



Halliday hell

Army referee on the pressures and pitfalls of being a Premiership official

Interview: Richard Lenton
Picture: Graeme Main

IN a split second last September, WO2 Andy Halliday's world was turned upside down.

He attracted a barrage of criticism and incurred the wrath of the red half of the city of Liverpool by making an honest mistake.

For serving soldiers, such decisions can mean the difference between life and death. However, this misjudgement had nothing to do with Halliday's career in the British Army.

As a Premiership assistant referee, his "crime" was to give an incorrect decision that ultimately cost Liverpool victory in their showdown with Bolton at the Reebok Stadium.

But, when one former Reds manager, the late Bill Shankly, argued that "football isn't a matter of life and death, it's much more important than that", it spoke volumes about the mentality of this football-mad city.

Halliday (APTC) incorrectly ruled that Liverpool goalkeeper Jose Reina had handled the ball outside his penalty area, awarding Bolton a free kick, which Gary Speed fired home.

And when Ivan Campo made it 2-0 after the break, the knives were well and truly out for Halliday as football pundits and newspaper reporters joined in unison to launch a series of scathing attacks on the 40-year-old.

"Getting the decision wrong was absolute hell," he told *SoldierSport*. "As an official I want to get every decision right and it killed me to get that one wrong. At the end of the day it was just a case of human error.

"What hurts me the most is when managers and pundits say things like 'these referees can go home after a game, have dinner with their wife and children and forget about it'. That is not the case."

Having worked hard for 12 years to reach the highest echelon of the English game, Halliday, who also referees at Nationwide Conference level, suddenly found himself officiating Football League games.

"The step down was to help build up my confidence when all I really wanted

was to get straight back in at the sharp end and be in a pressure situation again. I think that's what any psychologist would advise. If you fall off your bike, the best thing to do is to get straight back on again."

The subject of using video technology in football is raised on an almost weekly basis, but, despite being punished for one decision that could have been reversed by a quick peak at a monitor, Halliday opposes any such changes.

"There are already so many cameras trained on us," he said. "Where's it going to end? Pundits have got all these gadgets, all these cameras and all the time in the world with which to scrutinise decisions, and even then there are times when they can't agree on an incident.

"I believe video technology would kill the game. If pundits take six or seven looks at a decision and still disagree on the outcome then what chance has an official with a video replay got of pleasing everyone all of the time?"

Despite the intense scrutiny, Halliday is adamant that being part of the Premiership is a pleasure. Although he insists that his motivation for pursuing a career in refereeing had nothing to do with wanting to rub shoulders with multi-millionaire footballers.

"It all came about because I was struggling to stay in the corps team out in Germany," explained Halliday, who is originally from Newton Stewart in Scotland. "There were talented youngsters coming through who were better than me, and I was hardly getting a game.

"I thought if I can't play I may as well referee, and I also wanted to give something back to the game.

"I did the level three course in Germany in 1994 – and once you've done that you're qualified to referee.

"With the right breaks you can get from the grass roots to the Premiership in between eight and ten years. There's a mentoring system where people above you, past referees, supervise you, watch you and give you coaching points."

Halliday's refereeing debut was a stark contrast to the glitz and glamour of the Premiership as he took charge of an Army game in Gutersloh.

"It was daunting to say the least," he said. "And what happens to most referees happened to me. I blew the whistle for the first time and then suddenly thought 'what have I blown it for?'"

Despite more than a decade of hard work, it is unlikely that Halliday will fulfil his dream of becoming a Premiership referee because of the mandatory retirement age that forces the men in black to hang up their whistles at the age of 48.

A challenge to the ruling in the European courts has been mooted, but Halliday believes that the system is "about right".

"By the time I'm experienced enough for the Premiership I'll not be far short of 48 so it doesn't look as though it will happen for me," said Halliday who has served in the Army since 1985.

"I think 48 is probably about right because the level of fitness required is so high. We train every day, sticking to a strict regime, and have to send data back to our sports scientist on a weekly basis so they can ensure that our fitness levels are right."

Sheffield United manager Neil Warnock was recently quoted as saying that "because referees have never played the game they don't know what a fair challenge is". It was the latest in a long line of calls for more ex-players to train as referees. However, very few have taken on the challenge.

"Players know how hard it is and don't want to do it," said Halliday.

"We're a different breed to players. They think we want to be the centre of attention but that's not true. We just do our best to get decisions right." ■

“As an official I want to get every decision right and it killed me to get that one wrong”

Whistling lessons

THE Army Football Association will be running a series of week-long basic referee courses (level 7) in 2007.

Course dates include: February 19-23 (Herford); March 12-16 (Aldershot); July 2-6 (Aldershot); September 3-7 (Aldershot); September 17-21 (Aldershot).

For further details on all these courses, which cost £57 (£30 returnable on completion of ten referee appointments), call mil 94740 3120; email armysenrec.edinburgh@afco.mod.uk or visit www.army.mod.uk/armyfa