

With Arthur Douglas-Nugent, deputy chief umpire for the HPA



How possession has sent the backhand into obscurity

The umpires and members of the rules committee have a big job on their hands this winter, trying to find ways to improve polo as a spectacle. It has lost some of the old magic of late, with unseemly mêlées and lots of whistle proving to be an unwelcome side of the game for players and spectators alike. Just as rugby has experimented with many rule changes in recent years, to help encourage a more open style of play, so too must polo find ways to get the game moving again. But where do we start?

The obvious first port of call is Argentina, given that our polo, now at all levels, is inextricably mixed up with theirs. However, at a recent meeting with a senior member of the rules committee we learnt, somewhat to our surprise, that they are having the same problems as us in their show matches at Palermo and elsewhere. Thus, they too are open to suggestions with a view to rule changes and new guidelines for umpire interpretations.

ONE TAP IRONY – MÊLÉES ‘R’ US
The exciting open polo during the Queen’s Cup proved to be something of a false dawn, as in the Gold Cup the players reverted to their old ways – turning on the ball and then running with it into a mêlée with a view to achieving a penalty, which they invariably did.

Thus, in the Gold Cup final the first five goals were scored from the 30-yard spot, which is not what those who have paid £40 for a seat in the stands want to see. The penalty two now is virtually a non-event, as players so rarely miss.

But all this is easy to complain about. The point is what can we do? The “one tap” rule has been effective up to a point, but has proved a difficult idea to umpire and has led to a frustrating level of inconsistency and confusion for the players. It is also generally unpopular with the Argentine players, so it seems there is no likelihood of it ever being

adopted in Argentina. The other problem is that there is currently an inherent irony in the application of the rule – namely, that if someone is deemed guilty of tapping too much and not engaging in open play, then the game is restarted with a throw-in that regularly just leads to the kind of mêlée the rule was

stationary, then the umpire should only stop play for dangerous stickwork. This continues until a clear line has been established by the player, who has achieved sufficient speed to claim the right of way. Secondly, however, umpires should be encouraged to be much stricter with players who seek to block the

“The irony is that we restart the game after a tapping foul with a throw-in, which regularly leads to the kind of mêlée the “one tap” rule was designed to avoid”

designed to avoid. Perhaps we should go back to awarding a hit from the spot, with a modification for when a defender taps twice within his own 60-yard line.

BACKHAND TO THE FUTURE
We need to speed up the game and keep it flowing. And so, how do we go about encouraging players to hit a backhand, rather than turning on the ball? Firstly, a foul should not be called if there is no danger when a player, slowing down to turn the ball, is ridden off by an opponent. Should play be more or less

legitimate right of way of an opponent at low speeds, when it is clearly done deliberately. Although, as a corollary consideration for umpires, when the player in possession goes looking for this foul by tapping the ball towards an opponent who is just off his right of way, it should be he that is punished.

The unfortunate demise of the backhand has a lot to do with the great advantage of possession. Players don’t want to risk losing the ball, but would rather play for a foul when they are in a tricky situation. This has, in turn, meant that when backhands are offloaded, there is rarely anyone heading upfield in anticipation. But if possession is so important, could not a team be penalised for losing it?

Thus, if a player hits the ball over the sideline, penalise the team by giving the opposition a hit from the spot. This would cut down the number of mêlées, encourage teams to keep the game flowing up the centre, reduce the amount of play on the boards and discourage teams from time-wasting in the closing stages of a match. While we’re at it, let’s have a hit in from the back line or 60-yard line by the side that has just conceded the goal. ☒

FOUL FOR THOUGHT

Last month’s conundrum
You award a penalty 5b (hit from the centre). A member of the team facing advances to within 20 yards as the penalty is taken. What do you do as the parallel umpire?

It must be assumed that “Play” has been called and therefore the umpire must blow the whistle to stop further play but not the clock, as that will not have been restarted. Rule 39g states that if a defender “is closer than 30 yards to the ball when it is hit or hit at, the penalty will be upgraded.”

However, umpires should avoid having to take this action by preventing the situation developing in the first place, by warning the errant player before calling “Play”. For a similar offence on the hit in, the ball is moved up to the 30-yard line.

This month’s puzzle
A player places the ball with care on a divot for a penalty hit, which is then taken by another member of the team. Is this legal?