

Home advantage and referees: evidence from the European Rugby Cup (ERC)

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Introduction

Home field advantage is a commonly observed feature in many sports. Much of the literature has focussed on the role of match officials as a source of home bias with studies shown discretionary refereeing decisions, such as adding extra time, or awarding yellow and red cards being biased in favour of the home team in Spanish (Buraimo et al., 2012) and German football (Sutter & Kocher, 2004), the English FA cup (Downward & Jones 2007), The English Premier League (Dawson et al., 2007), as well as the UEFA champions League (Buraimo et al., 2012). The issue of referee bias in rugby union has received relatively little attention in the literature. This is surprising and worthy of attention for two reasons. First the degree of home field advantage in rugby tends to be relatively high with more than 70% of matches in the French Top 14 league over the period 1995 to 2015 resulting in home wins and more than 60% in the English Premiership over the same period. In the case of the European Rugby Cup 66%, of all pool stage matches result in home wins. Second, in Rugby Union, the referee has much greater influence on match outcomes than in many other team sports (Page and Page, 2010). This is because many decisions depend on the individual referee's interpretation of complex rules. It is also relevant that, traditionally in rugby, referees decisions could not be challenged and dissent was not tolerated as the referee has much greater influence on match outcomes than in many other team sports (Page and Page, 2010).

Aims of research and research question

The aim of this study is to examine the outcome of referees discretionary decisions with a view to answering the question; 'Do referees contribute towards home advantage in rugby union?'

Data and method

The present paper analyses refereeing decisions connected with the awarding of yellow cards and red cards and also penalty tries issued in the course of 1,240 matches played in the pool stages of the European Rugby Cup (ERC) from its inception in 1995/96 up to in 2013/14. Robust regression analysis on the difference between decisions in favour of the home and away team are undertaken controlling for important confounding variables such as the relative team qualities, the group stage and referee and team nationalities are undertaken.

Results

Results support the existence of crowd size and team quality effects on the award of yellow cards and penalty tries in the home team's favour but the shared nationality of the referee may ameliorate this.

Discussion

The results of the analysis suggest that home advantage can be contributed to by referees and particularly through crowd effects and referee nationality being shared with one of the teams. Whilst the latter is not frequent, elimination of shared nationality between competing teams and officials is desirable. The results also suggest that more emphasis might be placed on the use of television match officials (TMOs) for crucial game changing decisions. This will improve the management of an increasingly successful high performance sport.

References

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