

## 'I HAVE OFFERED TO REPLAY THE GAME'

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1999

Shortly after the 1986 World Cup Finals two managers were talking about a new development.

“Did you see what happened in the World Cup?” asked one manager. “If a player is injured, the opposition kicks it out to let him have treatment and then the injured player’s team throws it in to the opposition.”

“Our players do that anyway,” said the other manager.

This sporting tactic entered the British game and for several years worked well as an informal arrangement. Then a few things went wrong. The biggest furore concerned an incident in an FA Cup tie at Highbury on 13 February 1999 but Arsenal had experienced two previous controversial moments, conceding goals to Tottenham (1996) and Blackburn Rovers (1997) after opposition players had competed for throw-ins that followed stoppages.

Two incidents turned the FA Cup sixth round tie between Arsenal and Sheffield United into a strange match. The first came in the 76<sup>th</sup> minute when Arsenal scored to take a 2-1 lead. The second came shortly after the final whistle when Arsenal coach Arsène Wenger announced that his team would be willing to replay the game at Highbury because of the manner of the winning goal.

A second-half headed goal by Marcelo, United’s Brazilian striker, had cancelled out Vieira’s first-half headed goal for Arsenal, and Sheffield United were optimistic of forcing a replay when the game entered the last quarter of an hour. Then United’s Lee Morris went down with cramp in the Arsenal penalty area. A long clearance ran through to United goalkeeper Alan Kelly and he kicked it, right-footed, over the touch-line to his left to enable Morris to receive treatment. There was a delay of several minutes while Morris was treated. Then a further delay when substitute Bobby Ford replaced Morris. Play resumed with an Arsenal throw-in.

Ray Parlour threw the ball towards Sheffield United goal. The Nwankwo Kanu, a Nigerian international making his debut for Arsenal as a substitute, latched on to the ball and crossed. The unmarked Marc Overmars turned the ball into the net despite a defender’s lunge.

Referee Peter Jones felt he had no option but to give a goal. The Sheffield United players were furious. They followed Jones around the pitch and told him what they thought. United manager Steve Bruce tried to call his players off the pitch and there was a six minute delay while tempers cooled. When the game was resumed, Arsenal played out a 2-1 victory in a fractious atmosphere.

Fifteen minutes after the end of the game, Wenger came in to make his announcement: “I have offered to replay the game here at Highbury. It is the only thing I can do. I am trying to repair an accident. Kanu and all of us are very, very sad.”

The FA agreed to Wenger's offer although others were quick to point out that it was a dangerous precedent to replay a game when a referee had technically done nothing wrong. Indeed, FIFA questioned whether the game should be replayed and there was an anxious wait until it was given the go-ahead. FIFA agreed on condition that both clubs signed a declaration to say they agreed that the winner of the rematch or any subsequent replay would progress to the next round. FIFA also insisted that a donation from the match proceeds should be made to an appropriate charity. FIFA's position was that the first match was still valid. Matches can only be replayed if the referee makes an error of law and that hadn't happened in this case. As the incident was tossed back and forth, all kinds of suggestions were made. Some people thought Arsenal should have backed off and allowed Sheffield United to equalise. Some Sheffield United supporters felt that the rematch should be at their ground as United were only 14 minutes away from earning a replay. Others raised a hypothetical question: what would have happened if Sheffield United had equalised at 2-2?

Still other thought the referee should have given an indirect free-kick against Kanu for unsporting behaviour. There had been a precedent for this a fortnight before in the Wrexham-Preston Division 2 match. The Preston goalkeeper kicked the ball towards the touch-line to allow treatment to a player but the referee blew to stop play as the ball was in the air. At the resulting drop-ball, the Preston players stood back to allow Wrexham's Jeff Whitely to return the ball to their goalkeeper. Instead, Whitely immaculately half-volleyed the ball over the goalkeeper's head and into the net. The referee gave an indirect free-kick to Preston.

Arsenal won the rematch by the same score, 2-1

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