

♦ EXTRA TIME ♦

Crossing the line

ADRIAN CHILES

I WATCH FOOTBALL for all sorts of reasons. Some I have chosen; others have been chosen for me. You don't choose your club; your club chooses you or, in my case, it was chosen for me by my grandad, which amounts to the same thing. I attend matches to feel part of my past and part of my family of fellow fans. It's not that I particularly like them all, but that's the point: you can't choose those who support the same team as you, any more than you can choose your family.

But if I have to identify the one element of the whole experience that is central to it all for me, it is this: the explosion of joy I feel the moment my team scores a goal. It's difficult to explain or justify this feeling to those who don't experience the same thing. They must find it all rather silly, as do I sometimes if I stop and think about it. But it's real, it's very real.

Or rather, it was. Because now it has gone. It's been robbed from us by the introduction of the Video Assistant Referee, who is now the final arbiter of whether the goal can be given or not. Once upon a time all that was needed for the joy to burst forth was the sight of the (real) referee giving the goal, unaccompanied by the sight of their assistant on the touchline raising a flag for offside. Glance one; glance two; goal; joy. It was that simple; it's not anymore. Now, however apparently straightforward the goal your team has scored, there is always the possibility that



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the video assistants will have spotted a reason to disallow it. You can never be sure they won't; you can never lose yourself in unalloyed joy. This is a huge and terrible loss.

Holed up in front of a bank of screens in a building in Stockley Park near Heathrow, these all-seeing eyes may identify the possibility of an infringement of some kind. This will then be relayed to the on-field official who will signal for time to stand still as these gods of football consider their opinion. There are two possible outcomes: if the decision is not in your favour you will be enraged, but

impotent. Just as real joy must now be a stranger, so must your anger, for at whom will you direct it? You can't even rage at the ref in the middle because he can generally be entitled to direct your ire towards Stockley Park.

Should the decision be in your team's favour, while that's all very nice, the joy won't feel the same. Imagine taking a call from the National Lottery that went like this: "Good evening. Adrian Chiles? Great. Got some good news for you: you've won £5,436,498 on this evening's draw."

"Really, incredible, wow," etc.

"Oh, erm, hang on, no, there may be a problem. Just checking something. Hold the line."

That's what it feels like.

An eminent theologian once mused to me that if God was proven to exist it might mark the end of religion because mystery must be at its heart. The same might be true of football: chaos, uncertainty, bad luck, good luck, human error and, yes, the plainly unjust, must be at its heart too. Efforts to eliminate these things – beyond straightforward, non-interpretative judgements on stuff like whether the ball's crossed a line or not – will destroy the game. They'll drive us all to distraction. Not least the poor souls in charge, because their efforts will always be in vain. The game is too big, bad and mad for its wrinkles ever to be ironed out.

Adrian Chiles is a radio and TV presenter.

Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

A GALE of raucous laughter rang out from the fogbound orchard. Intrigued, I went to investigate. Hopping over the gate, I was approaching the first dripping apple tree, when the laughter roared out once more, followed by a hefty green bird. I ducked as the pigeon-sized bird bulletted over my head and disappeared into the thick mist. It was a green woodpecker and what I had heard was its famous "yaffle": the rumbustious cry quite unlike any other sound in the world of British and Irish birds.

Any encounter with a green woodpecker



is memorable. They're just as striking to look at as they are to listen to – even in the dim light of a foggy winter afternoon. Predominantly green (in order to be

camouflaged when feeding in grass), they have a vivid yellow rump, a black mask, a bright red cap and piercing white eyes. Their beak is long and strong.

The species' oddest physical characteristic is rarely seen even on the brightest day. To access its main food of ants, green woodpeckers have a 10cm-long, sticky red tongue that can penetrate deep into the labyrinthine cavities of an ant hill and Hoover up the insects. This tongue is so long that in order to fit inside the bird's head, it must coil neatly behind the skull.

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