LAW 5 – The REFEREE

REFEREE OBSERVATION REPORT

2019 FIFA Under-20 World Cup (Poland) – Match 31, Group D, Matchday 3

USA – QATAR 1:0 (0:0)

Referee: Abdelkader Zitouni (TAH)

Assistant Referee 1: Folio Moeaki (TON)

Assistant Referee 2: Bernard Mutukera (SOL)

Fourth Official: Iván Arcides Barton Cisneros (SLV)

Video Assistant Referee: Benoît Millot (FRA)

Assistant Video Assistant Referee: Adonai Escobedo González (MEX)

Blog Observer: Howard Maxi

Presentation of the match

Matchday 3 in the pretty open Group D: While the USA needed at least a point to almost certainly clinch the round of 16, goalless Qatar could only hope for a victory to keep their own progression hopes alive. Conditions were good and despite a rather small attendance of 3,651, the atmosphere inside the stadium was pleasant.

The Oceanian refereeing team led by Abdelkader Zitouni had their second match after Portugal – Korea Republic on Matchday 1. The game was a close one and while the USA was the team with advantages in technique and as a result the more threatening outfit, Qatar kept it close until the end and had several chances of their own. A higher victory for the USA was possible, but they were denied by the Qatari goalkeeper.

While 29 fouls are still an average number, the match itself was “quite challenging” for the referees. Especially in the second half, there was a number of scenes, mostly fouls and smaller player altercations they had to deal with and a penalty scene in the final phase of the match. Despite eight yellow cards though, the match was still mostly fair. Disciplinary control, player management and fitness were the traits that were required the most.

Referee performance (Personality, LotG application, disciplinary control, physical condition, cooperation, VAR management)

Abdelkader Zitouni clearly understood what the game needed: A secure referee who made quick decisions, didn’t hesitate to blow the whistle, punish infringements accordingly, was close to the scene and knew how communicate. He did just that.

Zitouni had a system for whistles, mainly loud, short ones to clearly signal what was a foul and what not. That may sound simple, but it actually made every player realize when the game had stopped, thus avoiding any possible continuation of play that would have led to more aggressiveness in the match, especially in the later stages.

The Tahitian is in an excellent physical condition. I was extremely impressed by several of his sprints in which he was quicker than most players even (11’, 75’). This didn’t change as the game progressed, so he also knows how to keep this up for most of the match. He prefers to be rather close to the game, which he is able to do thanks to this stamina. Coupled with his positioning, that enables him to make some very good decisions, especially when it

comes to foul detection. Of course, this also brings with it a risk of actually interfering with play. However, he managed this very well (22', 26', 33'), only once being a bit too close to the ball (69'). Overall, he was highly alert and concentrated for the entirety of the match. Advantages were used well (14', 43'). Bravo!

Zitouni moreover managed to combine player management with a very good disciplinary control. Especially in times where it seems referees are told to avoid cards and talk more, I found this not only refreshing, but also very nice to see a different "style" in this regard. His communication with the players was very relaxed, he wasn't to shy to explain his decisions briefly, but always made it clear he was in charge. That ensured that despite some calls that did not find the agreement of the players, there was never any form of larger dissent. Very well done indeed!

He opened with an early yellow card at 14' for USA #4, who had deliberately blocked his opponent during a fast break. This is definitely a caution and even though we have seen referees at this competition trying to solve such scenes with a warning, I fully agree with the decision to book the player here.

The second caution at 31' for USA #16 could be seen as harsh, as the step on the foot seemed rather unintentional. Also, Zitouni allowed play to continue without signalling an advantage or anything else, before whistling a free kick and cautioning the player. It is possible that the FO or AR2 gave him a signal, but overall, this sort of management could bring trouble, especially if the possession changes in the meantime. Still, we can support the decision.

The third yellow card for QAT #13 for a reckless tackle was a stonewall one (44'). He gave a caution to QAT #12 shortly after the break (47') for a scene that was very similar to the one in 31' – a late stamp that was called after play had continued. In this case, Zitouni did not signal an advantage, so we can assume the decision once again was taken after some input from AR1 or FO. This is not the best management. We can't be sure if Zitouni missed the challenge at first, but in such cases, a clearer decision making (whistle the foul and book the player or signal the advantage) is mandatory. Most importantly though, the mandatory card was given in the end.

In 59', Zitouni had to deal with a rather difficult scene, after a US player seemingly lashed out against his opponent after being held. Zitouni was on the scene immediately – which he always was – and gave a free kick for the US before talking to the players and calming them down. Replays are not conclusive and AR1 seemingly did not advice any action, just like the VARs. We can back the referee, although at least a YC for the US player – and be it to somehow show he had seen the incident – would have been a good choice.

Zitouni's player management is unusual, but I think it worked very well based on the lack of dissent. (Have a look at the booking for SPA for QAT #17 in 67'!) His body language while explaining isn't as firm and clear, it seemed quite relaxed and sometimes even somewhere between slightly annoyed and disappointed. But: It worked. When in 71' USA #6 shoved his opponent after the latter had tried to delay the restart, he was there immediately, booking the US player and making clear such behaviour would not be tolerated.

The most crucial scene of the match happened in 80'. USA #16 was brought down inside the box by a tackle by QAT #3. Zitouni was about to whistle a penalty but noticed AR1 signalled an offside position. This was an extremely close call and even the lines by the VAR made it not 100% conclusive for me. AR1 could have been backed, but the VAR clearly told Zitouni that the player was onside.

The Tahitian then pointed to the spot but realized after two or three seconds he hadn't made the signal for VAR intervention. This is a technical mistake that SHOULD NOT happen. He corrected himself, making the gesture and pointing to the spot again but he needs to be fully focused despite the pressure at this moment.

It wasn't over though: VAR advised an OFR, though it is unclear if it was for the foul itself or a possible RC for DOGSO. I believe it was the latter, as the foul was pretty clear. Zitouni judged the tackle was aimed at the ball and therefore gave a yellow card. Once again, a fully supportable decision.

Final assessment: A quite challenging game for Zitouni, but he managed it well. His disciplinary control, positioning and fitness impressed me very much. While his player management is rather unusual, paired with his other skills it worked very well. He needs to improve in some areas though (clearer whistling of fouls, especially if you proceed to penalize them with cards!; remember the VAR gesture!). Nevertheless, I was very satisfied with his performance and a reward in form of a knockout stage game should be seriously considered.

AR1:

AR1 had a mostly solid expected level evening. He can't really be blamed for the offside he gave that was overruled by the VAR. It was almost impossible to call without technical aid and his original decision could have been upheld as well. It is possible he helped the referee in several scenes mentioned above. Good work overall!

AR2:

AR2 was less involved then his colleague, but a solid game from him as well.

Fourth Official:

Iván Arcides Barton Cisneros only was involved closely in two scenes: The YC in 71' where he was rather passive despite the scene unfolding right in front of him – though it was ok since the referee was there immediately – and that he stopped a substitution during the VAR review. Excellent application of the LOTG here. He might have helped with the bookings at 31' and 47'). He should get more involved in potential dangerous scenes in his area though.