

Q&A with ADG Developer, Tim Farrell

What's your background in football?

I'm just a football fan, simple as that. I grew up in Australia in the 70's, and like most boys I played football, or soccer. I was a totally hopeless player, but that didn't diminish my love for the game. As a 16 year old, I clearly remember the 1986 World Cup and Maradona leading Argentina to victory.

Watching the World Cup down here needs some passion and dedication because the matches are mostly in the middle of the night and the dead of winter. I also have clear memories of the 1994 World Cup final and Baggio's missed kick. You could literally feel the knife go through the hearts of the Italian communities here in Australia.

A lot of people have assumed and I'm some bitter old English bloke, who has suffered years of shootout torment and that's why I created ADG. But, as fortune would have it, Australia have now qualified for two World Cups on penalties. So, as a devoted Socceroos fan, these were obviously unforgettable moments. The point I'm trying to make is that ADG isn't about national allegiances, or who's been successful in shootouts, and who hasn't. ADG is just about the beauty of football and creating a tie-breaker that does the sport and its players justice.

What was the inspiration for ADG?

Over many years and like a lot of football fans, I've thought that there had to be a better solution than penalties. I suppose around the 2006 World Cup ideas began gestating again, but it wasn't until the 2008 UEFA Champions League final that I actually sat down and began to flesh out an alternative. Once again, I wasn't a Chelsea supporter who had just suffered a heart-breaking defeat, I was just a neutral fan who was trying to improve the sport.

What was the starting point for ADG?

Two of the really big issues with the shootout, the abuse, racism and trauma players suffer, and the 20% advantage for the team kicking first, both stem from the same underlying problem. And the problem is simply, that there's the expectation the kicker should always score. So, you ask yourself, how do we change that expectation? It was then that I thought of including a defender. The challenge was then to develop a tie-breaker format that would combine the skill, speed and athleticism of modern football, with the climactic drama and tension of penalties.

What exactly is wrong with the penalty shootout?

Well, there are three very obvious and fundamental problems. Firstly, it exposes players to psychological trauma, racism and death threats. We see this time and time again, and if anything, it's getting worse. You can act like FIFA and put your head in the sand, and hope it goes away. But it won't. The second problem is that it fails to showcase the game. Football has some of the most gifted male and female athletes on the planet and the shootout fails to showcase their skills. And thirdly, the team kicking first has a 20% advantage. This is because the team kicking second is usually playing catch-up and experiences greater pressure with each kick. It's the reason why the ABBA kicking sequence was trialled. So, we've got three absolutely massive problems here. Normally, you would assume that any one of these problems would be enough for the governing body to say, we have to fix this up straight away.

What psychological impact does the penalty shootout have on players?

You just have to listen to the players who have missed important kicks. Baggio said that it affected him for years. Didier Six has related how it was hard for him to get a job, because people thought he was unstable. Christian Karembu has compared it to Russian roulette with someone always getting the bullet and it reducing them to nothing. Roma's favourite son, Bruno Conti, described it as unspeakable pain and being psychologically destroyed. This was after the 1984 European Cup final against Liverpool and Grobbelaar with his wobbly legs. Roma's captain that day was Agostino di Bartolomei, who scored with his penalty, but later suffered from clinical depression and committed suicide on the tenth anniversary of the game. It's a stark reminder that professional athletes are just as susceptible to mental illness as any other group in the community.

Twenty years ago, Terry Venables, who I don't think anyone is going to mistake as a new-age sensitive guy, said that, 'We ought not be subjecting people to this kind of pressure. Penalties put too much strain on one player.' Since then, the situation has only gotten worse. Today's players also have to endure all the scrutiny and vitriol from social media. Death threats were made against several players at the 2018 World Cup. Three English players received racial abuse and a mural was vandalised after they missed penalties in the 2020 Euro final. And of course, this is just going to continue. So, the football community needs to ask itself, is this what we really want for our best players?

How does ADG reduce trauma, racism and death threats? Isn't a missed goal in ADG going to have the same repercussions as during the shootout?

Football is the ultimate low scoring game. But the shootout turns the game upside down and creates the expectation that the kicker will always score. Players measure themselves against their team-mates. If four of your team-mates convert penalties and your solitary miss loses the match, you'll feel singularly responsible for the loss. You're going to feel guilty about letting your team-mates and supporters down.

ADG's scoring rate is estimated at 20%, which is three to four times lower than the shootout. So, now the expectation from team-mates and fans is that you won't score. They hope you do, but they don't expect it. We've successfully flipped those expectations around. If you manage to score a goal during ADG, you're going to be hero for your country or your club. However, if you don't score, you won't be saddled with feelings of guilt and responsibility, because it's likely none of your team-mates scored either. And of course, you won't be subject to the vile abuse and trauma that kickers who miss penalties are subjected to.

What's been the response from FIFA?

You often hear people say, don't fix what's not broken. However, FIFA acknowledge the problem and that's why we saw golden goal and why other alternatives are always discussed. Even Sepp Blatter, for all his faults, declared the shootout a tragedy and in 2012 asked Franz Beckenbauer to come up with an alternative. Beckenbauer said something about them being better than the coin toss, and that was it! So, regrettably there's an astonishing amount of arrogance and wilful neglect exhibited by the sport's law makers and administrators.

ADG has basically been ignored by FIFA. I've never received any substantial feedback from anyone in the organisation. You'd have to ask them why that is. I know that Infantino is aware of ADG, but I haven't received any acknowledgement from him. In recent years I've sent the proposal to Arsène Wenger who is their Chief of Global Football Development. But just like everyone else in the organisation, he has never provided any feedback, analysis, notes, criticisms, or suggestions. It's incredibly poor form.

In contrast, over the years I've had very meaningful correspondence with IFAB technical director, David Elleray. He's been very generous with his time and I know he thinks it's a highly detailed and very well thought out proposal.

But FIFA call the shots. So, they need to pull their finger out and test ADG. Test other alternatives too. See what works. Only thorough testing will reveal the actual strengths and flaws of different proposals. I know testing will cost money, but you're the biggest sporting organisation on the planet. Spend some time and money. See what works. See what people actually like.

FIFA itself haven't come up with anything since golden goal. But just because you don't have any ideas, it doesn't mean good ideas aren't out there. This beautiful game that we all love deserves a tie-breaker that rewards and showcases the modern footballer, both male and female, for their immense skill and athleticism. Not one that crucifies them, or gives one team a 20% advantage. And don't wait for a catastrophic real-life tragedy before doing anything. We've already had 52 years of penalty shootout carnage. The time for change is now!