An apparatus for use by spectators to express a response to a referee at an associated sporting event, and methods related thereto are taught. The apparatus may include a flag member, including a fabric membrane adapted to receive a weight and a weight, received therein. The apparatus may also include a cord, which may be removably attached to the flag member at its first end, for retrieving the flag member after it has been thrown. The flag member may be substantially the same color and shape as a penalty indicator used by a referee of the sporting event. To express a response, the spectator may throw the flag member substantially upward to create a visual display, and retrieve the flag member with the attached cord.
METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR FAN EXPRESSING PARTICIPATION IN SPORTING EVENTS

I. BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A. Field of Invention

This invention pertains to methods and apparatuses associated with facilitating spectator participation in sporting events and devices that spectators and fans can display at such events to visually express a response to a referee’s action.

B. Description of the Related Art

It is well known in the art for spectators of a sporting event to display memorabilia and apparel, such as pennants, sweatsuits, and jerseys, in support of particular teams and players. Ordinarily these items include indicia, such as logos, jerseys numbers, or commentary, associated with one or more teams or players and intended to convey support for the team’s or player’s endeavors on the field. The ability of spectators to be vocally and visually involved with the play on the field adds not only to the spectator’s enjoyment of the event, but it encourages the home team toward success and frustrates opposing teams. Fans are routinely encouraged during the course of a sporting event to show support for their team both visibly, by means of dressing in team colors and apparel and waving pennants, and audibly.

While it is well known for spectators to bring items to a stadium having an immediately recognizable correlation to one or more teams or players on the field, it is not known for spectators to have items having a recognizable correlation to the referees on the field—items that give spectators a visual means of supporting or objecting to a referee or referee’s call or non-call, for example, a penalty. Currently, when a referee makes a call on the field that the spectator wishes to express agreement or disagreement with, the spectator may cheer or boo loudly, or visually display objects on their person, which are typically objects that were intended to be used in support of teams and players. Thus, display of these items to dispute or support a referee’s call or non-call does not effectively convey the intent of the spectator to visibly direct his or her expression toward the referee, as well as the other spectators. This display of team or player associated items does not adequately distinguish support for the team from support (or frustration) with a referee or a referee’s call.

It would be desirable, therefore, to provide spectators with an object that can be visually displayed by those who wish to express a response toward a referee, an action taken by a referee or a non-action taken by a referee. It would be desirable that the object have associated indicia, such as color or shape that are associated with referees and devices used by referees in the course of judging a sporting event. Additionally, it would be preferable that the process of displaying the object reflect and emulate the actions of the referee in making a call on the field. In these ways, spectators may better direct their response, through a visual display, toward the referee or judge, as distinct from the team or player. The device of the present invention addresses these issues by providing a colored flag-like device that may be thrown by a spectator in response to a called penalty or failure to call a penalty or other disagreement with a referee. The flag member may be colored to emulate a referee’s flag or other device used in announcing a penalty. In order to allow the object to be used repeatedly, it may be provided with means for retrieving the device after it has been thrown. Also taught herein is a method of expressing a response toward a referee’s conduct or acts that involves throwing a selectively colored flag-like device.

II. SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to one aspect of the present invention, a flag member is provided for throwing by a spectator in response to an action by a referee of a sporting event.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the flag like member may be retrievable by means of a cord attached thereto.

According to another aspect of the invention, the flag like member may include a fabric membrane.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the flag like member may include a weight received by the fabric membrane to assist in throwing.

According to yet another aspect of the present invention, the weight may be a textile.

According to yet another aspect of the present invention, the flag like member may be substantially the same color as the penalty indicator used by the referee of a sporting event.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the flag like member may be substantially the same shape as the penalty indicator used by the referee of a sporting event.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the flag like member may be provided with logos or advertisements.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the device may include a tethering band for tethering the cord to an associated user.

According to another aspect of the present invention, the cord may be adapted to be removably attached to the flag like member.

According to yet another aspect of the present invention, the fabric membrane may be weather resistant material.

Still other benefits and advantages of the invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art to which it pertains upon a reading and understanding of the following detailed specification.

III. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention may take physical form in certain parts and arrangement of parts, a preferred embodiment of which will be described in detail in this specification and illustrated in the accompanying drawings which form a part hereof and wherein:

FIG. 1 is a schematic representation of a throwing apparatus according to the present invention.
FIG. 2 is an alternative schematic representation of a throwing apparatus of the present invention.

FIG. 3 is a schematic representation of exemplary components of the flag member of the apparatus of the present invention.

FIG. 4 is a depiction of an associated spectator using the throwing apparatus of the present invention.

FIG. 5 is a depiction of an embodiment of the present invention, showing the throwing apparatus tethered to the spectator's belt.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring now to the drawings wherein the showings are for purposes of illustrating a preferred embodiment of the invention only and not for purposes of limiting the same, FIGS. 1-3 depict one embodiment of the throwing apparatus 1 according to the present invention. The throwing apparatus 1 may include a flag member 10 and a flexible cord member 20, which may be adapted at a first end 22 to securely engage the flag member 10. The flag member 10 may be tossed or thrown, while the associated user retains the second end 24 of the flexible cord member 20. In this way the flag member 10 may be easily retrieved so that it may be thrown again at a later time.

As shown in FIG. 3, the flag member 10 may include a fabric membrane 12, which may be adapted to receive a weight 15. The fabric membrane 12 may be a piece of natural or synthetic cloth, such as cotton, silk, nylon, or any other similarly flexible cloth. In one embodiment, the fabric membrane 12 may have the characteristic of being weather resistant. By weather resistant, it is meant that the fabric membrane 12 is able to repel water or is substantially non-absorbent. This characteristic of the fabric membrane 12 may be an inherent characteristic of the materials selected for the membrane. Thus, for example, the material selected may be a water resistant nylon or other man-made material such as are often incorporated into clothing. Alternatively, this characteristic of weather resistance may be imparted to the flag membrane 12 by application of a water resistant component to the material such as a silicone spray.

The characteristic of weather resistance is particularly important when the fabric membrane 12 is used in open air stadiums, where spectators may be exposed to rain or snow. Absorption of water into the material of the fabric membrane 12 may add significant undesirable weight to the flag member 12, making the flag member 12 drop more rapidly after being thrown. Additionally, absorption of water or other liquid into the fabric of the flag membrane 12 may lead to more rapid deterioration of the flag membrane 12.

As shown in FIG. 3, the fabric membrane 12 may be a unitary piece of fabric having its edges stitched or otherwise treated to prevent fraying. Alternatively, it may be composed of more than one piece of fabric fixed together by stitching or other similar means. In one embodiment, the fabric membrane 12 is a substantially quadrilateral piece of fabric having a length and width of between approximately 6 and 18 inches. The fabric membrane 12, may be rectangular, having a length that is substantially less or greater than the width, or square. Any appropriately shaped piece of fabric may be used for the fabric membrane 12 in accordance with the present invention. In this aspect the shape of the fabric membrane 12 is not intended to be limiting.

In one embodiment, the fabric that is selected for the fabric membrane 12 may be substantially the same color as the indicator used by a referee to indicate a penalty or infraction at a sporting event. For example, in football, referees typically use yellow colored flags to indicate a penalty or rules infraction. In soccer, a referee may use yellow or red cards to indicate a penalty or rules infraction. As discussed below, the flag member 10 of the present invention preferably emulates in color the penalty indicator used by the referee of a sporting event and accordingly, it is anticipated that the color of the flag membrane 12 be substantially the same color as the referee's penalty indicator. In one embodiment, wherein the throwing apparatus 1 is to be used in conjunction with a football event, the flag membrane 12 may be yellow. In an alternate embodiment, wherein the throwing apparatus 1 is to be used in conjunction with soccer event, the flag membrane 12 may be either yellow or red. The penalty indicators of other sporting events may dictate the color selected for the fabric membrane 12 of the throwing apparatus 1 associated with that sport. In order to better visually display the color of the flag member 10, at least 50% of the area of the fabric membrane 12 may be colored as discussed above. In yet another embodiment, the fabric membrane 12 may be substantially the same color as the uniform of an associated referee. Thus, for example, the fabric membrane 12 may be black and white striped to reflect the colors of a football referee's uniform. In still yet another embodiment, the fabric membrane 12 may be black and white checked similar to a flag used in car racing events.

As discussed above and shown in FIGS. 1-3, the flag member 10 may include a weight 15. The weight 15 may be a solid material or a granular material, such as sand. In one embodiment, the weight 15 may be a fabric batting or textile, such as cotton batting or a piece of fabric. The weight 15 may alternatively be rubber, foam or plastic. The weight 15 may include combinations of one or more of the above referenced materials. However, it should be understood that any material or combination thereof may be selected with sound engineering judgment. In an alternative embodiment, the weight 15 may be a weather resistant material.

The weight 15 may be a deformable mass. Alternatively, the weight 15 may define a substantially fixed shape. By "substantially fixed" it is meant that the weight 15 may resist deforming or may return to an original shape after being deformed. The weight 15 may be substantially spherical. In one embodiment, the weight 15 is a round foam ball, having a diameter of between approximately 1.0 inches and 2.0 inches.

The weight 15 may serve to improve the distance that the flag member 10 may be thrown. The use of a light weight, such as cotton batting, has the advantage of allowing the flag member 10 to drop more slowly after being thrown, so that the flag member 10 is visible in the air longer. Additionally, the weight 15 may be selected so that significant injury does not result in the event that the flag member 10 hits another person. In this respect, the material of the weight 15 may be selected based on the amount of weight that is desirable to incorporated into the flag member 10. The
weight of the weight 15 may be between approximately 0.5 grams and 500 grams. However, more weight or less weight may be incorporated into the flag member 10 as selected with sound engineering judgment.

[0033] The weight 15 may be incorporated into the fabric membrane 12 a variety of ways. In one embodiment, shown in FIG. 3, the weight 15 may be placed approximately in the center of the flag membrane 12 and the edges 40, 41, 42, 43 of the flag membrane 12 may be drawn together to form a pouch 45 (shown in FIGS. 1 and 2), with the weight 15 retained in the pouch 45. The weight 15 may be secured in the pouch 45 by cinching the pouch 45 above the weight 15, such as with a string, ribbon, thread or other similar means. In an alternate embodiment (not shown), the flag membrane 12 may be formed with a pocket adapted for retaining the weight 15. A pocket may be formed, for example, by affixing a fabric remnant to the fabric membrane 12, thereby creating a space between the fabric remnant and fabric membrane 12 where the weight 15 may be retained. Alternatively, the fabric membrane 12 may be folded toward the center of the fabric membrane 12 with the weight retained beneath the fold and stitched along the two open edges of the pocket. Any means for retaining a weight 15 within the fabric membrane 12 may be selected with sound engineering judgment.

[0034] The weight retaining pouch 45 may be adapted with means for accessing the weight 15 therein. In the embodiment described above, the pouch 45 may be unchinned to access the weight 15. In this way, the weight 15 may be selectively removable from the flag member 10. Where the throwing apparatus 1 is to be used in a highly populated stadium, it may be desirable to replace a heavier weight 15 with a lighter weight 15, or even, to remove the weight 15 completely so that the flag member 10 may be thrown with less force. Additionally, the weight 15 may be removed so that the fabric membrane 10 may be washed.

[0035] As shown in FIGS. 1 and 2, the throwing apparatus 1 may be provided with a cord member 20. The cord member 20 has a first end 22 and a second end 24. The first end 22 of the cord member 20 may be adapted to engage the flag member 10. By “engaged” it is meant that the cord member 20 is able to restrict the distance that the flag member 10 may be thrown and remains engaged to the flag member 10 after the flag member is thrown, so as to alternately provide a means for retrieving the flag member 10 after it has been thrown. In this way, the flag member 10 may be thrown repeatedly without having to travel to the flag member 10 each time it is thrown. The associated user may simply hold the second end 24 of the cord member 20 while throwing the flag member 10 (see FIG. 4). Alternatively, as discussed below, the second end 24 of the cord member 20 may be attached to the associated user by means of a tethering band 30.

[0036] The cord member 20 may be constructed of a variety of materials. The cord member 20 may be flexible. The cord member 20 may be a natural fiber or a synthetic fiber, such as nylon. The cord member 20 may also be elastic. The flexibility of the cord member 20 allows for a smoother trajectory once the flag member 10 has been thrown. The cord member 20 should be sufficiently strong to adequately restrain the flag member 10 after it is thrown and to allow the associated user to retrieve the flag member 10 by pulling on the cord member 20. The length of the cord member 20 may be between approximately 18 inches and 72 inches, though longer and shorter lengths may be incorporated.

[0037] The first end 22 of the cord member 20 may be engaged to the flag member 10 in a variety of ways. In one embodiment (shown in FIG. 2), the fabric membrane 12 may be provided with a hole 50 there through, which may have an associated grommet. The first end 22 of the cord member 20 may be tied to the flag member 10 by passing the cord member 20 through the hole 50 and tying a knot. Alternatively, the first end 22 of the cord member 20 may terminate in a clip, such as a spring-biased clip. The clip may be clipped to the fabric membrane 12 at the hole 50, thereby providing a selectively detachable engagement between the cord member 20 and the flag member 10. In another embodiment shown in FIGS. 1 and 2, the first end 22 of the cord member 20 may be fixedly attached, such as by glue or sewing, to an engaging strip 55, which may be a strip of Velcro. The engaging strip 55 may be secured to the flag member 10, such as by wrapping the engaging strip 55 above the weight retaining pouch 45 as shown in FIG. 1. It is desirable, but not necessary, that the cord member 20 be selectively detachable from the flag member 10 in the event that an associated user wishes not to retrieve the flag member 10 or does not wish to have the flight of the flag member 10 restrained. In another embodiment, the cord member 20 may be fixedly attached to the flag member 10 by gluing, sewing or any other means so that the flag member 10 may not be detached from the cord member 20. Any other means for engaging the first end 22 of the cord member 20 to the flag member 10 may be selected with sound engineering judgment.

[0038] With reference now to FIGS. 1 and 2, the throwing apparatus 1 may also include a tethering band 30. The tethering band 30 (as shown in FIGS. 4 and 5) may be removably tethered to the associated user, such as around the user’s wrist or belt buckle. The second end 24 of the cord member 20 may be selectively, removably attached to the tethering band 30. By providing a cord member 20 that is selectively removable attached to the tethering band 30, the throwing apparatus 1 may provide increased safety in the event that the flag member 10 is violently pulled away from the associated user or is otherwise pulled with significant force. To prevent injury to the associated user, the tethering band 30 may be adapted to release from the associated user. Alternatively, the second end 24 of the cord member 20 may be adapted to release from the tethering band 30 upon application of sufficient tension. For example, the second end 24 of the cord member 30 may be attached to the tethering band 30 by Velcro. In another embodiment, the second end 24 of the cord member 20 may be fixedly attached to the tethering band 30, such as by sewing or gluing. The tethering band 30 may be an elastic band or a Velcro band or a fabric band. In one embodiment, the tethering band 30 is a piece of Velcro having a suitable width so as to be wrapped around the associated user’s wrist or belt loop. The tethering band 30 may, however, be attached to any mass in order to secure the second end of the cord member 24 when the flag member 10 is thrown.

[0039] In accordance with the present invention and depicted in FIG. 4, a method is taught whereby spectators may interact with and express their emotions in response to the conduct of the referee or players participating in a sporting event. In one aspect, a spectator, upon seeing conduct on the field that is believed to be an infraction, may toss a flag member 10 in the air as a means of indicating to
the referees that a penalty flag should be thrown as a result of the conduct. In another aspect, a spectator, upon seeing a referee throw a penalty flag, may toss a flag in the air as a means of indicating support of the referee’s decision. Spectators that are sufficiently close to the field of play may throw their flag onto the field in an effort to notify the referees of a perceived penalty infract or to support a referee’s call. Spectators that are too far away from the field may elect simply to toss their flag substantially upward in the air as a visual display to the referees.

[0040] The flag member 10 thrown by the spectator may emulate, in its color, the flag or other penalty indicator used by the referees at the associated sporting event. In this way, referees will be able to associate the flag member with their actions. In another embodiment, the flag member 10 that is thrown by the spectator may be provided with a retrieving means for retrieving the flag member 10 after it is thrown. Referees typically call penalties numerous times throughout a game. Accordingly, there are numerous opportunities for a spectator to toss his flag during a game, and it is beneficial to be able to retrieve the flag member 10 without having to travel to the spot where the flag member 10 has been thrown.

[0041] It is noted that other aspects of the apparatus described herein, may be incorporated in accordance with the method taught herein, including the colors and shapes of the selected flag member 10 and components thereto as well as means for retrieving the flag member 10.

[0042] Having thus described the invention, it is now claimed:

I/We claim:

1. An apparatus comprising:
   a flag member, wherein the flag member is comprised of a fabric membrane adapted to receive a weight, and a weight received substantially within the fabric membrane; and
   a cord member suitable for retrieving the flag member after the flag member has been thrown, the cord member having a first end and a second end, wherein the first end of the cord member is adapted to be affixed to the flag member.

2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the fabric membrane is substantially the same color as an associated penalty indicator used by a referee of a sporting event.

3. The apparatus of claim 2, wherein the flag member is a standard football referee penalty flag.

4. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein at least approximately 50% of the fabric membrane is a color selected from the group consisting of yellow and red.

5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the fabric membrane is a color pattern selected from the group consisting of white and black striped and white and black checked.

6. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the fabric membrane has a quadrilateral shape and wherein the longest of the four sides of the fabric membrane is less than approximately 18 inches and the shortest of the four sides of the fabric membrane is no less than approximately 6 inches.

7. The apparatus of claim 6, wherein the cord member has a length of between approximately 18 inches and 72 inches.

8. A retrievable throwing apparatus, the apparatus comprising:
   a flag member, the flag member comprised of a fabric membrane; and
   a cord member, the cord member having a length of between approximately 18 inches to 72 inches and having first and second ends, wherein a first end of the cord member is communicated to an associated user and a second end of the cord member is adapted to be affixed to the flag member.

9. The apparatus of claim 8, further comprising:
   a tethering band, the tethering band adapted to be attached to a second end of the cord member, the tethering band adapted to tether the second end of the cord member to an associated mass.

10. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein the tethering band is a Velcro band.

11. The apparatus of claim 9, wherein the first end of the cord member is adapted to be removably affixed to the flag member.

12. The apparatus of claim 9 wherein the tethering band is adapted to be removably attached to the second end of the cord member.

13. The apparatus of claim 11, wherein the color of the fabric membrane is selected from the group consisting of yellow, red, black and white striped and black and white checked.

14. The apparatus of claim 8, wherein the flag member further includes a weight, the weight being secured substantially within a pouch formed by the fabric membrane, and wherein the weight is between approximately 0.5 grams and 500 grams.

15. The apparatus of claim 14, wherein the weight includes a material selected from the group consisting of foam, plastic, textiles, and rubber.

16. The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the weight is substantially spherical.

17. A method of responding to a referee’s ruling at a sporting event, the method comprising the steps of:
   providing a flag member, the flag member including a fabric membrane, the fabric membrane having substantially the same color as an associated penalty indicator used by a referee of the sporting event,
   throwing the flag member substantially upward following an act by the associated referee to express a response.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising the steps of:
   providing a cord member, the cord member having a length of between approximately 18 inches to 72 inches and having first and second ends, wherein a first end of the cord member is communicated to an associated user and a second end of the cord member is adapted to be affixed to the flag member; and
   following the step of throwing the flag member substantially upward in response to an action by the associated referee, retrieving the flag member with the cord member.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the response is approval of the act by the associated referee.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the response is disapproval of the act by the associated referee.

21. The method of claim 20, wherein the act by the associated referee is a failure to call a penalty.

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