



IF A GOAL  
IS SCORED  
BY FOREST  
AND NOBODY'S  
THERE TO  
CALL IT...  
THE CASE  
FOR SILENCE  
IN TELEVISED  
SOCCER  
BY ERIK  
HOFFNER

I was settling onto my couch for the second half of a Borussia Dortmund match recently when I realized something was wrong. As the cameras beamed back the kickoff and the crowd roared to life, there was one thing missing: nobody was talking. As the match restarted, I found myself paying closer attention than usual, noting which player had the ball, which side came out of the break more fired up, and whose fans were singing loudest. A match that had been mildly interesting during the first half was now utterly gripping.

We were almost 15 minutes in when some embarrassed producer remembered to flick a switch, bringing the familiar piddle-paddle of the play-by-play into my living room. I wish they hadn't.

Without the voice of the announcers mediating the game, my huge television had felt for the first time like a window into the rollicking stadium. I suppose all the extra information they offered—what this club or that player had done in the first half, or last week, or last season—was useful in some abstract sense, but it didn't enhance my experience of the match. In fact, the absence of these reminders forced me into a more active mode of viewing. The trajectory of televised sports is indisputably toward total immersion, but I can't remember a more fascinating or blissful 15 minutes of soccer on TV.

Since that day, I've been wishing announcers would stop talking, even just for a bit, and never more than during the latest Merseyside derby, where two wordy chaps in the booth must have been under the impression that they were calling the game for radio: "Coleman finds Lukaku, but his first touch is heavy and Liverpool have a throw-in. Now Clyne finds Lallana..." Yes, I can see the game—that's the magic of television. What I want to hear is the players communicating with each other, the managers shouting and cursing, and the fans taunting each other with clever songs.

A commentator-less broadcast doesn't just enhance all the elements that contribute to a great atmosphere; it can also offer better information than we get from the guys in the booth. Early this year, during a break in play between Tottenham and West Brom, an analyst talked right over the instructions Mauricio Pochettino was giving to Kyle Walker on the sideline. I could make out some of what the Spurs manager was saying thanks to a well-placed mic, but no amount of rewinding made the rest of it intelligible. Instead, I got yet another lecture on the importance of organizing a defense from the back. (Oh, really?) With respect, I'd rather hear what the coach has to say.

Match commentary has its place. It's handy when I'm watching two unfamiliar squads, especially during international matches. That's when I appreciate hearing about players' histories and affiliations, the relative success of the teams involved, even stats. But when a match concerns teams in leagues that I watch regularly, I'd prefer just to hear the live match audio and my own thoughts.

This is not a new idea. NBC Sports tried comment-free coverage in 1980 for a meaningless late-season NFL game between the Dolphins and the Jets. The producer, Don Ohlmeyer, thought that commentators spent too much time talking.

"My first reaction was of incredible nerve, nervousness," the announcer on that game, Dick Enberg, told ESPN.com decades later. "We're paid to talk, so all of us want to fill the air with lots of exciting words." But he also said the experience changed him, and he afterward refused to talk over "special" moments so viewers at home could enjoy them more fully.

The experiment didn't catch on, but NBC tried it again in 2016 for the Rio Olympics, making an announcer-free option available on the Internet. And one Redditor posted a tech hack for NFL fans who are serious enough about live-game audio to disconnect their TV's center-channel speaker and thereby cut out the play-by-play.

I'm not that technical and don't really like watching sports on the Internet, so I wish my TV service offered a wordless soccer broadcast. (Another Redditor in the U.K. says this option is sometimes available there by pressing a "red button" on the remote.) My American TV provider offers more than 800 channels; surely one of those could be made available for commentless coverage.

I'm sure many folks won't agree with me, and not just sportscasters: the guys I kick around with every Tuesday are split on the idea. Even these well-informed viewers tell me they often like what they learn from the call. So until it becomes an option, we'll have to rely on the guys in the booth to show some discretion, as Lee Dixon did when his broadcast partner cued him to reflect on the atmosphere in the first minute of a recent match.

"Well, I don't need to speak," he said. "I know I'm paid to speak, but I'm better off just letting you listen to this noise—it's absolutely deafening, even with my headphones on."

What followed was a sublime five seconds. **H**

