

The Art of the Penalty Kick by Stuart Fuller

Back in December whilst Lewes were beating Billericay Town 2-1 away in Essex Club Secretary Kevin Brook and I were discussing how good the referee had been in the game. "Of course, when he awards an injury time penalty against us, he will be the worst ref ever" said Kev. Sure enough, the ref awarded a penalty four minutes into stoppage time.

Of course we all prayed for Rikki Banks to save it but the odds were stacked against him. Rikki is a fantastic keeper and has won us many points in games over the past few seasons but he's not known for his penalty saving record. But why are some goal keepers more adept at saving penalties than others? In the 2014 World Cup, Dutch coach Louis Van Gaal substituted his goal keeper in the 120th minute of the game versus Costa Rica. Fans and pundits were aghast that he took off Jasper Cillessen and replaced him with Newcastle United's Tim Krul, especially as Krul's record in saving penalties was average at best. Krul saved two penalties in the shoot-out, the Dutch won and Van Gaal was heralded as a tactical genius. Interestingly enough, in the next game, the Semi-Final against Argentina also went to penalties and Krul wasn't deployed. The Dutch lost. Coincidence?

In his 2014 book, *Think like a Freak*, U.S. Economist Steven Levitt examined the odds on scoring based on how the penalty is taken. 75% of penalty kicks taken at the professional and semi-professional levels are scored. If a keeper guesses the right side of the goal then the odds fall to just 40%. Whilst the best option is to hit the ball into the corners, the chance of missing rises dramatically. The Economist's data set suggests that keepers move to the left on 57% of penalties and to the right on 41%, which means you stand a much higher chance of scoring if you hit it down the middle, yet less than 20% of penalty takers ever plan to put the ball straight down the middle.

Some penalty takers have legendary status. Antonin Panenka won the 1976 European Championships for Czechoslovakia with what would be called today "an audacious chip" against West Germany. West Ham's teenage full back Ray Stewart kept his nerve to equalise at Wembley Stadium with the final kick of the 1981 League Cup Final against the legendary Liverpool side. Stewart scored 81 out of 86 spot kicks during his West Ham career, whilst he netted 3 out of the 5 remaining kicks from the rebound. Fellow Hammers full-back Julian Dicks adopted the same "*smash it down the middle*" style during his career, scoring 35 out of 38. Southampton's most famous son, Matt Le Tissier, went one step better than Dicks and Stewart, scoring 47 out of 48 spot kicks.

In the 1980/81 season, Bobby Robson had assembled one of the best squads English football ever seen. British players such as Terry Butcher, Russell Osman, John Wark and Paul Mariner were combined with the skills of the Dutch duo, Arnold Muhren and Frans Thijssen. The Blues came within a whisker of the league title, a FA Cup semi-final but on the bridesmaid tag to one side by capturing the UEFA Cup. In March of that season they beat Manchester United 6-0 - a score that could have been so much worse if the United keeper Gary Bailey hadn't saved three Ipswich penalties.

But you cannot talk about Ipswich and penalty saved without mentioning Paul Cooper. In the 1979/80 season alone, the Ipswich keeper saved 8 out of the 10 penalties he faced. This was in a time when keepers weren't even allowed to move along their line as they can today. The following season, The London Evening Standard, as it was known back then, arranged a competition between Cooper and Ray Stewart for charity. Stewart scored 6 out of 10 - less than his normal success rate but still fairing better than some of Cooper's other opponents.

And then there's the legendary misses. Roberto Baggio's kick that ended up in row Z of the Rose Bowl in Pasadena handed the 1994 World Cup to Brazil. John Terry's slip on the wet turf in Moscow

saw Manchester United take the 2008 Champions League title. Then there was the farcical Arsenal spot kick in the game in 2005 against Manchester City when Thierry Henry and Roberto Pires tried to be too clever ending in players not understanding what the rules were. In May 1992 in his final game at Wembley Stadium, Gary Lineker had the chance to equal Bobby Charlton's scoring record for England against Brazil. His weak spot kick was easily saved and with it went his chance to equal the 49 goal record.

Of course we could write a whole story about other England players misses. Stuart Pearce and Chris Waddle in the 1990 World Cup semi-final, Gareth Southgate against Germany in the 1996 European Championship semi-final, David Batty in Japan in 2002 against Argentina, David Beckham v Portugal in 2004 and then Ashley Cole in 2012 against Italy in Ukraine. Nearly 25 years of penalty shoot-out hurt.

So a word to the wise for whoever is our current penalty taker. Take a leaf out of the book of Le Tissier, Stewart or Dicks and drive the ball down the middle of the goal. That is unless the goal keeper has a copy of Levitt's book tucked into his kit bag.