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Subject: Offside – Interfering with Play

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The first goal scored in the new MLS season (New York Red Bulls at Seattle Sounders, March 19, see accompanying clip) was the subject of controversy based on the argument that a teammate of the scorer was in an offside position at the time and had become involved in active play by interfering with play. The goal was from Sounder #17 (Montero) against the Red Bull goalkeeper #1 (Cepero) and the Sounder forward alleged to have been offside was #23 (Nyassi).

The following facts are not in dispute:

- Nyassi was in an offside position.
- Nyassi did not become involved in active play by gaining an advantage (historically, this is only an issue if the ball has rebounded from the crossbar, a goalpost, or a defender, which it did not in this case).
- Nyassi did not interfere with an opponent. He did not get in the way of a defender, make any movement or gesture which deceived or distracted an opponent, and, most importantly, did not block the goalkeeper's line of sight (the attack came in from the goalkeeper's left whereas the attacker ran from the goalkeeper's right and was at least several yards away from the goalkeeper when the shot on goal was made).
- Nyassi did not interfere with play (no contact with the ball).

The assistant referee was well placed, in line with the second to last defender, to confirm these essential elements in deciding for an offside violation. Accordingly, there was no offside violation and the goal was valid.

The debate has been vigorous over the last several years regarding the way in which an attacker in an offside position can be involved in active play. The definition provided by the International Board regarding "gaining an advantage" is clear and based on concrete observable facts. The definition of "interfering with an opponent" involves various judgments but is generally clear in its application since the primary issue here is whether the interference results from blocking paths and/or lines of sight.

This memorandum confirms that “interfering with play” cannot be decided unless the attacker in an offside position makes contact with the ball.

Consider these statements, one from FIFA, in the new version of the laws of the game (with comments), and the other from the memo that Alfred sent out about that first goal of the season in MLS.

- FIFA: "The (offside) player cannot be penalised because he did not touch the ball."
- USSoccer: "This memorandum confirms that “interfering with play” cannot be decided unless the attacker in an offside position makes contact with the ball."

They both say the same thing, and yet people wonder about someone standing in front of the goalkeeper, or running towards the ball, or even the wording of "gaining an advantage". The fact is this: **There are *three* infringements for which a player is punished in law 11:**

1. Interfering with play, recognized by the referee and assistant because the offside player ***plays the ball***.
2. Interfering with an opponent, recognized by the officials by the effect that the offside player has upon an opponent, *even if he doesn't play the ball*. The effect could be: obstructing a defender in a challenge, obscuring the goalkeeper's view of the flight of the ball, or simply by his presence, preventing an opponent from reaching the ball.
3. Gaining an advantage, recognized by the officials because he gets to the ball from a rebound or a deflection from a defender, even though he might have been well away from the play when the ball was played by one of his teammates. This would be *a delayed call*.

So, to the question "Does an offside player have to touch the ball in order to be penalized?" the answer is "Yes" for 1. and 3., "No" for 2.

To the question "Should the AR wait before flagging an obviously offside player?" the answer is "Yes" when there are two players possibly offside, because you need to be sure that the ball is played by an offside player, not by one who ran through. Hesitation before flagging by the AR rarely hurts in offside situations.