

Refs pick on taller players, scientists say

SOCCER

BY JACK BELL

Phillipp Lahm is often described as skillful, heady and tenacious. The Bayern Munich defender has played 63 times for Germany. At just 1.70 meters, or 5-feet-7, Lahm often finds himself defending against much taller attackers. Yet, research suggests, that can, in one way, be to his advantage. "Lahm hardly has a foul called against him," Steffan Giessner said in an interview by telephone.

Giessner, 35, and Dr. Niels van Quaquebeke, 32, German scientists and researchers at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, in the Netherlands, assert in a paper titled "Height-Related Bias in Foul Calls," published Tuesday (and in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology's* February edition) that taller players usually get

the short end of the stick when a referee calls a foul. "I'm pretty short, and when I play basketball I tended to get away with a lot of fouling," van Quaquebeke said in an interview by telephone from the Netherlands. "In evolutionary terms, we associate size with aggression, dominance and power. Now we can show, via data, that this is still in our thinking — including a referee in soccer."

The study is based on data compiled by Impire, a German company that catalogues sports statistics, including seven seasons in the Bundesliga (85,262 fouls) and the Champions League (32,142), and three World Cups (6,440), a tally of more than 100,000 fouls.

"We chose football because the sport often yields ambiguous foul situations in which it is difficult to determine the perpetrator," van Quaquebeke said. "In such situations, people must rely on their instincts to make a call, which

should increase the use and the detectability of a player's height as an additional decision cue."

Beyond the data, which van Quaquebeke and Giessner assert show that taller players are called for more fouls, they conducted experiments with fans in which they were shown photographs of a smaller and a taller player running side by side, pictures of play in which no actual fouls had been committed. The subjects anticipated a foul by the taller player, and, told that the taller player was on the ground in subsequent photographs, believed that he had taken a dive.

"We have shown that refereeing in football has, to quote Joseph S. Blatter, a very 'human face.' Indeed, referees are not objective and perfect information processors, but human and thus also subject to socially learned and evolutionarily formed cognitive associations which sometimes bias their judgment."

