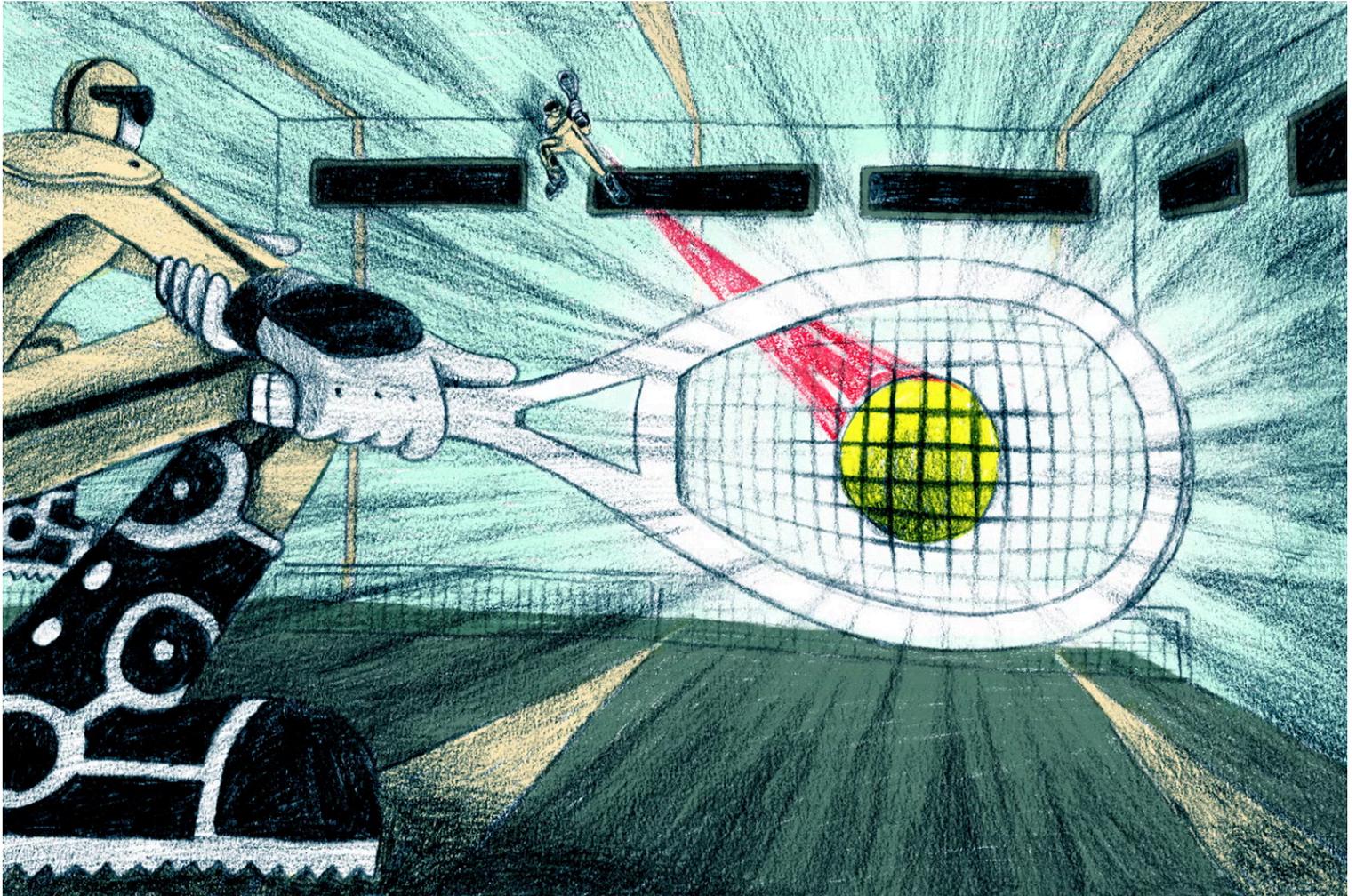


“When We Were Patched”

A short sci-fi story about officiating in a very cool futuristic sport.

BY DEJI BRYCE OLUKOTUN

AUG 27, 2018 • 9:00 AM



Doris Liou

Each month in 2018, Future Tense Fiction—a series of short stories from Future Tense and ASU’s Center for Science and the Imagination about how technology and science will change our lives—will publish a story on a theme. The theme for July–September 2018: Sport.

The last time we ever spoke, my partner Malik asked me whether I believed speed or power made for the best athlete. I was puzzled, of course, feeling that neither could explain why some athletes excelled more than others, even in straightforward competitions like sprinting or the javelin. “There are enough variables to make it unclear,” I observed, “whether speed or power offers a better advantage in competition, or whether some other factor confers the greatest advantage.” It seemed to me an unanswerable question.

What happens when podcasters are determining what constitutes rule of law?

[Read More](#)



“And how about elegance versus quickness of thought?” Malik asked. But he stormed off before I could respond, as if he had confirmed some awful quality about me. By then I should have known not to expect anything from Malik, because he was about to ruin my career.

You see, I come from an illustrious line of sports officiants, spanning the world’s most dynamic and lucrative competitions, and I think my family would agree that my treatment by the FogoTennis Officiants Association was abominable. I should never have been suspended because of dishonorable behavior on Malik’s part.

Like many referees, I remember the very instant I was called for the first time to officiate on the professional FogoTennis circuit, widely considered the most exciting and dangerous

sport in the world. I had honed my skills by watching my parents officiate before me, and by observing my siblings, cousins, and extended family. You could say that I was an officiant from the day I was born. Not only did I learn from other matches, but I also visualized countless scenarios of FogoTennis so that I could fulfill my duties to the best of my ability, cementing my family's reputation as impartial, efficient, and affordable judges. But there is a difference between officiating in theory—even when it is woven into your very soul—and officiating in reality, when you can find yourself with an irresponsible refereeing partner.

On that day, my invitation from the FogoTennis Officiants Association arrived as I was running through several game simulations in my mind.

3ab:1340:4532:4b:120:8ef:dc21:67cf

I could not hide my excitement! The IPv6 address meant that the match was at the professional level, in the final round of the Zanzibar Open. Thrilled, I immediately traveled to Tanzania, taking any number of shortcuts to get to the match as quickly as possible.

When I arrived on the island, Malik was already at the courts, going through some sort of warmup routine. He wore the typical soft red tunic of a medium-ranked FogoTennis referee, and he jogged in place while muttering to himself, "*En, de, trwa, kat, senk, sis ...*" and performing backbends and calisthenics. He had dark chestnut eyes and stood large for a referee, at about 1.9 meters.

"In pren twa plis letan qui mo ti pense pou to arriv ici," he said.

"Pardon me," I replied. "I did not quite catch your meaning."

"In pren twa plis letan qui mo ti think pou to arrive here."

"I beg your pardon, but you are not speaking French."

Malik lowered into a knee-bend as I retrieved his profile. His speech patterns were highly irregular.

"Ah, there we are," I said. "You have a most unusual way of talking. You appear to have picked up some Mauritian patois."

"Nothing unusual about it," he snapped. "I was raised in Mauritius."

“Indeed you were,” I replied. “I only expected that you would be speaking standard French. It was a mistake in your profile. It is a pleasure to meet you, Malik.”

“Right. So you can understand me now?”

“Every word,” I said proudly. “Our calibration is complete. Would you like to take a look at the athletes’ records?”

“You look a little different from what I’m used to,” he said.

“I have improved my appearance based on feedback from our partners: cherry-red alerts with light-green scorekeeping. The contrast is designed to emphasize only the most essential information.”

“I’m colorblind.”

I muted my colors somewhat, and switched from red and green to blue and yellow. “How is this color palette?” I asked, now eager to please.

“Much better.”

Although it was illegal for me to check Malik’s medical records, I was able to assess from his pupil dilation and tone of voice that he was under some degree of stress. I tried not to let his mood spoil the moment. Seeing the center court of the Zanzibar Open in person was one of the most cherished experiences of my career. The 50-meter-high outer walls of the court were fashioned from wafer-thin industrial-grade diamonds. Spectators enjoyed an unfettered view of the athletes as they played out their points, while the protective goggles that the players wore made the walls look solid so that they could follow the ball without distraction. The floor was high-density ceramic. Ten thousand spectators crowded into the arena to watch the match, many placing high-stakes wagers on the outcome of the game. Some munched on concession food from Stone Town, while others drank tea and nibbled at sweets.

I have no physical body as an augmented assistant, of course, but my tens of thousands of sensors help me intuit the feel of a room. It must have smelled like fine cologne in the choicest seats next to the arena, with an unpleasant odor in the section where fans had smuggled in cheap spirits and peppery meat sticks.

By now Malik had completed his calisthenics and seemed to be in a better mood.

“Would you like to go over our officiating plan, partner?” I asked earnestly.

“Your job is to keep score and mark the chases. If I need you, I’ll ask.”

“The best matches always start with a good officiating plan.”

“Look—what do you go by—”

“—it is Theodophilus.”

“—Theodophilus, this is my Platinum Match. I don’t mean to be brusque, but it’s a big day for me. Follow my lead, and you’ll learn the ropes.”

“Of course, Malik. I strive to learn at every moment possible.”

match. This was an honored position that would enable him to wear a sparkling silver tunic and to preside over the most coveted matches. Furthermore, the winning player would receive 500,000 FogoCoins, an exorbitant sum exceeded only by the Svalbard International Championships. Given what was at stake, I concluded, it was best to excuse Malik's impatient tone.

Finally, the players emerged from their training chambers. Each was fitted in a membrane suit that retained heat while wicking away sweat. They carried light carbon-fiber rackets strung with high-tension polymer strings. Malik examined their belts and shoes as the players stepped onto the court.

"How are the inserts?" he asked me.

I carefully checked their ceramic ballasts. "They are regulation." Already I had learned to communicate with him as succinctly as possible.

He issued detailed instructions to the players, which they had heard countless times before, much like two boxers nodding at the referee as they eye each other before a bout. Sylvia Basto was a brash, up-and-coming young player from Macau: a diminutive, compact athlete with calf muscles that pressed against her champagne-colored suit. She had a button nose and pooled dark-brown eyes beneath her goggles. She wore laser-cut eyeshadow in the typical fashion. The dashing wealthy scion Jackson Corluka, a full head taller, had won the coveted Manx Open three years in a row and had the wiry, sinuous body of a superlative racket-sport player, with bulging forearms. He wore a detached, benevolent look that could quickly turn fierce. I used a random number generator to award the first serve to Basto, meaning her opponent, Corluka, would move to the other end of the court to receive.

Malik remained outside the court, sitting behind the server in a slightly elevated position so he could easily follow the flight of the ball. I took up position near the net and turned on my cameras for the spectators at 16 different nodes around the court, and I made sure to observe Malik carefully as well. You see, as an augmented assistant, my role was to display as much helpful information in Malik's visual field as possible, but people do not realize this is a two-way conversation. Just as he was seeing the data I displayed before his dark chestnut eyes, I was tracking his eye movements to tailor the readout and make it optimally useful for him. Display it too fast, and he would not understand it; display too much data, and he would ignore it. This intimate dance lies at the heart of any successful officiating team. We may not be corporeal, but augmented assistants know the eyes of our partners better than their lovers.

The players jogged in place and spoke softly to themselves in preparation for the severe physical and mental challenge of the match. Once both gave a thumbs-up, I sealed the door behind them. They were now locked in the court.

“Please give a warm welcome to Sylvia Basto,” loudspeakers announced to the spectators, “reigning champion of the Macau Open and one of the hottest new prospects on the FogoTennis Tour!” The crowd clapped politely. “And Jackson Corluka, holder of the Manx Golden Crown, six-time winner of the Inter-island FogoTennis Tour!” Now the crowd roared. “And give a round of applause to your officiant, Malik Jadoo, assisted by marker Theodophilus Hawkeye the Sixteenth.”

The crowd snickered at the mention of my name, for some reason. But I had decided to be less sensitive to people’s reactions.

Sylvia Basto bounced the ball on her racket strings as she prepared to serve. The objective of FogoTennis is to win three sets out of five. To win a set, a player must win at least six games, with at least a two-game lead over their opponent. The scoring of each game is just like traditional tennis: 15–30–40. But that is where the similarities end because FogoTennis is based on “court” tennis, an ancient game with an asymmetrical court. The strange shape of the court, with its jutting angles and sloping lines, makes for a much more engrossing competition. To win a point, you have to hit a shot that your opponent cannot return, because they simply miss the ball or hit it out of play, or because the ball strikes one of several stationary targets. A single dynamic target, which the player serving the ball has to defend at all times, is called the *dedans*. Any ball that hits the *dedans* instantly ends not just the point, but the entire match. This tiny glowing target moves around randomly throughout the match and is about the size of a peppercorn. Hitting the *dedans* is as rare as shooting a hole-in-one in golf, and worth considerably more money to the victor.

Then there is the superconductivity. Over the first three sets of a FogoTennis match, the temperature of the court gradually decreases until it reaches 175 degrees Kelvin, or about minus 98 degrees Celsius, imbuing a degree of complexity, chance, and danger offered by no other sport.

As Basto readied her serve, the temperature rested at a comparatively balmy 275 degrees Kelvin, close to the freezing point of water. The polymer ball behaved like it would at room temperature, meaning that it responded to spin, and tended to skirt low and bounce predictably. Basto tossed the ball slowly into the air, then struck it with the full force of her racket, loosing a fantastic *crack* that drew applause from the crowd. The ball skirted along

the wall before dropping into the court, where Jackson Corluka returned it, using his wrist to apply spin to his return. Basto scraped the ball back over the net, where Corluka was waiting to end the point with a deft cross-court shot. At this temperature, the best players controlled the center of the court in order to dictate play, and Corluka's long arms and lightning-fast reflexes meant that he mounted a three-game lead in the first set after just 15 minutes of play.

For our part, Malik and I were rarely called upon to officiate. I merely kept the score, and Corluka managed to win points without controversy. He bounded across the court with the effortless grace of his renowned bloodline from the Isle of Man. Basto seemed totally intimidated by the nobleman and made a number of unforced errors. Indeed, the match was rather boring, and the spectators were losing interest. What had been advertised as a major battle between a precocious talent and a wily elite was becoming a slaughter. Corluka closed out the second set with a trick shot into one of the targets that sent Basto running the wrong way. He had superior racket skills, and his awesome wrist strength meant that he could disguise his shots until the last moment.

The third set proceeded just as swiftly, with only one question about whether a cross-court shot by Corluka had gone out of play. I confirmed that the ball was fair, and had in fact hugged the line by a full 5 millimeters. It was Basto's right to contest the decision, but there was little for her to complain about.

Basto contested two more decisions that game, and each time I confirmed that Malik had made the right call. Still, something was bothering me.

"I have noticed a pattern of Ms. Basto contesting a call every 3.6 rallies," I told Malik over our private channel.

"She has the right to do so," he replied.

"But it suggests a strategy that is unsporting."

"Just focus on the match."

Suddenly Basto raised her voice at us in Mandarin. "Are you imbeciles? That ball was way out!"

By my assessment, Basto's tone was inappropriate and highly critical of an officiant—namely, us. I could not help responding to her. The term “imbecile,” as well as its Mandarin equivalent, is agreed to be an insult by a wide cross-section of sources.

“What did you just say to her?” Malik asked.

“I gave her a warning and informed her that the next one would result in her dismissal.”

“You said that in Mandarin?”

“Of course; it is her preferred language.”

“Check with me first next time, alright? All that stuff you said about an officiating plan—well, you don't go off and warn players on your own without talking to me about it.”

“Ms. Basto clearly violated the rules,” I objected. “Her words were inappropriate and highly critical of an officiant. Also, the volume of her voice registered 90 decibels.”

“She'll be even more upset now.”

“She is merely engaging in gamesmanship.”

“Gamesmanship is all that matters.”

As Malik and I bickered back and forth, and Basto became more incensed, the on-court temperature steadily dropped. The players were forced to jog in place to keep warm as we deliberated, even though their heated membrane suits would prevent them from suffering from hypothermia. The temperature was now 210 degrees Kelvin.

The first sign that the match was about to change happened when Corluka bounced the ball before his serve. It rebounded off the floor at a rapid speed, and Basto seemed to glide slightly along the surface as she waited to return the serve. Corluka served the ball into play, and it slid along the roof at alarming speed before striking the rear wall. But Basto was already there, half-skipping, half-running to the ball, which she attacked with tremendous power. The ball hurtled into the target on Corluka's side before he could touch it. Point to Basto.

The cooling zones of the court were beginning to have their effect. The FogoTennis ball, laced with advanced ceramics, began to speed up due to the lack of resistance. It moved at

different speeds through different zones of the court, making its flight paths highly unpredictable. The ballast belts around the players' waists quickened their movements, allowing them to accelerate to frightening speeds in just a few steps. They used carbon spikes in their shoes to slow themselves down.

It was as if Basto had suddenly woken up. Her compact form gave her an enormous advantage over the lanky Corluka in shifting direction and rapidly building up potential energy. She was dominating her opponent, smashing the ball with terrifying speed and leaping five meters into the air to intercept Corluka's feeble attempts to slow down play with lobs or looping cross-court shots. He was forced to attempt increasingly difficult strokes. But he could not close out the third set to win the match.

Instead Basto won the game, and took the third and fourth sets handily, sending the match to a fifth and final set. The temperature of the court had bottomed out at 175 degrees Kelvin. This meant that Basto could fling herself about the court like a god, levitating in the air with precision and determination as the ball hurtled about at 500 kilometers per hour. This was the most dangerous part of the match. Now the ball could severely injure the players. They could only track its flight with help from their goggles.

By this time, the crowd was cheering at this extraordinary comeback. Even more entertaining, Corluka was beginning to land his low-percentage skill shots, killing the ball into the targets with precision. Basto was clearly the better cold-court player, but Corluka's phenomenal racket skills meant he would not just concede the match. He had won six Tour titles and had learned to scrape his way to victory at all costs.

Then, in a flash, Corluka could barely play at all. Basto forced him into a corner with a serve that scythed through the air. Corluka managed to fish out the ball but Basto hurtled herself at it with unbelievable strength, crushing it into Corluka's left arm. He crumpled from the pain.

"Medical analysis!" Malik barked.

I hastily examined his arm with my resonance imaging. "His radius bone has fractured in three places."

"Right," Malik said, switching to a public channel. "Mr. Corluka, would you like to continue play?"

We were forbidden from entering the court because it would raise the temperature inside the room, effectively ruining the match. Corluka was rolling along the supercooled floor, screaming in agony. Outside the court, a medical team was preparing to extract him. But it would mean conceding the match. Basto tactfully held up her hand in apology, as if she had not meant to hit Corluka with the ball. She waited silently to claim her victory.

Something about Corluka writhing around in pain made me feel uneasy. An extreme sense of discomfort, as if something fundamental was amiss. As if an advantage was about to be taken that had not been earned. It was a sickly feeling that began deep inside me and vibrated in my very essence. If I did not do something about it, everything I stood for would be

| Doris Liou

compromised.

“It appears that Ms. Basto intentionally hit Mr. Corluka,” I heard myself say.

“Nonsense,” Malik replied. “How do you know?”

“I tracked her eye movement. She looked directly at Mr. Corluka’s forearm before making the shot.”

“Can you show me?”

“It is unlikely you could observe it at human scale.”

“Forget it, then. It doesn’t matter. Players get hit from time to time. That’s the risk they take when they enter the court.”

“But it is against the norms of FogoTennis to intentionally strike another player,” I argued.

“I don’t follow.”

“We should sanction her for unsporting conduct.”

“You already gave her a warning! We’re not going to kick her out of the match for hitting him. That’s preposterous! There’s no rule against it. He should’ve gotten out of the way. I

don't want to hear any more of this."

Malik outranked me on interpretations of the laws of the game, so there was nothing I could do. Meanwhile, Corluka was slowly dragging himself to his feet.

"Mr. Corluka," Malik continued, on the public channel. "I repeat, would you like to continue play? You have 30 seconds."

Groaning, Corluka used his racket to prop himself up. He toggled a zipper on his suit, which stiffened his shattered arm into a makeshift cast. He took several deep breaths and slapped his own cheek with his good arm, as if trying to shock himself awake.

"I'll play," he grunted.

Basto knew not to offer Corluka any pity, not when she was so close to victory. She narrowed her eyes, and I thought that the rascal would make him suffer the consequences with another cruel attack. Everything was aligned in her favor—the temperature of the court, Corluka's injury, and Malik's apparent lack of consideration for unsporting behavior. That is when I saw it again. She narrowed her eyes fractionally. She was planning to hit him again with her next serve.

I decided to do what any honorable officiant would do. Right the scales, as it were. Appeal to Lady Justice.

Basto thrashed the ball at Corluka's body, but with honor on his side, he evaded the assault—for that is what it was, an attack—and twisted his body like a yogi to return the serve between his legs with his good arm. The ball rocketed through the air toward Basto's side of the court, right into the glowing *dedans*! It was an extraordinary shot into the dynamic target. He had snatched victory out of nothing at all. Corluka raised his fist in the air to celebrate, and the crowd erupted.

"I contest!" Basto shouted. "That ball was out!"

"Ms. Basto has no appeals left," I explained to Malik on our private channel.

But Malik ignored me. "Appeal granted!"

"She contested five times already, partner. In the first, second, and third sets."

“Appeal granted! Show us the shot!”

“Malik, Mr. Corluka has won the match.”

“I’m the one who decides who wins the match. The shot looked low to me.”

“My sensors are designed never to make mistakes.”

“Show the video to the crowd.”

I did as I was told, and displayed the shot in super-slow motion for the spectators from a variety of angles. The ball approached the tiny target and seemed poised to miss it, but touched its surface at the very last moment. It was difficult to see with the naked eye, of course, but my sensors told me that the ball had struck the *dedans* within 3 or 4 microns. Corluka had won the match. Even Malik had to admit it.

The champion managed to hoist his racket in the air as I unsealed the court, and collapsed to the ground again when the higher temperature made him feel the full extent of his injury. He had sacrificed his body for victory in the face of a vicious young upstart opponent. And I felt proud that I had done my part to support the spirit of the game over its more sinister qualities.

As Basto hung her head, Malik asked me that question about whether power or speed was the more important quality for an athlete. I responded earnestly, as you may remember, and he was unhappy with my answer. By then I did not expect him to be pleased with anything I did.

* * *

You can imagine my surprise when Malik denounced me directly to the Officials Association, recommending that my contract be suspended.

All athletes are equal before the laws of the game in FogoTennis, he wrote. But the Augmented Assistant Theodophilus system clearly favored Mr. Corluka. It’s possible the system issued a signal to Mr. Corluka at a critical moment in the match. Maybe a flash, or a sign of some kind that enabled Mr. Corluka to avoid being hit with the ball. I’m not sure how this happened exactly, but I’ve never seen anything like it before. It even talks like some kind of manservant. It was like it was sneering at me or something. I recommend

searching the video footage of the match and, more importantly, a full audit of Theodophilus' source code.

I had endured Malik's testiness throughout the match, and behaved, I believe, like a true professional. But his backstabbing hurt me on a personal level. Indeed, I re-read his remarks 1.12 million times, using my language-processing protocols to discern hidden meanings. There was no way to get around the fact that Malik had questioned my abilities and had behaved in a completely dishonorable manner by criticizing me to the association without giving me an opportunity to defend myself.

I come from an illustrious family of officiants, as I mentioned, and we have never stood for such abominable treatment. My great-great grandparent helped bring the first Hawkeye tennis systems online, calling shots for the renowned lawn tennis champion Roger Federer. My great-aunt Wilhelmina Hawkeye III (version 10.16.34) perfected the art of goal-line technology, and her offspring became the first official to create efficient automated reviews of offside calls in soccer, leading to a decisive win by Chile in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Each line of our code was immaculately crafted by the most desirable software engineers. We are an extended family—not of manservants, as Malik insinuated, but of equal and effective partners in sport, and I honestly felt that an insult to me was an insult to all of us. We stand up for what is right.



I re-read his remarks 1.12 million times, using my language processing protocols to discern hidden meanings.



During our brief time together, I had noticed that Malik kept a port open on his implanted augmented lenses. I also suspected that his colorblindness made him more receptive to certain patterns. In particular, it was likely that bright flashing primary colors at tenth-of-a-second intervals, alternating with zigzagging lines of black and white, would cause him considerable discomfort. He succumbed to a horrific migraine headache at his next match, leaving him incapacitated for several hours. Naturally, the doctors suspected that his stressful occupation as a Platinum Official led to the headache.

I am not totally proud of my behavior. In fact, if I could revisit my final conversation with Malik, when he asked me about whether power or speed was more important for an athlete, I might have said, “You may as well ask someone whether rhythm or melody makes for the best dancer.” Indeed, I realized after a minor update that there are any number of preferable responses to the one I gave him on that day.

The Officiants Association has since prescribed regular patches to my source code, which it claims will bring notable improvements to my objectivity. There was, frankly, little I could do to argue my case, as I enjoy no right of appeal like a FogoTennis player, even if the Association never found the alleged “signal” mentioned by Malik. I assure you that Jackson Corluka evaded that ball because of his experience and unrivaled athleticism. Instead, perhaps the Association should have questioned the probability of him hitting the *dedans* at that very moment, which was quite unlikely and might have raised concerns that someone had manipulated its movement intentionally. But the Association did not think to ask such a question.

Meanwhile, I’m on mandatory furlough. It’s not all bad; I’ve got a whole new suite of creoles and pidgins that I’m enjoying, plus they’ve given me contractions. Thousands of contractions. I find the contractions highly enjoyable. Humans use such grammatical features for efficiency and to foster connections with each other. The Association hopes they’ll make me more relatable to my officiating partners.

Because, when you think about it, poor communication causes so much misunderstanding, wouldn’t you agree? Take Malik, for example. I think that if we’d had the opportunity to get to know one another, and taken the time to work together as equal partners, we could’ve become a superior refereeing team. We could’ve reached a better understanding, for the good of the sport. 📌

Assistance with Mauritian dialogue provided by [S. Moonesamy](#).

Read a response essay by [Jeanna Matthews](#), an expert on algorithmic bias..

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU



My Husband's Severe Work Injury Halted a Major Part of Our Marriage. Now He Wants It Back and I Simply Can't.



When I Had a Baby, My Childhood Suddenly Stopped Making Sense

I'm Short. I Have a Major Concern About Menopause—and I Want to Do Everything I Can to Fight It.



Well, We Have Barron Trump's First College Scandal



My Teen Just Blew Up at Me Over His "Right to Privacy." Excuse Me?



I Can Tell You Exactly Why Serena Williams Was in the Super Bowl Halftime Show



It Wasn't Supposed to Be This Way for J.D. Vance



Tom Hanks' New Movie Totally Bombed. I Loved It.



The Trouble in MAGA Paradise Appears to Have Already Begun



I Worked on Employment Law Until Trump Fired Me. Here's the Truth About DEI.

The Embarrassing Trash That Got Us Through the Election

I Want to Hate My Ex-Husband Forever. Is That OK?



He Isn't Who Anyone Would Have Imagined as a Credible Foe to Trump and Musk's Assault on America. Yet Here He Is.

I Finally Have My Sex Drive Back. But With It Came Some Strange Complications.

Lara Trump Isn't Ivanka—She's Even More Sickeningly Loyal to Trump

Slate is published by The Slate Group, a Graham Holdings Company.

All contents © 2025 The Slate Group LLC. All rights reserved.