



How the UEFA refereeing family is keeping fit

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While football has been halted across Europe owing to the COVID-19 crisis, UEFA has given the continent's top male and female referees the chance to keep training, care for their health and fitness...and show their renowned dedication to their job.



Thanks to careful planning, detailed research and preparation, expert advice, and a spirit of teamwork and positive thinking on all sides, the match officials – referees, assistant referees and video assistant referees (VARs) – are still training and analysing their 'trade' while football waits to return.

The chairman of UEFA's Referees Committee, Roberto Rosetti, explains how UEFA has put a plan into operation to keep the referees 'in business' in these difficult times.

Video: Hungarian referee Katalin Kulcsár training on her balcony (MLSZ)
Main photo: All smiles at the end of an online group training session (UEFA)

"The first steps that I took at the onset of the pandemic," Rosetti told UEFA.com, "was to write an open letter to the referees, in which I asked them first and foremost to take care of themselves and their families – I also promised them that we'd continue to work together as a group during the crisis, and find solutions to keep active."

"We then contacted the referees one by one – myself and the UEFA refereeing officers Dagmar Damková, Hugh Dallas, Marc Batta and Vlado Sajin – because we felt that human contact was vital in this difficult period, to show that we're together and united as a 'family'. Then we started out on the task of setting up technical and training activities for them."



Roberto Rosetti
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Vast experience was already at hand: Prof. Werner Helsen, UEFA's long-standing sports scientist and referee training expert from Belgium (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), embarked on collecting and researching information and ideas from a wide range of sources. The fruits of his dedication have been the launching of a referees' training programme featuring home training routines and online group training sessions. "Of course," Rosetti explains, "this programme must always be adapted to circumstances in each country,"

'Perception 4 Perfection'

Alongside this programme, an online tool for decision-making training – 'Perception 4 Perfection' – has been set up for referees, video assistant referees (VAR) and assistant referees, comprising video clips and footage of fouls, offside and goal/no goal situations, and includes feedback from the UEFA refereeing officers. Clips from matches have also been produced for the referees to study performances and identify potential areas of improvement.

The match officials exchange feedback with the referee officers on the various clips – with the result that continuity in the referees' study and analysis work is still guaranteed during the COVID-19 crisis.

Physical and mind training

The various home training and group exercises drawn up by Werner Helsen cover a variety of different and interesting facets. In addition to physical exercise – including strength training, cardiovascular exercises and functional training at home with little or no equipment - the programme includes tips on 'mental training' – such as keeping calm, holding stress at bay, and practising yoga and mindfulness. "Our referees are already extremely resilient, because they learn to deal with pressure," Rosetti emphasises. "But in these exceptional times, we felt it was important to give them the opportunity to do 'mind training' to help them along the way."



Portuguese match official Artur Soares Dias is taking part in UEFA's programme
©FPF

Rosetti is keen to underline the crucial contribution currently being made by Helsen and his team: "We've worked together for many years now," he reflects. "He's one of the best in the world at his profession, and we're lucky to be able to count on his huge experience and know-how at this particular moment."

UEFA's referees – a team in their own right

The spirit of togetherness that binds the UEFA refereeing community is a key component in the present environment. "It's always part of our overall concept that we function as a solid group," says Rosetti. "And this is especially the case now."



Maltese referee Fyodor Zammit exercising at home
©MFA

"The referees are in contact, encouraging each other, showing concern for each other's well-being – it's something that makes our referees so strong as a team." Meanwhile, Rosetti and the UEFA referee officers are holding a video meeting every week to plan and discuss strategies and steps for now and the future.

How does Roberto Rosetti envisage the time when the crisis passes, and referee teams are once again managing matches and carrying out their role as ambassadors for football's image? "I love football and refereeing, so I'll obviously be as delighted as anyone who cares for our game," he says. "But I also feel that there'll be a wider effect. We'll all still have our goals and ambitions - but I really think we'll all have learned for the better about life's proper priorities..."

UEFA sports scientist and training expert Werner Helsen talks about training Europe's referees in the COVID-19 crisis

UEFA.com: How quickly were you able to set up the functional training programme once the crisis expanded – how much did your extensive experience help you in the process?

Werner Helsen: As a sports scientist, I'm fortunate to have access to the most up-to-date information. Furthermore, we're trained to always think ahead about new tools and technologies to support the match officials in the most professional way.



Werner Helsen
©Sportsfile

As a result, I was able to provide the referees with information shortly after the last UEFA Champions League games were played - how to train and eat to boost immunity from COVID-19; functional training at home under COVID-19; mental and mind training; simple and effective tips to sleep well during quarantine; training exercises to do at home; how to preserve muscle mass during quarantine...all kinds of information that is valuable to the referees in a similar way as it is to players."

Leading referees are top athletes like the players, and they're also trained to be mentally strong. How important are the mental training elements that you're offering them at present?

They're very important indeed. They're extremely complementary to the physical training sessions, and also a distraction in these special times. Consequently, I've provided the referees with a list of potential exercises and websites for 'brain training', stress management and mindfulness. In the online group sessions, we have also worked on brain and body activation.

What are you advising the referees NOT to do in this situation?

We're recommending that they don't practice too intensively! Excessively intense training can weaken the immune system and increase the risk of being contaminated by COVID-19. For these reasons, we recommend avoiding too intense training during the epidemic period and also to limit the high intensity sessions to two sessions of a maximum one hour per week.



Estonian referee Kristo Tohver carrying out a training exercise
©EJL

This is a new experience for you in your role and work. What do you think that you'll learn from the experience...and what do you think the referees will learn? Personally, I've learned new opportunities in terms of technologies for online training and coaching, reflected in the work that we've been doing in the last few weeks. As Johan Cruyff once said: "Every disadvantage has an advantage."

We've also shown how flexible we all can be. It's unbelievable how quickly we all complied with the quarantine instructions, given they have such a huge impact on our daily personal and professional life. And this also applies to referees. They're being equally flexible in their training approach at this time.

Like Roberto Rosetti, are you also feeling the famous 'team spirit' that exists among the match officials?

More than ever! One of the main reasons why referees appreciate the online group training sessions is to see and meet each other. It's a great way to stay in touch! In these difficult times, we need to act as a team, more than ever before!

You must be looking forward to the day when you've got the referees together again out in the open air at a UEFA course?

Of course, it will be something special for all of us. In the meantime, we're also impressing on the referees to use 'visual imagery'. For example, we're asking men's referees to imagine being involved in the preparatory workshop for EURO 2020, or even the tournament itself. It's designed to help referees to think in a positive way about the future challenges that will come....

