

## **Obstruction or Impeding the Progress of an Opponent?**

A couple of years ago (I wouldn't say how many), while running the line in a State Cup game, there was a great 30 yard through pass played to an attacker running in from the left wing. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your team loyalties, a defender intercepted the pass and, without playing the ball with his feet, ran between the attacker and the rolling ball for fully 20 yards until it was safely in the hands of his keeper, who was standing at the edge of the penalty area. At no time was the defender less than 2 – 3 feet from the rolling ball nor did he play the ball with his feet. He simply shadowed the ball with his body for 20 yards until his keeper picked it up. A parent behind me screamed in a loud voice, "That's obstruction Ref ! It's not basketball!" This set me thinking that too many times we apply concepts from different sports to the soccer field, not recognizing that the Game has had its own concepts throughout its rich history.

Clearly in the situation described above, the defender is exercising his legitimate right under the Laws of the Game, to tactically shadow the ball and prevent his opponent from getting it, PROVIDED THE DEFENDER REMAINED WITHIN PLAYING DISTANCE OF THE BALL. Indeed he had possession of the ball and was in fact playing the ball. The fact that he was not touching it with his feet is irrelevant in this situation. In the spirit of the Law, if not the letter, he was not "impeding the progress" of his opponent, who can, if he wished to do so, overtake the defender and challenge for the ball. This is therefore the essence of the concept of "obstruction" now reworded in the Laws to read "impeding the progress" of an opponent.

In other words, the emphasis in judging the infraction must be on answering the basic question "is the player in possession of the ball, making a play with the ball - or is he preventing the opponent from having a fair challenge for the ball"? If he is in possession and making a play with the ball, then he must be within playing distance of the ball. He therefore cannot be charged for the infraction. If however, he does not have possession and by definition is not within playing distance of the ball, and prevents an opponent from getting to the ball, then he is "obstructing" or "impeding the progress" of an opponent. An indirect free kick must be awarded to the opponent.

Two points of clarification must be noted. The first is "What is playing distance"? Obviously this will vary considerably based on players' skills, age, and competition level. The playing distance of the ball for an Alexis Lallas in a MLS game will be far different from a U-13 match on a Sunday afternoon. This is where the six magical words of the Law book come in – "in the opinion of the referee". Referees should therefore read the game and judge realistically the playing distance of the ball based on these factors.

The second point worth noting is that, if a player not in possession of the ball impedes the progress of an opponent BY PHYSICAL CONTACT, then the infraction is no longer considered "impeding the progress" of an opponent. This physical contact may be charging or holding and makes it a more serious offence which is punishable by a direct free kick. In other words, the well known concept in basketball of a "pick," which may be

permitted in basketball, should not be tolerated in soccer. Different sport, different concept.

So the next time players appeal for "Obstruction ref!" when his opponent is playing and is within playing distance of the ball, let them know that the basketball game is on Channel 4. This is soccer!