

Soccer

It’s here: Major League Soccer implements video replay

By ANNE M. PETERSON
AP Sports Writer

Today, Major League Soccer. Tomorrow, the world.

Despite purists who believe the beautiful game should never be sullied by video replay, it has arrived and isn’t going anywhere. Major League Soccer will start using it for every match, even the postseason, starting Saturday.

The Video Assistant Referee, VAR for short, was showcased on an international level during this summer’s Confederations Cup in Russia and the Under-20 World Cup in South Korea, with mixed results.

But MLS has been preparing for this moment for three years, determined to get it right.

“The idea is minimum interference for maximum benefit,” said veteran referee Howard Webb, who is overseeing the league’s implementation of video replay. “We’re not trying to change the way the game is played. We’re trying to enhance it. We’re trying to make it fairer. We’re trying to make sure the outcomes are right.”

Australia’s top-flight A-League used a version of video review on trial earlier this year, and the South Korean K-League Classic began working with it in July.

At least two other top-tier leagues will add a VAR soon. The German Bundesliga will debut video replay for the season opener between Bayern Munich and Bayer Leverkusen on Aug. 18. The Italian Serie A will also introduce its version after adding goal-line technology last season.

For now, all eyes are on MLS and how it rolls out the VAR protocol. The league has not publicly stated its investment in video review.

“We’ve seen some really big players — and make no mistake about it MLS is a big player in the global soccer world — make the decision to take it on board, and undoubtedly we will be watched by the leagues that haven’t made the decision as well as the leagues that are doing it,” Webb said. “We are confident with our extensive preparation that what they’ll see will encourage them to do the same thing.”

Webb serves as manager of video assistant referee operations for the Professional Referee Organization, which oversees on-field officials in the U.S. and Canada. He’s got the credentials: He was a Premier League referee from 2003-14, and also worked the Champions League and World Cup finals in 2010. He also served as director of referees for the Saudi Arabian Football Federation.

Soccer’s rule-making



AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

In this July 11, 2017, still image from video, video review screens are shown before a video replay scrimmage, in Park City, Utah. Games were staged as part of the final training camp to gauge MLS referees’ competence in and comfort with video replay.

body, the International Football Association Board, approved trials of video technology in March 2016. Internationally, live experiments are taking place in about 20 competitions this year, including the recent Confederations Cup, considered a test for the 2018 World Cup.

Implementation at the Confederations Cup drew criticism because of slow reviews that seemed to confuse players, coaches and fans. But FIFA concluded that video replay helped referees overturn six “game-changing decisions.” Calls made in 29 additional “major incidents” were confirmed correct on review.

“What fans have been waiting for over so many years is finally happening. This is a milestone tour-

nament. Video Assistant Refereeing is the future of modern football.” FIFA President Gianni Infantino said after seeing the VAR at work in early-round matches in Russia.

It is expected that the IFAB will add video replay to the laws of the game within the next two years, and any competition meeting the requirements will be able to use it.

For the MLS program, a fifth member of the officiating crew — the Video Assistant Referee — will be at each MLS stadium and will monitor all video feeds of the game that are available, focusing on “potential clear and obvious errors or serious missed incidents” involving goals, penalty kicks, straight red cards and mistaken identity.

If a review is required, the VAR will alert the referee on the field, who will make a box gesture with his hands to indicate the VAR is examining a possible error. All final calls will lie with the head referee.

During 93 test games, the VAR checked 736 possible reviewable instances, resulting in just 28 reviews or about one every three games.

Real Salt Lake’s Brooks Lennon has seen VAR firsthand at the U-20 World Cup, where he was part of the U.S. team that advanced to the quarterfinals.

“There was one big call in the quarterfinal game where we had a goal scored against us and it was offside so they called it back,” Lennon said. “I think it’s good for the game and I think it will make right calls that are wrong.”

While MLS is considered something of a pioneer with the program at the professional level, the NCAA successfully used video replay dozens of times last season. A rules change last year allowed video replay in three situations: goals, player identification for disciplinary reasons, and to identify players involved in fights. Schools are allowed to use whatever equipment they see fit.

The technology was used in the men’s College Cup final between Stanford and Wake Forest.

“So the first year we put it in, it was right there for the whole world to see in the men’s Division I final,” said Ken Andres, the NCAA’s secretary-rules editor. “It was utilized to determine whether or not there was a goal. The ref determined on the field that there was no goal, (he) went to the video and the video was inconclusive. So the call of the field stands because we require indisputable visible evidence.”

Critics point mainly to issues involving communication because fans, players and coaches are unable to see what is going on while in the stadium. Some have suggested that video review be adapted to show what the refs are looking at on video scoreboards — like other leagues, including the NBA.

Webb is pragmatic in understanding that the VAR protocol may have to be adapted. But the time has clearly come — and the MLS can lead the way, he said.

“Every time there’s a big controversy in a game we have the same conversation: Why don’t we have video technology? Why can’t we use replays? Why can’t we bring the game up to date with the way other sports have used the technology?” he said. “It is a challenge in soccer because of how the game is played, that’s why it’s taken a lot of training and a lot of preparation.”

Neymar signs 5-year deal with PSG in world-record transfer

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN
AND JOSEPH WILSON
Associated Press

PARIS — Six years after taking over perennial under-achiever Paris Saint-Germain, the French club’s wealthy owners finally got what they wanted by hiring Neymar — a player they believe will bring them Champions League glory.

The Brazil star became the most expensive player in soccer history after completing his blockbuster transfer from Barcelona for 222 million euros (\$262 million) on Thursday. By paying the release clause in his contract, PSG



Neymar

shattered the world transfer record to sign arguably one of the top three best attacking players in the game, alongside Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

The previous transfer record had been set a year ago

when Manchester United paid 105 million euros (then \$116 million) to bring Paul Pogba back from Juventus.

In his four seasons at Barcelona, Neymar scored 105 goals as Barcelona won the Champions League, Club World Cup, two Spanish league titles and Copa del Rey three times.

Now he will look to emerge from the shadow of

five-time world player of the year Messi at Barcelona, becoming the biggest star in the French league in a team without the track record of success to match his former club.

“I am extremely happy to join Paris Saint-Germain,” Neymar said. “Since I arrived in Europe, the club has always been one of the most competitive and most

ambitious. And the biggest challenge, what most motivated me to join my new teammates, is to help the club to conquer the titles that their fans want.”

While Barcelona has lifted the European Cup five times and won the FIFA Club World Cup three times, PSG is yet to win either prestigious competition.

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