

BODY AND MIND TRAINING

Thanks to careful planning, detailed research and preparation, expert advice, and a spirit of teamwork and positive thinking on all sides, match officials – referees, assistant referees and video assistant referees – have still been training and analysing their ‘trade’ while football has waited to return.

The chairman of UEFA's Referees Committee, Roberto Rosetti, explains how UEFA put a plan into operation to keep the referees ‘in business’ in these difficult times. “The first step that I took at the onset of the pandemic 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 Šajin – 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



INTERVIEW: WERNER HELSEN

‘Every disadvantage has its advantage’

UEFA sports scientist and referee fitness expert Werner Helsen talks about training Europe’s referees during the COVID-19 crisis.

How quickly were you able to set up the training programme once the crisis expanded, and how much did your extensive experience help you?

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

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; functional training at home; mental training; simple and effective tips to sleep well during lockdown; training exercises to do at home; how to preserve muscle mass... all kinds of information that is valuable to referees in a similar way as it is to players.

How important is mental training in such a situation?

It’s very important indeed. It’s extremely complementary to the physical training sessions, and



Sportfile



Artur Soares Dias, Porto (Portugal)



Fyodor Zammit (Malta)



Kristo Tohver, Tallinn (Estonia)

out on the task of setting up technical and training activities for them."

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

Perception 4 Perfection

Alongside this programme, an online tool for decision-making training – Perception 4 Perfection – was 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 has included feedback from the UEFA refereeing officers. Clips from matches were also produced for the referees to study performances and identify potential areas of improvement.

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

The various home training and group exercises drawn up by Werner Helsen have covered 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 has included 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."

A team in their own right

The spirit of togetherness that binds the UEFA refereeing community has been 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 has especially been the case now."

"The referees have been 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 refereeing officers have been holding a video meeting every week to plan and discuss strategies and steps for now and the future. ☺

has also been a distraction in these special times. Consequently, I provided the referees with a list of 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 have you been advising the referees NOT to do in this situation?

We've been recommending them not to practise too intensively! Excessively intense training can weaken the immune system. For these reasons, we've been recommending avoiding too intense training during the pandemic and also limiting the high-intensity sessions to two sessions of a maximum of one hour per week.

This has been a new experience for you in your role and work.

What do you think you'll learn from the experience... and what do you think the referees will learn?

Personally, I've discovered new opportunities in terms of technologies for online training and coaching, as reflected in the work we've been doing in this recent period. As Johan Cruyff once said: "Every disadvantage has its advantage."

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

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

More than ever! One of the main reasons why referees have appreciated the online group training sessions has been to see and meet each other. It's been a great way to stay in touch! In these difficult times, we have needed 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 encouraging the referees to use 'visual imagery'. For example, we're asking the men's football 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 challenges that lie ahead...