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Paul Gardner's Soccer Talk is a benefit for Soccer America members.

Soccer's insane rule: forcing a team to play short-handed

By Paul Gardner

When people pay money -- plenty of money -- to watch a soccer game, they are entitled to receive in return a genuine soccer game. And the minimum requirement for that, it seems to me, is that they get a contest between two teams of 11 players.

The players may not be the ones who the fans would wish for, there may be injuries and suspensions keeping some guys out, and once the action has begun, the players may not perform as well as expected. And it may rain. Or the referee may have a bad day. All sorts of unpredictable things may happen -- *will* happen, for that is the essence of a competitive game.

Uncertainty about the result gives small teams the buoyancy of hope, and eats away at the confidence of big teams. Without those opposing forces, the fierce excitement of competition is greatly reduced.

Yet we have a situation in soccer where the game itself, the very rules of the game, work to destroy the vital element of hope in a game. Where the rules decree that the paying fans shall not see an 11 vs. 11 game. But rather 11 vs. 10 - or even 11 vs. 9, as happened the other night in the game between Dallas and Colorado.

In that game, referee Mark Geiger red-carded two Dallas players in the first half -- Daniel Hernandez at 34 minutes, Blas Perez two minutes later. I'm not concerned here with the validity of Geiger's decisions, both of which seemed to me justifiable. What does concern me is what happened next, when the rules step in to order that Dallas must now play nearly two-thirds of the game with only nine players.

At which point the game is destroyed, or at least irretrievably distorted. The possibility of Dallas being able to withstand Colorado for nearly an hour is simply not realistic. And so it proved, with Colorado running out 2-0 winner of a game that had been drained of the suspense and tension that it promised, a game that had been turned into something approaching a farce.

It is easy enough to finger the immediate culprits -- Hernandez and Perez -- and blame them for the fiasco. Hernandez, in particular, should know better than to get himself cautioned for dissent because, given his appetite for rough tackling, a second yellow was always likely. It took only nine minutes.



Hernandez and Perez were duly punished, and will be further punished with suspensions, which is as it should be. But the empty shell of a game left when they departed makes no sense at all. Is there any other sport that so determinedly seeks to ruin its own product?

I have felt for some time now that the rule stating that red-carded players cannot be replaced is a bad one. It is a rule that can drastically alter a game, that can remove the competitive excitement ... that can turn the spectacle of good soccer into the boredom of simply waiting for the inevitable.

I think fans who have payed money -- a lot of money -- to see a soccer game should be allowed just that, an 11 vs. 11 game. The rules should insist on that, as a minimum.

So -- I believe that ejected players should be replaced. Which definitely, and unacceptably, reduces the punishment for the offending team. The clearest answer to that difficulty would be to award a penalty kick for each red card. That may not be *the* answer, but is an answer, and a workable one.

Soccer has already been through a very similar rethink, and it came up with a workable solution -- one that was vigorously opposed at the time. That was back in the 1950s, when there was no substitution, and when the whole idea of substitution was widely viewed as, if not actually cheating, certainly something that would *lead* to cheating.

The restraining force of tradition weighed heavily: Soccer had been played without substitutions for nearly 100 years, things should not be changed. But against that was the unavoidable evidence that too many games were being marred when teams had to play with 10 men because an injured player could not be replaced.

By 1970 the argument for substitution had triumphed and that year saw the first appearance of substitutes in a World Cup. And yes, substitution has altered the game in a way that was not foreseen. Its use to replace injured players has been completely overtaken by its importance as a tactical weapon for coaches.

That unexpected development must give pause to any move for a radical rule change. But what I'm suggesting is that the situation now with red card ejections is similar to that with injuries back in the 1950s. Then the rules were standing in the way of correcting a distortion. Now the rules are actually *creating* a distortion.

Unless the idea is to inflict public humiliation on a team, I do not see the point of a rule that turns a potentially top-class encounter into a sad apology for a game, one drained of both excitement and good soccer, like the Dallas vs. Colorado affair.

I have discussed this matter frequently with many soccer people. Their reaction is overwhelmingly against any change. Which is to be expected. At the same time, I have found that those who defend the idea of reducing a team to 10 or fewer players tend to rely on the "it serves them right" argument. Which, given what is at stake in terms of providing fans with a true game of soccer, hardly measures up as an intelligent response.

But soccer -- by which I mean, ultimately, FIFA -- has no obvious way of judging developments of this sort: Firstly to investigate the situation, secondly to decide whether a change is necessary, and then, if a change is needed, to work out the details of that change.

I have listened to a lot of suggestions about what should be done. The most frequent, I'll admit, is "Nothing" -- but I remain convinced that the current rule that does not permit replacements for red-carded players and therefore forces teams to play short-handed, is outdated and damaging to the sport.

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