

# Video refs come of age in World Cup

## Out of the Box

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**CONTRARY TO WHAT** has been on the front pages of international and Hong Kong media, the biggest global event for the past couple of weeks is not the China-US trade war but the World Cup in Russia.

Like many of you, I have been watching the games on and off (but only stayed up once for a 2am game). It is almost a social obligation – without some knowledge of who beat whom and who is in and who is out, we run the risk of becoming social outcasts.

Being a fan my whole life and a school team player in high school and college (with an occasional game even in my senior years now), I also enjoy the personal skills of individual players, team strategies and the mental aspects.

This particular World Cup seems more interesting

and engaging than in the past: more goals, drama, suspense, surprises and fewer controversies.

Who would have thought that defending champion Germany would not make it into the elimination rounds?

What could top the drama of Japan making it into the elimination round on fewer yellow cards than Senegal at the end of their last group game? France's Kylian Mbappe has been crowned the new Pele, while Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi went out early.

Russia, as the host nation, has come out looking very good. Not just the team – which advanced much further than anyone had expected (or its global ranking would forecast), but both the hardware (eg the stadiums) and software (crowd control – no hooligans) that it has put up looked very impressive, at least on TV.

Japan also shone – not only did the team almost beat Belgium (I was rooting for it) but its fans were cleaning up the stadium seats after the game. Puts those traditional football hooligans to shame.

Hong Kong's English Premier League fans must be ecstatic that England got into the final four for the first time in 20 years. The Korean team shows true grit in beating Germany for pride and honor even though it had no chance of advancing even after it did. That's the human drama beyond the physical game.

But what really sets this World Cup apart from the past is that it is the first one to use technology to assist refereeing. Every time we see the referees draw a box with their hands, they are indicating that they are using the video assistant referee system.

The VAR is designed to support decision-making by referees in four game-changing situations: goals and offenses leading up to goals; penalty decisions and offenses leading to penalty awards; direct red-card incidents; and mistaken identity.

The VAR team is located in a centralized video operation room in Moscow and communicates directly in real time with referees at each of the 12 stadiums.



**Argentinian referee Nestor Pitana checks with the VAR team during the World Cup final between France and Croatia in the leadup to a crucial penalty award. AFP**

It is claimed VAR usage increased the accuracy rate of refereeing decisions from 93 to 99 percent in 335 incidents at the end of the group stage.

VAR is not without controversy. Detractors claim that it slows down the flow the game, lacks accuracy, removes the "human" dimension of the game: imperfect decisions by referees and the arguments they cause to arise among fans.

Supporters claim that it removes unjust referee decisions and discourages players from doing "tricks" like diving and pulling on opponent's shirt, or deliberate or inadvertent handballs (Diego Maradona's "hand of God" would have been caught on VAR).

I am a supporter myself. I guess it is the scientist in me who prefers the "truth" rather than the human limitations of the referee.

Like Hawk-Eye in tennis (the same company does VAR), I think VAR adds a new entertainment dimension to the game. I think VAR will be retained.

In a time of global tribalism, the World Cup, more than even the Olympics, gives me hope that the human race still shares something we love in common. We compete fiercely, with national pride on the line. We celebrate when we win and cry when we lose.

But we all share the human spirit together. That's the power of something like the World Cup.