

“The best referee is not the one who hides.”

Pierluigi Collina on the importance of meticulous preparation and living with your own mistakes

Making decisions in fractions of a second under the eagle eyes of ambitious players and managers and surrounded by tens of thousands of screaming fans is all part of the referee's lonely profession. The man with the whistle has the final say – in extreme cases deciding the outcome of entire tournaments. Talking to THE FOCUS, Pierluigi Collina, the world's most famous referee, recently retired from the game, reveals how a referee can win the respect of the players and explains the part played in his decisions by analysis, intuition, experience, and emotions.

The Focus: Pierluigi Collina, the way you interpreted the role of referee one could be forgiven for assuming that he's the main character and not a supporting act. Is that the way you see it?

Pierluigi Collina: The role of the referee is to guarantee that the game is played by the rules. You will only get a high-quality match if there are few fouls and few interruptions. On a football pitch, like in business, respecting the rules is a key value. So the role of the referee could be considered as that of a service provider – for the players or for the game. But sometimes it's more than that, because making important decisions is one part of the referee's job and he can thereby influence the outcome of the match. So in fact he frequently does become one of the main characters. Contrary to what some people say, I think the best referee is not the one who hides. The best referee is the one who always makes a decision when it's needed.

The Focus: How do you make good and fair decisions under extreme pressure with millions watching on TV?

Collina: As a referee you have to be very self-confident. And you have to make sure you do everything you can to be perfectly prepared for the job. You have to know everything about the match beforehand – how the teams usually play, how the individual players play. So you have to walk onto the pitch knowing all there is to know about the coming game. Very few people are aware of the huge spectrum of activities that take place off the field of play, both before and after a match. For a referee, preparation means a lot of things, not just exercising, not just knowing the rules of the game. He has to know how to interpret those rules. The rules allow the referee to interpret situations from his point of view, so it is very important for a referee to be consistent – to make the same decisions in the same kind of situation. Also, it is very important to improve your own performance, particularly if you're aiming to stay ahead of the pack.



RESUMÉ Pierluigi Collina



Pierluigi Collina was born in Bologna, Italy, in 1960. His career as a referee began when a classmate persuaded him to take a course in refereeing. By 1991 he was taking charge of Italy's top-flight Serie A matches. In 1994 he was appointed by FIFA to referee international matches. Career highlights included refereeing the 1996 Olympic Final, Nigeria v. Argentina; the 1999 Champions League Final, Bayern Munich v. Manchester Utd; the 2002 World Cup Final between Germany and Brazil; and the 2004 UEFA Cup Final, Valencia v. Olympique Marseille. He also officiated at the 1998 World Cup and at the 2000 and 2004 European Championships. Collina was voted World's Best Referee of the Year six times in succession. He announced his retirement from refereeing in August 2005 following a dispute with the Italian Football Federation over a sponsorship deal. Collina originally trained as a financial consultant. He holds a degree in Business Studies from the University of Bologna and an honorary degree from the University of Hull. For his services to sport, Italian President Ciampi conferred upon him the title of *Commendatore of the Italian Republic*.

The Focus: What kind of improvements do you mean?

Collina: One of the things that have really changed in football is speed. Thirty years ago, the speed on the field of play was 10 km/h, now it is 30 km/h. It more or less tripled. Playing with opponents 15 meters away from you was common in the 50s, 60s, and early 70s. Now you play with your opponent 50 centimeters away from you. There's much more man-to-man marking, forward pressing and aggression. Tactics have changed completely. So as a referee, you need to know exactly where you have to be in order to make a good decision. And if you're going to be in the right place at the right time, you have to be able to anticipate what's going to happen.

The Focus: Which key skills make a good performance?

Collina: During the match you mostly draw on your concentration and your experience. Sometimes at the end of the match I can't remember who scored a goal because I was concentrating so hard on the single frames of the match that I missed the whole picture. You draw on your experience, for example, to decide if you can trust a particular player. If a player whom you trust goes down, you assume that he was fouled. That's only human. On the other hand, you try not to be influenced unduly by a player's previous attitude, because you're aiming to assess what he does in this particular match. What also helps a referee to deal with the pressure is courage. You need the courage to take controversial decisions.

The Focus: Is refereeing also a team job – or to what extent did your assistants help you?

Collina: Nowadays, many important decisions are taken by an assistant referee, not least offside decisions which the referee himself can't judge or when offences are committed that the referee cannot see. It can also be the assistants who decide whether a goal was scored or not – whether the ball actually crossed the line. So the assistants help and wave their flags when something happens, but the final decision is always up to the referee. European football's governing body, UEFA, is currently testing a new system of wireless headset communication to enable the assistants and the referee to discuss controversial situations instantly. This will definitely help.

The Focus: Why is technology still largely absent from football?

Collina: Back in 1999, UEFA asked referees what we think about an electronic control system for the goal line. There are situations in which a referee or an

assistant cannot assess what happens because it is beyond the power of the human eye. So no one would object to the introduction of such a system – if it can be relied upon 100%. As long as no such system exists, referees just have to do their best.

The Focus: So we have to live with the fact that referees – being human – will make mistakes?

Collina: It's a bit like an oriental philosophy: you have to accept that nothing is perfect. Making mistakes is part of the job. It's a risk you must take. When a match is shown live on TV, two minutes later everyone on the field of play knows that the referee made a mistake. TV people talk to journalists beside the pitch, they talk to the benches, and they inform the players. So two minutes after you make a decision, the players know exactly if the penalty was a penalty. And they tell you so, and try to influence you.

The Focus: What's the best thing to do when you realize you made a mistake?

Collina: The best thing is always to forget it. When a forward misses a great scoring opportunity early in the match, he can either continue to regret his mistake, and the match will become a nightmare, or he can look ahead, and go on to deliver a good performance. But there's another aspect here: Normally when you realize you did something wrong, you try to compensate. That is something a referee must not do, because it doubles his mistake. After the match he has to try to understand why he made the mistake, and in this process, technology like videos is very useful. A critical post-match review is another important part of improving your performance.

The Focus: Does the kind of authority that a referee needs come naturally or is it something you can learn?

Collina: You can be an excellent piano player but to be at the very top you need to have something special in your DNA. What you *can* learn is to understand the way people think. If you show them that you're trying to see things from their point of view, they are more likely to understand and accept your decisions. It's about communicating by trying to tune into the other person's way of seeing things.

The Focus: Is there any such thing as an objective decision in football?

Collina: I think the referee's decisions are objective because he has to decide in less than one second without

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thinking of the consequences. In business you talk to your staff about the consequences of any given decision. That is part of the teamwork in which everything is analyzed. In refereeing there's no time for that.

The Focus: Do emotions influence a referee's decisions?

Collina: Like any great player, the referee should be able to control his emotions. One of the differences between a good player and a great one is how they handle their emotions. Some players are great in poor matches, but when they play in top matches you hardly see them at all – they “disappear.” The same applies to referees.

The Focus: Which was your most difficult match?

Collina: Every match is difficult. If you ever think a match is going to be easy, you will lack concentration and your performance will suffer.

The Focus: Now that you have retired from refereeing, will you go back to being a financial consultant?

Collina: As a top-level referee I didn't have time for consultancy work. Now I am going to take the time to think about my future and enjoy being with my family. It is only six months since I retired as a referee, and this is one decision I don't have to take in a split second.



The interview with Pierluigi Collina was conducted by Claudio Ceper and Nicola Gavazzi, Egon Zehnder International, Milan, and Ulrike Mertens, THE FOCUS.