The Referee as Educator: Hermeneutical and Pedagogical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, in contemporary sports studies scarce attention is devoted to studying the referee and his/her functions in light of the philosophical and pedagogical approach. For this reason, the main aim of this study is to use a hermeneutical philosophic methodology to reflect on the role and functions of this figure, and to show his or her importance in preserving the intrinsic values of sport in front of youth and society.

Starting with a historical analysis of the referee and the sport judge in ancient Greek athletics, this study will highlight how such this important figure has always been a key element of competitive sport. This study will demonstrate that refereeing is a practice that needs a specific set of hermeneutical skills and the development of complex pedagogical knowledge and ways of acting. It will also define the concept of "refereeing" in light of a pedagogical approach demonstrating that this practice is, fundamentally, a communicative action implying an ethical and hermeneutical dimension of the referee as a critical-reflective professional committed to enforcing sport's rules and values.

In conclusion, the study will stress the importance of looking at referees and sport judges not as a mere technicians and evaluators of performances in competitions but as educators whose specific knowledge must be developed in all of the courses for their training and education.

KEYWORDS

referee, education, philosophy, hermeneutics

Introduction

Nowadays, in contemporary sport studies little attention is paid to study the referee and his/her problems and functions in light of a philosophical and pedagogical approach because the research on this figure is mainly psychological (Weinberg & Richardson, 1990). Furthermore, it is said that the powers of referees and officials should be put back into the hands of sport educators and the sport participants themselves (Nlandu, 2008).

For this reason, our aim is to reflect on these problems, wondering if from a theoretical point of view the referee (and the sport judge) can be conceived of as an educator and how, in case it happens, this educational role and function is perceived by youth. In this theoretical study we will not make any distinction between referee, judge or sports official, and our reflections will include all these figures. The referee

embodies a fundamental ethical responsibility and always acts to preserve the intrinsic values of sport and its main component (competition) in front of youth and society (Caballero et al., 2010).

Refereeing is a practice that needs a specific set of hermeneutical skills and the development of complex knowledge summed up in a communicative action, which always implies a hermeneutical dimension, and a critical-reflective attitude committed to enforcing sport's rules and its values.

The referee is a fundamental component of sport, as without him or her there can be no competition. This figure has to be understood not only in light of the tension between social systems and social situations (because sport as game has to follow certain kind of regulations and these regulations are constitutive for competition) but also in light of a pedagogical triadic conceptual relationship. In fact, the referee is, first of all, connected to the concept of sport interpreted in its meaning of social system; and secondly, tied to the society in which we live and its rules one can find in all of the sports.

From a hermeneutical point of view, the problems of refereeing are very complex because of the different perceptions of competitive situations in sport. Therefore, this study will demonstrate that refereeing embodies a tension of different structures of perception and always has a hermeneutical and pedagogical perspective whose meanings are not recognized and understood by our society (this is more evident in football).

Very often, referees are not aware of their pedagogical functions and of the complexity of their duties as educators and "philosophers" of sport, because of their being considered and perceived of as mere technicians and evaluators of performances in competition. This lack of awareness is due to a lack of pedagogical and philosophical knowledge not sufficiently developed within the system of their initial and continuous education.

The referee from sociology to hermeneutics

Sport conceived of as a competition, that is a social practice related to a human community represents a system in itself, which is an integral part of the social and educational system embodied by society as a whole (it can be considered one among its subsystems). Therefore, the referee and the functions he or she implies within groups as well as sport conceived of as a social and educational system needs to be systematically analyzed from many scientific points of view (first of all, from the philosophical and pedagogical ones).

Sport sociology has shown that the referee in sport competitions is the personification of two parties' wishes for keeping the rules. The role of the referee is rather uncommon compared to other forms of social life (for example, legal cases), because the referee can slow down or accelerate the competition. There are only a few sociological works about it the problem of the referee.

Heinemann (1990) has summed up the main sociological problems of the referee as follows:

- referee's personality structure and its sociological implications, biography, and social background,
- the social preconditions for the service/mission of the referee,
- function and meaning of the referee within the dynamic process of the competition, i.e. the meaning of the referee in order to avoid conflict and aggression,
- the evaluation of the referee by the spectators and the media,
- the effect the referee has on the players on the pitch.

Sociology justifies the presence of the referee because sport conceived of as competition always embodies a situation in which interests are conflicting, compromises are impossible, but at the same time both parties have a certain interest in solving the conflict (zero-sum game). Both parties accept the rules, but the interpretation of the rules is not so clear, and it needs a human interpretation.

For sociologists, sport competitions are always zero-sum games, meaning the one party wins what the other party loses. The "property" of the game is undeniable, and the referee has the certain competence of

filling uncertainties of the rules. Associations and the public have a certain interest that the game and the result are reached in controlled way and without unfair conditions.

Therefore, the function and meaning of referees in sport has to be understood in the eyes of the tension between social system and social situation. Sport as a social system means that the competition has to follow certain kind of regulations and these regulations are constitutive for the competition. Players follow the rules and the referee supports/stabilizes this order of the rules.

Conceiving of sports as social situations also means that competition is bound to a rule system board. This comes into being only through the players and partially also through the spectators. It is more or less a spontaneous, original act that involves the whole personality of the player. It is a dynamic action and parallel to this we can find an emotional development.

This leads to attention from which the function and meaning of the referee can be derived: the referee is always an interpreter who has to avoid, on the one hand, that a system of rules applied in a strict and coercive way to a game leads to restraints that kill spontaneous and dynamic actions. On the other hand, he has to avoid the situation in which too many spontaneous and dynamic actions become problematic for keeping the rules system into power and destroy the identity of the game.

Within competition, we find tensions between the necessity of the social system and the dynamics of the social situation that competition sums up; the referee has to balance those. The tension gets bigger and with it the significance of the refereeing; therefore, the bigger the importance of the social norms and rules are on the one hand and the I-identity and I-will-to-power of the person on the other hand.

The problems of refereeing increase because of the different perceptions of competitive situations by other participants. That means sometimes that some people see a breaking of the rules while the referee does not see it; on the other hand, the referee might see a foul while the opponent does not (Clegg & Thompson, 1989). So here the referees is again among the tensions of different structures of hermeneutical perception, but the referee has to remain independent and to show his or her hermeneutical capabilities and abilities.

With reference to these hermeneutic capabilities, there are high expectations on those of the referee: that means not only quick decision-making but also flexible interpretation of rules that keeps the game running. By his or her interpretation of the rules, the referee influences the perception of those who take part in the competition which, without the presence of the referee, can be perceived, on the one hand, as loud, unfair, unstructured, and full of conflicts and without rules, societal, friendly, cooperative, social, helpful, and continuing. Or, on the other hand, in case of his or her presence, perceived as well structured, corporative, just and fair, serious, and competitive; but at the same time conforming to the rules, coercive, strongly structured, and aggressive. All these different hermeneutical interpretations, for example, lead to the question if it is necessary that in scores of different forms of education to rules should be introduced to make the pupils aware of the differences of the game with or without a referee.

The referee and his/her function from a historical point of view

History can help us better understand the hermeneutical and educational functions that referees have always played in sport. If we look at what it remains of the beautiful western pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, we can see the drunken Centaurs during the wedding of Peirithous, king of the Lapiths, violating the sacred law of hospitality by attempting to rape the beautiful Lapith women. In the center of this composition, Apollo, god of reason and order in the world, acts as a sacred referee and judge, intervening to punish the offenders who violated the laws of hospitality.

Apollo embodies here the cultural prototype of the referee and sport judge in the Greek world. Inserted in a systemic specific cultural and social context (the Olympic one), he expresses three deep meanings we can start from in order to develop our hermeneutical and pedagogical analysis.

1. An ethical and religious meaning. The context in which Apollo as referee is called upon to play his role is a deeply “ethical” and religious context, because it is linked to the issue of hospitality and peace.

Hospitality is a fundamental concept to ancient Olympism and can be considered the base of the ancient Olympic games. The Greek considered hospitality as a fundamental law for their society.

Also, the need to find rules for a peaceful coexistence among the different peoples from Greece was fundamental. They needed to create a common identity and a system of relationships and communication among all the people belonging to the Panhellenic community. This was the main aim of the Olympic games and this is the reason why we find the myth of hospitality as a foundational myth of the Olympics.

The Olympic judge and referee was given his authority (which was at the same time political, moral, social, and religious) by the community of all of Greeks. Therefore, his function went beyond the limits of a pure and simple competition in a strict sense. The figure of the referee was always connected to the concept of rationality, science, justice, reward, and punishment; all concepts embodied by Apollo and his character.

2. A cultural and political meaning (connected to the concept of *agón*). The referee was an integral part of what we can call the “*agón* system”, that is, a cultural system aimed at avoiding violence and preserving people from destruction by war. This system required (community) control and (individual) supervision: the referee’s function was summed up in this second concept. This supervision expressed the link between ethics, society, and religion and was rich in pedagogical and philosophical meaning.
3. A pedagogical and philosophical meaning. Respecting the rules of competition is fundamental for keeping peace because competition was for the ancient Greeks not only a metaphor of society but also a way in which peace could be put into practice.

The referee always played a pedagogical role which was not reduced to a mere application of a punishment to any incorrect behavior or misconduct, but implied a hermeneutical action of interpreting and understanding whom is the most “worthy” and deserves a prize according to criteria of “equity” and not mere “justice”.

The main aim of the referee and judge in the ancient world was to supervise and control human actions so to ensure that they didn’t go beyond the limits of the rules and laws of human community (of which the gods are always guarantors) and generate violence and death.

The referee had to recall not only the limitations of every human being (the motto “*gnóti sautón*”, which has to be interpreted as a sportive motto too, meant “man/woman, take aware of your limitations as human being [when you compete] in front of the gods”) but also the possibility to excel at competition and surpass everyone by respecting the rules on which competition is based and by respecting the gods.

Therefore the referee had only to reward, in front of his same community, one who was “a more capable among others”, that is, the athlete who showed his devotion to the gods and his body. For this reason, referees’ actions had deep pedagogical meaning.

The Greeks used the term *ellanódikos* (which means judge of all of the Greeks) to indicate the figure of the referee in the Olympics and in all the other main Greek sport competitions (Miller, 2004). But the Greeks also used other terms to indicate the referee, such as the word *diáitetés*. The first term (*ellanódikos*) is connected to the word *díke* and the second one to the word *diáita*. This is very interesting from a philosophy of law and hermeneutical point of view.

The term *diáita* is linked to an arbitration connected to interpersonal or family problems (that is, to the sphere of private law, one would say nowadays), while the concept of *díke* expresses not only a judgment that dealt with what is sacred and with the gods (with a religious sphere) but, first of all, it expresses something tied to the laws of the community (or the communities, that is national and supranational social systems) in which they lived. Therefore the concept of *díke* was connected to the sphere of public law, the sphere of what was sacred and supervised by the community; the great

community of all the Greeks, divided in different *póleis* but united under the same civilization and *paidéia*, who recognized in sport and competitions their common identity and roots.

Interpreted as a person who acts in function of the *díke* and of its educational and social principles, we can understand how refereeing was, in ancient culture, not just something only that referred to any technical problems of how to apply mere rules and to judge or sanction, on the basis of any given norms, some behaviors in sport competitions. Refereeing or acting as a judge in the Olympics or in whatever other kind of sport competition was an educational and social action that implied a commitment to democracy, religion, and *paidéia*.

The referee within an educational perspective

Therefore the question is now: how much does it remain of such an ancient referee's functions and roles in contemporary referees and sport competition judges? We state that it remains a lot of and there remain many traces to follow and that allow us to conceive of the referee as an educator. All the functions and roles we have just mentioned above when reflecting on the referee in the ancient Greek world can be found in contemporary referees and judges.

To sum up, from a philosophical and pedagogical point of view, a referee and a sport judge is always:

- one equal among equals (among players/athletes, coaches, and spectators),
- a supervisor of human actions and one who applies the rules on the basis of clear and shared common ethical principles,
- an interpreter who must clarify and explain the rules when they are unclear and confusing,
- one whose authority and power (of interpreting and judging/adjudicating in sport) was given by his/her same community,
- a social (sport) educator who must show the results of his/her refereeing in public.

Moreover, the referee's functions always imply three main procedural dimensions, which deal with what we may call a *philosophy of sport education*, namely:

- an ontic dimension dealing with the Being and its values, which gives sense to sport as a human and at the same time transcendental practice (*what*),
- a technical dimension that refers to the application of a system of rules to interpret, to judge, and to put into practice, in the best way, the values sport implies (*how*),
- a deontic dimension concerning *why* and *with what purpose* mankind is engaged in sport and the way people (athletes and players first of all) can be taught to be aware of their responsibility and the need of a commitment to develop sport as a social value (*why*).

Refereeing is both an educational tool and action; these functions are always connected to the sphere of ethics. Referee's profile can be compared to that of an educator. To be clear, the referee always acts and behaves as an educator as well as a teacher because:

1. He/she shows proper and correct behavior patterns. Showing these patterns, the referee or judge not only allows the players involved in a game or competition to understand the rules of that specific sport in which they are engaged but also educates those who do not in a strict sense take part in the game: that is, the spectators. As an educator or a teacher, he or she shows them the importance of respecting, through game and competition rules, the fundamental values of human relations including respect, honesty, fair play, tolerance, etc.
2. He/she corrects and intervenes acting as an interpreter who does not interpret the regulation and rules to the letter but adapt them according to the Aristotelian principle of the *epiékheia* (equity and fairness) and *synesis* (Isidori, 2012), that is, the faculty of apprehension, judgment, understanding, intelligence, and conscience (Aristotle, 1137a31-1138a3; 1143a 1-18).

Many people learn and educate themselves with the impression of stability and consistency in decision-making and the referee, making this impression, in fact, is an educator. As an educator, the referee (or judge) does not punish but supervises what an athlete does and evaluates the way in which he or she acts

in the game and does an exercise (sometimes transforming it in numerical data, applying qualitative or quantitative criteria), imposing (or avoiding) penalties or sanctions which are part of the sports regulations/rules, mediating between behaviors and norms, explaining and clarifying, in the best way and through a flexible attitude, to participants and spectators the intrinsic values on which sport as a micro-social system is based.

Therefore, the question is: how can one transform all these assumptions, dealing with referee's profile as educator, in terms of educational practice? That is, how can one sum up all that in a specific pedagogy or theory of a referee's education? Didactics, which allows us to put the referee's profile detected by sport pedagogy and theory of education into practice, can be the answer to this question.

In fact, the main problem of this profile is to develop a specific educational curriculum for educating and training the referees as educators in the framework of their lifelong learning. In this context, such techniques as *role* or *model playing* usually used as a means to develop and promote sport values in schools and different educational contexts, can help to develop this kind of specific curricula.

From a sport pedagogy point of view, the development of such a specific form of education can be helped by two main strategies, that is:

1. Teaching students to become referees. It can be a useful educational strategy to educate children in schools or sport clubs in playing such a role and function in any simulated situations. Playing this role can help them develop a new critical and reflexive perception of sport and its values from an educational point of view, which requires the adoption of a hermeneutical and a flexible attitude focused on decision-making within a value system and the ethics of sport. This view can help them take awareness of the intrinsic values of sport and competition as a system in which all these values can be expressed by the person.
2. Developing experimental research aimed at detecting the way referees are perceived by children in schools and sport clubs or, generally speaking, by youth. Through experimental research, in fact, one can better collect data for building referee's educational profile, analyzing and explaining his/her function, and enhancing didactic strategies for educating and training such a fundamental sport professional, without whom sport cannot be conceived of and understood in its deep pedagogical and socio-moral meaning and sense.

Conclusions

To conclude: educating referees and judges of all sports not to be mere technicians of officiating and sport arbitration, i.e. to be aware of their pedagogical roles and functions, must be the main aim of what we can call the *theory of the referee as educator* and its pedagogy. So rather than putting the powers of referees back in other hands, we support the idea of strengthening the referee as educator. This should be made possible on the basis of the history of such a fundamental figure of sport conceived of as a competition, together with teaching students in schools and sport clubs to learn to be referees and judges in competition. This pedagogy, inspired by a hermeneutical sport philosophy, supported by experimental research on the referee's social and educational perception by society, must be a fundamental part of a new lifelong learning in sport and of a new didactics in which sport is not conceived of as a pure practice but as a tool to promote social values and pacific coexistence as well as mutual understanding among people.

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