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Umpires... or anarchy?

The confusion at the end of the recent Cricket World Cup has produced a predictable outpouring of frothy opinion pieces on the role of umpires, now known apparently as 'interfering jobsworths' or 'petty officials'.

Latest to join the attack is the London *Daily Telegraph's* Simon Hughes, who writes that 'officials have developed a disturbing habit of ruining major events with their law-obsessed meddling'. From the examples he uses to justify this comment, Hughes evidently believes that the Laws that govern cricket should be set aside if their application in any way interferes with the 'entertainment'.

It is the job of the players to satisfy the sponsors and spectators by playing the game in an attractive and entertaining way. It is the job of the sponsors and governing bodies to stage matches that will attract the crowds. The umpire's remit is quite different. It is to ensure fair play by applying the Laws of Cricket and any special regulations or playing conditions that may pertain to the particular match. Umpires do not have, nor do they *seek*, the power to 'adjust' those Laws or fudge them, or bend them to suit the whims of others. Even if they wanted to do so, how would the umpires decide just *whose* interests were to take precedence? Would Hughes be happy if it were the *bookmakers* who determined the outcome?

He writes that, after play had been suspended for bad light towards the end of the final Ashes Test at the Oval in 2005, the England team had to 'wait half an hour' before umpires Koertzen and Bowden 'deigned to come back out to ostentatiously remove the bails' (*sic*). The umpires were undertaking their duties in accordance with the Laws. But suppose they had decided – just because it seemed like a good idea at the time – to call off play earlier and suppose that the light *had* subsequently improved and that Australia had needed just a few runs to win, rather than 300-odd? He would doubtless then be the first to condemn the 'unsporting attitude of little dictators'.

Hughes writes that, last August, 'there was the unedifying sight of Darrell Hair apprehending the Pakistanis for alleged ball-tampering and later taking umbrage and

his bat and ball home with him when they staged a protest.’ It was in fact the *Pakistanis* who took their bats home with them, having forfeited the match by refusing to play (Law 21.3(a)). What would he have expected Hair and his colleague Doctrove to have done instead – ignored the *truly* unedifying attempt to discredit umpires upholding the Laws and the Spirit of the Game and carried on? And, if they had, what could any umpire have done the *next* time it happened?

Hughes recounts an anecdote about umpires delaying the start of a Test at Old Trafford because ‘the outfield was a touch damp’ (his analysis), with the result that, by the time the outfield was fit for play, the spectators were faced with the choice of watching the cricket or an England football match in the 2002 World Cup that was about to be shown on a big screen somewhere nearby! He writes this as if cricket umpires were obliged to consider the feelings of football fans. They are not. Under the Laws of the game, they have more important things that they are instructed to worry about – like whether the ground conditions pose an obvious and foreseeable risk of injury to the players – the *cricket* players - if play starts or continues. Supposing they *had* started on time, in unreasonable conditions - would Hughes and the rest of the press box club together to pay for their legal costs if a player slipped and injured himself and sued the umpires for negligence (and, yes, it *has* happened – the legal case, that is, not the journalists coughing up!)?

He writes that there are ‘those purists who still believe that the umpire’s decision is final.’ Does this mean that he is *not* one of those ‘purists’? He argues, too, for a new Law – the forty-third - the Application of Common Sense. ‘Law 43’ already exists. In the words of one of our greatest umpires, now retired, ‘Law 43 is the common sense application of Laws one to 42.’

The idea of bending the Laws to suit the occasion is tempting, but dangerous. Start the process and there is no way of stopping it. The end of that road is anarchy or, worse, a game run entirely for the benefit of commercial interests. Cricket umpires exist to serve a non-commercial master - the Laws of the game. Whether he realises it or not, Simon Hughes has produced a most compelling argument for all umpires to be completely independent of all cricket administrators and governing bodies. Each party can then make progress with their respective jobs.