

Watching the Rugby World Cup recently has been a rollercoaster of emotions. At the time of writing, we've just got through the quarter-finals; you'll of course know who's lifted the Webb Ellis trophy when you read this, so perhaps my musings might feel dated, irrelevant or just a bit silly. But I was shocked to see Ireland lose to New Zealand, proving once again that this stage of the tournament is their achilles heel, having never progressed to the semi-finals of a World Cup. Not once. But this really did feel like the year for the aptly-named 'Green Machine' to break that curse and go on towards overall glory, as the world's number one ranked side. They looked unplayable in the pool stages, but blew their big moment against the All Blacks, undone by a few moments of sheer brilliance from rugby's traditional dominant power. Argentina beating Wales also felt like a big shock to me, the South Americans continuing their surprisingly impressive World Cup track record – they've reached the semi-finals in three of the last five tournaments. And then in an all-time classic of a match, defending champions South Africa knocking out the hosts France by a single point. England, in fact, the only pool winners to qualify for the last four. South Africa are a different animal for me, and I can't see anyone else beating them – they're my bet to lift the trophy. You'll be able to laud me or laugh at me.

Switching to a sport that I'm not as sharp on, but I recently enjoyed golf's Ryder Cup. I'm not usually a massive golf fan – it's a bit too pedestrian, and hard to really get behind any one player in particular as no one since Tiger Woods' peak has really managed to consistently win each and every tournament they enter. These two factors make it, for me, a very different kind of spectator experience to football, rugby, etc.

(Perhaps, thirdly, it's due to me not being

able to play golf at all well – I went to the driving range for the first time ever a few months ago; it's safe to say I won't be on the PGA Tour anytime soon!)

But the Ryder Cup deals with those two factors. Firstly, the match play format stirs up real excitement. It's over and done with in just three days, and each shot matters so much. Secondly, you're not supporting just one golfer who you slightly admire. Instead, you tribally support the Europeans against the Americans. Historically we've tended to be on the same side in international contests, but the battle lines are definitely drawn on the golf course. And that intensity of battle really came through this year, with the sore losers from across the pond struggling to cope after a tough first day. World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler breaking down into tears after a shock defeat in his first match – and not only a shock defeat, but the biggest defeat in Ryder Cup history. Then there was a spat between Rory McIlroy and the caddy of US star Patrick Cantlay, which looked like it could've spilled over into a fight. Just two examples of the pressure-cooker environment that the Ryder Cup is.

Europe were the victors, carried by a monster of an opening day as previously stated. And the big take-home for me was that the Scandinavians are a big force in golf – Norway's Viktor Hovland, Sweden's Ludvig Aberg, Denmark's Nicolai Hojgaard all playing a part in the team's success. Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy was stellar though, winning the most points out of any player over the three days. I really enjoyed watching it – and I'm striving to get good enough at hitting a golf ball to eventually pluck up the confidence to play 18 holes.

Onto the regular segments now, and yes, it's football chat. There's been huge controversy in the Premier League recently, particularly surrounding that old

continued on p57

foe VAR. Rewind the clock to Saturday 30th September at the Tottenham Hotspur stadium, Spurs taking on Liverpool. Midway through the first half, Liverpool winger Luis Diaz goes through on goal – it's seemingly touch and go if he's onside, but play continues, Diaz scores, then the linesman puts his flag up for offside. At this point, it should be checked by VAR. Referee Michael Oliver consults VAR, but then it gets strange.

Unprecedentedly for such a marginal call, within seconds the VAR check is complete. The VAR officials are 'sticking with the on-field decision' – that decision being offside. But here's the problem – he was onside. The now-famous lines that get drawn to determine these decisions didn't appear to have been drawn. It all happened so fast and, at the time, felt so wrong.

VAR gets a lot of flak at the best of times - for holding up the speed of the game, contentious handball calls, penalty decisions – but offsides, the most black and white refereeing call of all, had become entirely a non-issue with VAR removing human error. Until this one moment.

Liverpool go on to have two players sent off; both reds seemed pretty harsh if I'm being honest. Down to nine men, despite a real show of resilience, they conceded a late own goal to lose 2-1. Manager Jurgen Klopp kept his cool after the game to avoid further fines for criticising officials, but you could tell he was livid - and for good reason of course. Eventually, as expected, the refereeing body PGMOL put their hands up and admitted VAR was used incorrectly.

Of course, a lot of this might feel very trivial - it's just football, it doesn't really matter. Recent events in the Middle East put sport in perspective. But there's a lot

more at stake here than simply football. The Premier League is big business - mistakes like this, that somehow feel so commonplace, can have enormous financial implications. No wonder Klopp and Liverpool wanted the match to be replayed.

Audio was later released of the communications between referee Michael Oliver and the VAR room. Above all else, I concluded that the VAR process is a shambles. The lines of communication are just so messy. Listen back to the audio if you haven't already - I can imagine the referee has a really tough time hearing a clear decision from the VAR room in his ear with the noise of tens of thousands screaming and whistling in a stadium.

It's good to see that PGMOL are changing the VAR process. In this Diaz incident, only the replay operator realised the mistake had been made. He urged the match to be stopped and the goal allowed to stand. But I can imagine that he struggled to get that point across on those scrambled lines of communication with Michael Oliver.

There was chatter of corruption too. Admittedly very loose pub chat. Michael Oliver and Darren England (the VAR referee overseeing the incident) were officiating in the UAE just 48 hours before the Spurs-Liverpool match. The logic being that Manchester City, Liverpool's big rivals, are owned by the Emirati royal family – and that Oliver and England were perhaps bribed? I think that chatter is far-fetched and nonsense – unsurprising, given that the source was my Liverpool-supporting flatmate. The real concern about this UAE link is one of workload fatigue affecting concentration levels. But still, it was such a clanger of a mistake, one that I think even I could've avoided with no refereeing expertise.

On the brighter side of things, despite the

continued on p58

Premier League's woes at times, we've now got what seems to be a wide open title race. Spurs have started so well under new manager Ange Postecoglou, the refresh of the club culture that was touted seems to have been realised. Liverpool will hope that the VAR controversy doesn't affect them, and they've started well enough for me to think it won't trouble their top four hopes. Manchester City are obviously the eminent threat, but losing surprisingly to Wolves, and then a 1-0 loss to their biggest title rivals Arsenal has opened the door. It's a four horse race for me though, and I'd argue that the top four might be signed and sealed already. The only threat to the Champions League places, in my mind, is the team enjoying life in that competition right now – Newcastle United. And, after 21 seasons away, what a return to Europe they've had. A gritty 0-0 draw with last year's semi-finalists AC Milan at the San

Siro, followed up with a 4-1 thumping win over star-studded PSG. An electric atmosphere at St James' Park – no away team wants to go there. It's a tough group, with PSG, Milan and another big name in Borussia Dortmund. But these are exactly the kind of teams Newcastle should want. Not just for the amazing away days that the travelling 'Toon Army' can enjoy, but also because all three of these teams will bring the game to Newcastle - thus creating the perfect set-up for Newcastle's blistering counter-attacking prowess. I think they've got every chance of topping the group - and then who knows where they go. Exciting times ahead for the English team furthest away from us here in the south-west!

paul@thediary.uk.com

© Paul Harrison October 2023