

Differences between refereeing the men's and women's game?

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As a woman FIFA Referee with many years experience refereeing both men's amateur, professional and women's international level football I am often asked, "What is the difference between refereeing the men's and women's game?" "Is there a difference?" To that question I answer a resounding "Yes." In my opinion to successfully referee women's matches a referee must understand some fundamental differences between male and female football players.

Women tend to develop very strong interpersonal relationships. Teammates often become very close friends, much like a second family. Women players usually share more than just their football lives with one another. There is genuine care and concern between members in a team. To illustrate this point, the next time you watch a women's match, notice that at an injury, many of the injured players teammates will crowd around to check on her status. Whereas in a men's match, unless the injury is very serious, rarely does a teammate come over to check on the fitness of a teammate. Usually there is only a crowd around the trainer's water bottles as the injured player is being attended to.

While male players can and often do play alongside teammates they dislike, in a women's team this is very difficult and creates a great deal of interpersonal, emotional dissention. A women's team with players who do not get along off the field is very unlikely to be successful on the field. Women players tend to take a hard foul committed against a teammate as an attack against their entire team. Women "feel" fouls suffered by their team members and in addition have LONG memories regarding rough treatment by opponents. My experience refereeing men has taught me that men will retaliate for a hard or unfair challenge almost immediately in most cases. Women are much more patient than men to "seek revenge." It is not uncommon as a referee to deal with an incident in a match between opponents only to discover later that it is retribution for a clash, which may have occurred more than a season ago and the hard feelings still linger. After a physical game, men are much more inclined to shake hands and forgive than women.

Prior to the inaugural season, in 2001, of the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) Women's Division 1, Professional Soccer in the United States, my professional league refereeing experience consisted only of men's professional football. My experience in refereeing women was much less than my experience refereeing men. Early last season I found I needed to make a few necessary adjustments in my positioning to successfully referee women's football in comparison to my positioning for men's football.

Generally referees can expect to run wider as play doesn't move up and down the field quite as rapidly. Estimates are that the distance covered by a referee is similar in a women's game compared to a men's, and the work rate of the referee should be comparable since it is necessary, in general, to position yourself wider during active play.

At most goalkeeper punts and goal kicks, it is recommended that referees position themselves opposite the Assistant Referee in the same half of play as the goalkeeper or team kicking the ball because the ball ordinarily will not travel into the opponents half of the field.

Throw-ins require observation early in a match to determine how far the ball can travel. Many women players have the ability to throw the ball as far as men. We have seen women players utilize a "flip throw" at a throw in which travels 40 or more yards in the air.

Free Kicks also require consideration for referee positioning. Male players have much more success on free kicks using their physical strength while in women's football free kicks regularly offer intricate passing or great precision. In addition it has been noted that women's games are made up of many more short passes than you will normally see in a men's match. I attribute this to the physical strength differences between men and women but also to the pleasure women seem to derive from playing and connecting with their teammates.

Women's games generally are found to be wide open, attack oriented, spectator pleasing events. Teams spend enormous energy continually attacking the opponent's goal, creating numerous goals and scoring opportunities in every match. Many games between competitive opponents will see several goals being scored due to the continual relentless pressure put upon defenses.

So to answer the question, "Is there a difference?" I say, "Yes, different." In my opinion, one is not better than the other, just wonderfully different. Credit should be given to FIFA for recognizing the differences and promoting both men's and women's programs at the world level. As football fans realize their sport is played by players of another gender who participate with the same skill, passion, enthusiasm and intensity, they too will be drawn to appreciate and embrace "the differences" which make this the beautiful game for everyone.

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