climate change and the treatment and care of those suffering from HIV and Aids. By joining with thousands of other Christians across the UK who took part in 'Blow the Whistle Sunday' on 20 May, we were calling on the Government to both honour the promises it has made and encourage other world leaders to effect change in their own countries. But, back to the match....

The match pitted Irish League players in prime physical condition against what can only be called a motley bunch of unfit, middle-aged clergy. It wasn't a terribly even contest, not very fair at all. But that was the very point we wanted to make; the match was a metaphor for contemporary patterns of international trade. The current state of affairs in global trade is just as imbalanced. Let me expand the metaphor, just a little.

Fairness

In one sense the match was completely fair. There were five players on each side, the rules were scrupulously observed and applied equally to both sides, there was no bias in the size of the goals and the ball was the same for both teams. However, such was the imbalance in strength between the sides that such 'fairness' became a mockery of the term.

The clergy were not chosen because of their footballing prowess, they were just a group of local volunteers. On the other hand, the 'Footballers' (let's call them this for convenience) were chosen because of their prowess. In other words the selection criteria were very different. The footballers had two sets of advantages; first they were probably, on average, thirty years younger than the clergy therefore were in much better physical condition and second, they possessed innate footballing skills and had dedicated much of their time to training and honing these skills.

Both sides knew the laws of the game. For sake of argument let's say that they knew the laws equally well. But the Footballers knew the unwritten rules of football as well, the rules that the clergy didn't know at all. They knew about moving into space when your team's in possession but you as an individual don't have the ball; they knew about talking to each

other, drawing markers out of position and all of the other things on which the 'Laws of Association Football' are silent.

Neither team was really a team as such. Neither side had played together before but while the clergy floundered in incoherence, the Footballers instinctively played as a unit, supporting each other when in possession of the ball and falling into a neat defensive formation on the few occasions when the clergy did mount a putative attack.

The strengths that the clergy did have were of no use in this contest. They were men of integrity, possessing well over a century of spiritual experience between them. They were clearly men of God, but that cut no ice in this context. They had many skills, years of training and experience in their field of pastoral care but, again, that was of no use at all in this arena. In fact, it could be argued that their spirituality, training and experience were actually a hindrance. Their whole worldview and culture militated against them. Their reason for taking part had nothing to do with winning or losing, that just wasn't the point of the exercise. The footballers were young men, full of vigour and testosterone, trained to compete and with a passion to win. Winning is what football is all about for serious players; all that they do in their training and playing is directed towards winning. Their worldview and culture determined that their attitude to the game would put them well ahead of the clergy before a ball was kicked.

To be fair, the attitudes of the teams were not completely polarised. The footballers too knew that winning wasn't the ultimate aim of this game but I could see how it took time for the bigger purpose to kick in to their thinking. They went at it hammer and tongs for the first two minutes, by which time they were four nil ahead and already starting to look a bit lost. What's the point of playing if you're not playing your hardest and playing to win. They had to make a positive effort to restrain themselves, controlling their natural instincts in order to achieve the ultimate purpose of the game.

Taking action

So, what was I to do? If I let things continue as they had done for the first two minutes the final score after fifteen minutes would have been thirty – nil. All interest would have been lost before half time and the whole thing would have become a useless exercise, even for the purpose of the Micah Challenge. The point would have been made in five minutes and the rest of the time would have been a dispiriting farce, devoid of any meaning and an embarrassment to all. I suppose I had four options:

Reduce the number of players on the Footballers side. To be honest, even if there had been only one of them on the pitch, he still would have won.

Increase the number of players on the Clergy team. But they would only have got in each other's way and the Footballers would still have been in control until sheer weight of numbers brought other factors into play and, even then, application of the obstruction and foul play laws would have led to sendings off and the re-establishment of the primacy of the footballers.

Biased refereeing. This could have had an influence but, yet again, the gulf in ability meant that the Footballers didn't need to come within a mile of committing any infringement and the Clergy couldn't get close enough to the Footballers to commit an infringement to which

I could have turned a blind eye. Even if there had been infringements to invent or ignore, breaking rules in a cavalier way leads to dangerous places. Foul tackles can break legs, unjust decisions can lead to anger and setting aside the rule of law has a tendency to spiral downwards into anarchy.

Rewrite the rules for one side. This is what I actually did. I told the Footballers to play 'two touch' football, that is each player was only allowed to play the ball twice, then someone else had to play it before he could touch it again. This made a little improvement but still the goals flowed. So, we went to 'one touch' for the Footballers. This too made a difference and the clergy even managed to score a single goal. The advantage of this course of action was that there was a clear ruling that everyone could understand and the general laws of the game could still be applied fairly. In addition, the Footballers had a new challenge to overcome and could push themselves to use their skills at a high level. The game could become a real game.

Rewrite the rules for both sides. This is similar to the last option but more subtle. We could have introduced a rule that said that players over the age of forty could touch the ball as often as they liked but players under forty had to play one touch football. The effect would have been the same but it might have been less arbitrary because it would have had the rationale that aging always introduces unfairness and this needs to be allowed for.

Change the teams. We could have agreed to have three clergy and three footballers on each side. This would probably have worked. It would have meant changing some allegiances but it would have introduced a whole new dynamic to the match. The three Footballers on each new team would have had to work out how to integrate very weak partners into their new team. Would they involve them fully, knowing that they would be most likely to make a mess of things and give away possession or would they play to each other and leave their Clergy team members to fend for themselves? What would happen if the game became closely competitive and passions became inflamed?

The supporters

The match was watched by a group of about fifty primary school children and this provided some atmosphere. In the first minute or two they were somewhat awestruck by the skills of the Footballers but they quickly became bored with the procession of goals and the ineptitude of the clergy – the match was clearly not what they understood a match to be. They were encouraged to shout their support, which they dutifully, but rather half-heartedly did. At some point during the second half I heard them chanting, with some vigour, a variation of a chant used in support of the Northern Ireland football team. It is sung to the tune of the refrain of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic':

We're not Brazil, we're Northern Ireland,
We're not Brazil, we're Northern Ireland,
We're not Brazil, we're Northern Ireland,
But it's all the same to me.

They were chanting: 'We're not Brazil, we're the ministers....' For some reason, they had adopted the underdog and become involved. They were taking something from their own culture, something that stirred an emotion in them and they applied it to this new context. The Clergy were clearly heartened by the singing, the footballers were amused and, in some intangible way, the match was the better for it.

Reflections

Parallels with the imbalances of world trade and global economics in general are pretty obvious. The patterns of unfairness brought about by history, culture, allegiances and many other factors are well paralleled. The responses to try to bring about a fairer balance are thought provoking and, while they are obviously not grounded in real socioeconomics, they could provide some useful foundations for discussion in youth groups and other places.

Two factors that are of further interest are as follows. First, there was nothing at stake for either party in this match. The dynamics would have been different if there had been something substantial at stake for either or both sides. The means by which a better, fairer game could have been achieved depended on the good will of the Footballers and their willingness to play within rules that obviously disadvantaged them. Would they have been willing to do so if their club contracts had been resting on the margin of their victory? This leads to the second factor, the referee and the Laws of Association Football. All the players accepted that the laws apply and that the referee acted with real authority. Only in a very extreme situation would either side have flouted the laws and rejected the authority of the referee.

Obviously there is much at stake for all players in the global game, from governments and multinational corporations to families and individual citizens. The question of how the Footballers would have played if their contracts had been at stake raises some interesting issues, perhaps even suggesting some intriguing lines of thought for the global game.

On the question of a universally accepted authority, I can't see any straightforward parallel. The obvious possibilities are the authority of the United Nations or a similar organisation (but does anyone really accept their authority?) or, theologically, the authority of God Himself. While Christians and other Faiths accept their own understanding of divine authority, this acceptance is not nearly widespread enough to be paralleled with the acceptance of the Laws within football.