

CONTROL OF FREE KICKS

BY
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If you look through your copy of the *Laws of Association Football* you will find **Law 13** which deals with free kicks. An original definition dated 1863 describes the taking of a free kick as the privilege of kicking the ball, without obstruction, in a manner, as the kicker may think. The award of a free kick is, therefore, intended to compensate the non-offended team for an offence committed by their opponents.

No matter from where on the field of play a free kick is to be taken, be it a defensive free kick or an attacking free kick, efficient control over such a restart in play will be one of the most vital contributions toward the overall control of the game. Weak control of these situations can significantly change the mood of the players' which will ultimately lead to the referee experiencing all types of problems such as encroachment, players delaying the restart and time wasting antics. Therefore, to avoid the occurrence of such undesirable practises and gain the most co-operation and respect when dealing with free kick situations, the requirements of the letter and the spirit of the Law must be enforced with the referee adopting a calm and firm, authoritative approach when supervising such a restart in play, ensuring the game proceeds without undue interruption and delay.

The true intention of Law 13, however, is all about equality and it is the duty of the referee to safeguard the basic principles and equality of this Law. The award of a free kick is the method used to regain the balance of equality which is lost when an offence is committed thus depriving the offended side freedom of advantage. To implement *the spirit of the Law*, there must be no significant delay in allowing the non-offending team to take the free kick. The referee must be careful not to disregard the call to allow the offended team to take the free kick quickly, provided such action proves to be of benefit to that team.

LOCATION OF THE FREE KICK

Central mid-field and wing flanks: The award of a direct or indirect free kick and the location from which the kick will be taken is often referred to as a "variable situation" or more commonly known as a "set piece" in play, which will have an influential bearing as to how the referee moves and repositions in readiness for the next phase of the game. The supervision and control of free kicks when they are taken in the central mid-field and wing flanks will seldom create any problems. It will be a simple case of remembering to keep the restart of play clearly in view and fully alert to any potential attempts by opposing players to interfere or delay the taking of the kick. It is most unlikely that the opposing players would form a defensive wall, but a single player could be troublesome. Failing to retreat to the stipulated 9.15m requirement and/or indulging in acts designed to distract the kicker or to delay the kick. Situations such as this need to be dealt with *quickly and firmly* at the first hint of occurrence. Such prompt action on the referee's part will help to reinforce and consolidate match control. It will also be most beneficial in establishing a standard of consistency.

Having awarded a free kick in central mid-field or on the wing flanks, assuming no disciplinary measures are required, indicate to where the kick is to be taken and then quickly move into a position where you could expect the next phase of open play to take place following the kick. Do not linger within the vicinity of the area the kick will be taken, suffice to say the team may want the "quick free kick" irrespective of opposing players standing the required distance or closer to the ball. Such quick action will leave the referee flat footed and out of position, having then to sprint hard in order to catch up with the advanced open play. Once having awarded the free kick

and clearly indicated from where the kick should be taken, avoid being too pedantic with the ball placement, within a metre or so from where the kick will be taken should suffice. When retreating (preferably back peddling) to your new position, keep the centre of the restart in full view the whole time. You would be wise to think in terms adopting the “*blow and go*” method when having awarded a free kick, you continue your movement to where you want to reposition at the same time controlling the free kick activity, if required, with authoritative use of the whistle.

Deep mid-field and wing flanks: It is an accepted fact, the closer the free kick gets to the opponents penalty area, the free kick to be taken within the central deep mid-field and wing flanks within viable scoring distances of the opponents goal the more critical Law enforcement and control becomes. For such free kicks awarded to the attacking team in deep mid-field or within close proximity to the defending team’s penalty area become realistic goal scoring opportunities. In such circumstances the defending players’ will no doubt form the defensive wall lineout to reduce the risk of a possible goal being scored. When awarding free kicks within the deep mid-field or close to the defenders penalty area the important thing is to arrive early on the scene of the offence to take control of the situation and then direct proceedings.

Free kicks within the penalty area: Free kicks awarded to the defending team within their own penalty area should not cause a problem provided the opponents are outside the area and at least 9.15m from the ball. Free kicks albeit “indirect” which are awarded to the attacking team within their opponent’s penalty area can be problematic and will require the referee to take up a desirable position and be extremely vigilant when observing the restart. If the free kick is to be taken on the goal area line, the defending players can line up on the goal line between the goal posts. Other defenders, however, must stand the mandatory 9.15m from the ball. It will be inevitable that one or more of the attacking players will want to stand in front of those on the goal line, which if not controlled, could develop into a physical confrontation with pushing and shoving and possible use of flying elbows. For this free kick situation the referee needs to be very proactive and immediately sort things out before taking up a position close to the goal line, midway between the goal area line and the outer line of the penalty area. Such a position will allow for a wide angled view of the restart area and the crowded goal mouth. Free kicks taken elsewhere within the penalty area by the attacking team will again prompt the formation of the defensive wall. Control the wall by which ever method suits you and reposition accordingly, keeping your assistant in full view throughout the restart of play.

CONTROLLING THE DEFENSIVE WALL LINEOUT

When supervising the defensive wall lineout scenario, always remember to refrain from using physical force of any kind when directing the wall of players to retreat to where you want them to line out. Stand to the side of the wall or face the wall, verbally instructing the wall, supplemented with hand gestures with an open body language to clearly indicate you want the wall to retire the required distance. The authoritative use of the whistle could also come into the equation and be most beneficial to emphasise your requirements. There is no recognised standard procedure which should be adhered to when making sure the defensive wall lines out at the required 9.15m from where the free kick is to be taken. There are, however, a number of proven options of which the referee can take to supervise and control the defensive wall lineout scenario commonly referred to as the “ceremonial free kick.” The following options are based on the premise that the attacking team does not want to take advantage of a quick free kick before the defending team can form their defensive wall. In actual fact, the defending team has no divine right to form a wall, but such practice has over the years become deeply entrenched and is now accepted as part of the tactical game. With such free kick situations, the referee must quickly establish if the offended team want to take advantage by taking a “quick free kick” or have the offending team retreat the required 9.15m and then take the kick. If it is the latter, then the referee must ensure that the ball is not played until he/she has become satisfied that the requirement of Law 13 has been enforced, with the referee then taking up a desirable position from which to signal for the free kick to be taken and to view the outcome of the kick.

Option one – Stand your ground

Having awarded the free kick the referee arrives quickly on the scene to take control of the ball and then stands with one foot on the ball placed on the spot from where the free kick will be taken. The defensive wall lineout is then requested to retreat to the required distance. Whenever possible the referee should endeavour to use the field of play markings as a guide, particularly when the free kick is on or close to the penalty area arc which is 9.15m from the penalty mark. Referees would do well to be familiar with just how far the 9.15m distance can be. Once satisfied that the defensive wall has retreated to the required distance, he/she then moves quickly to take up a suitable position from which to clearly view the taking of the kick and its outcome following the signal to restart the game.

Option two – First brick in the wall

Be the first brick in the wall is another option where the referee arrives quickly on the scene of the offence and then making sure the ball placement is in the correct location, he/she then moves, deftly striding out the required 9.15m distance and then beckons the defending team players' to join him/her to form their defensive wall lineout. Having ensured the defensive wall has lined up where it should be the referee then quickly moves into position and signals for the kick to be taken.

Option three – Pace out the distance

This option is, perhaps, the most favoured with regard to control of the wall lineout. The referee having arrived early on the scene of the offence firmly informs the attacking team not to play the ball until the signal has been given to do so. The referee then paces out the required 9.15m distance by "back stepping", keeping a watchful eye on the players lingering in the restart area, ensuring the ball is not moved forward. Having back stepped the required distance, the referee then instructs the defensive wall to fall back in line to where he/she is standing. Once satisfied the wall lineout is standing where it should be the referee then moves quickly to his/her desired position and signals for the kick to be taken.

PROBLEMS WITH THE WALL

In addition to the positioning of the wall, the referee will also need to be fully aware of events which can occur within the wall lineout. Attackers and defenders will get involved, pushing and jostling with the likelihood of one or more defending players encroaching from the wall to charge the ball down before or as the kick is about to be taken. Other acts such as elbows, nipping fingers, knees digging and clipping of heels can be difficult to spot in the wall, and it is not always the defenders who are guilty. The full wall lineout may well move forward several metres before or as the ball is about to be kicked. Sometimes an attacker will attempt to line up in the wall, or take a stance just in front of it or at one end of it. This player must be watched very closely by the referee to see just what he is doing in this position. Another ploy will involve a defending player to move and stand in front or directly behind the kicker and the ball placement on the pretext of directing the wall lineout in an animated manner, designed to delay the taking of the free kick and to interfere or to distract with the kicker. The players are coached in the art of cleverly disguising delaying tactics or other acts of unsporting behaviour in attempts to gain an unfair advantage over their opponents. In all cases the referee must be fully alert to such practice and be prepared to take whatever disciplinary measure is required to encourage fair play for all.

CHOICE OF POSITIONING

Once you are satisfied the defensive wall is in position and the free kick is ready to be taken, only then should you move quickly to a predetermined position which will afford a wide angled view, encompassing the activity in the wall and the taking of the free kick in accordance with Law. Depending on the location from where the free kick is to be taken will also influence the depth and width of the referee's position in relation to the wall formation. Such positioning must always be of a flexible approach, remembering to keep sight of your assistant on the far side touch line. This means you may want to be close to the goal line when the kick is taken just outside the

penalty area, whereas for kicks taken from deep mid-field, taking up a position in alignment or just ahead or behind the wall could be a more viable consideration. You need to make your positioning as flexible as possible and be on the move, bearing in mind you need to see clearly what is going on in the wall and to ensure the restart takes place without undue interference. Once you have taken your desired position, only then do you give the signal for the free kick to be taken.

CLOSING REMARKS

The award of a direct or an indirect free kick to the team which has been offended against is intended to restore the balance of equality with freedom of interference by the offending side when the kick is taken. This will only be achieved if the wording and spirit of Law 13 is enforced and upheld on a consistent basis by the referee. It is, however, worth remembering that the offending side can be punished for their actions, but do not let the non-offending team use guises of unsporting behaviour to take advantage of the situation.

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