

Abuse of match officials – a short guide on what we as referees can do

Why, despite all of the recent efforts and measures, do we still suffer from player/spectator abuse across the game? In short, it is because the ingredients for it will always be there. Rugby is a competitive, physical game, often with plenty of passion and emotion and we are all human with all the frailties that that entails. The desire to win, the aggression, the passion, the one-eyed loyalty can all spill over and, triggered by foul play or mistakes, someone may go too far.

This does not mean that we should expect and accept abuse – far from it. It does mean that, as part of our duty as referees, we should understand the risk of abuse occurring and seek to minimise this risk. If abuse still occurs then we should also know how best to deal with it to ensure the game is protected and standards maintained.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to encourage the reader to consider how they can, as referees, minimise the chances of abuse occurring. Please note it is not comprehensive or biblical in scope or authority – it is one perspective and an attempt to pin down some useful elements of what is, in effect, a subjective art.

Prevention is better than cure

By far the best way to control abuse is to stop it occurring in the first place. If we can understand why someone might let loose at match officials, we can look at ways of removing contributing factors and thus prevent the offence rather than have to deal with its aftermath.

In simple terms, abuse usually occurs when someone's frustration builds, and a spark is applied. Of course, you may get the odd idiot or drunk who can't help themselves, but in the main it is the result of things coming to a head and a loss of self-control. Or put it another way.....

FRUSTRATION + TRIGGER + LOSS OF CONTROL = POSSIBLE ABUSE

As referees, we can influence these three causes to some degree. By managing in the correct way we can minimise the build up of frustration. By keeping a good control of the game we can reduce the number of triggers. By maintaining the standards of discipline we can contain a loss of control. Because no two games and no two people are identical, it is impossible to give absolute guides to how we do this. What follows are some tips that I hope will help you to think about the way you manage and control games.

Minimise frustration

The dictionary defines frustration as

“the feeling of being upset or annoyed as a result of being unable to change or achieve something”.

To understand what may cause players, coaches and spectators to become frustrated, we need to appreciate what it is they are trying to change or achieve

and how they want to do it (this is what we mean by empathy). Simply put, they want to play in a certain way to achieve their goal for that game (usually victory). They also have an expectation that the game will be a fair contest.

Our job as referees is to make sure that whatever a team is trying to achieve, they are operating within the laws of the game (so that we provide the fair contest everyone expects). If their play is legal, then we should be allowing them to execute their play as freely as is safe to do so. If it is illegal, then we should be clear as to what our expectations are and consistent and fair in enforcing them. The way in which we do this is crucial to limiting the levels of frustration that can build during a game. It is the ultimate dark art of refereeing – Game Management!

Game management is a topic in itself, but in a nutshell it is the way in which you handle the people and events on match day to (hopefully) make each game safe, enjoyable and fair. It involves judgements of materiality and empathy. It is unique to you and your style, but it should always include certain key elements:

- i) **The right demeanour** – this is how you present yourself and your decisions. It is key to your credibility. How you come across to players, coaches and spectators has a massive impact on how they will treat and respect you. All you do and say, all of your mannerisms and behaviours should convey the idea that you are competent, confident and committed. Do appear professional and approachable; do not appear aloof or too casual. Do manage the game and players firmly; do not become over officious. Always be conscious of how you project yourself.
- ii) **Consistency** – Never, never be inconsistent – if you penalise one side for an offence, then you really should do the same for the other. If you penalise something at minute 10, you should do so at minute 60. If you let something go before, you need a good reason to start pulling rabbits out of the hat. Equally, be wary of backing yourself into corners – don't demand something in a briefing and then ignore it in a game. Don't threaten and then fail to follow through. Inconsistent refereeing is the shortest route to raising levels of frustration.
- iii) **Accuracy** – Never guess. The best way to be a consistent decision maker is to get the first offence and to get it right. Work on your fitness, your running lines and your law. Each element of the game has it's own challenges. Have a checklist for them so that you use the same thought processes each time (eg. Scrum – body positions, binds, angles, etc...Breakdown - tackler release, tackled player release, etc). Know what to look for and how to recognise it.
- iv) **Materiality** – Some offenses leave no option as to how you must sanction them (eg. Punch, tip tackle). Most are much more open to management. Ask yourself if an offense has had a material effect on a

team's chances to play. Do you really need to intervene? Is a penalty the correct sanction? Perhaps you should have penalised that? Can you manage it without the whistle? There is no set answer but good referees can sense when they need to intervene and at what level. Get it right and the game flows; frustration ebbs. Get it wrong and teams are held back and frustration builds. It's a difficult one to master. Accuracy, consistency and empathy are all crucial too.

- v) **Communication** – use all the tools at your disposal. Whistle tone, voice (colour, number, offence), signals, downtime player management, captains' briefing, front row briefing, talking to coaches if needed. Your aim is to leave no doubt as to the who, what and why of each decision and your expectations of the players. No-one likes a mystery and leaving people guessing will lead them to think that that is exactly what you are doing.
- vi) **Empathy** – try to understand what the players want. Use advantage if appropriate. If they want quick ball, make sure you police the tackle area. Both sides should be given the chance to exploit any advantage fairly won. A stronger scrum should not be frustrated by illegal play such as folding in. A quick openside should not be prevented from turning the ball over by opponents sealing off.

In a nutshell, you want to make sure your decisions are credible. All of the above will help you to achieve this. If you or decisions lack credibility, the feeling grows that you are not in control and that it is not a fair contest. Frustration builds, making the situation you are in charge of much more volatile and abuse becomes more likely.

Prevent the triggers. Keep the safety catch on at all times. Maintain control. Minimising the frustration of players and spectators goes a long way to removing the volatility from a game. However, given the hard, physical nature of the sport, there is always the danger that something may spark an incident.

By maintaining good control during the game we reduce the chances of a flashpoint occurring. If the trigger is still pulled, maintaining good discipline minimises the fallout and the chances of other people losing control.

- i) **Temperature** – Be aware of the temperature of a game and of individual players. Is the scoreline close? Are you in the last quarter? Is Green 7 winding every one up? Is the scrum getting feisty? What you are looking for are indicators that warn when someone may lash out or take a cheap shot. Does a team want to raise the tempo of a game but is being prevented from doing so? (enter our old friend frustration). If you sense a rise in temperature, you need to up your game. Be ready to tighten up where necessary and maybe even slow things down a little when the ball is dead. Take your time when making decisions and be ready to accelerate your sanctions if necessary. Recognise and manage the pressure.

- ii) **Sanctions** – These are a key tool in our game management toolkit, (but always remember that they are not the only tools). Use the appropriate sanction for the offence. Sometimes advantage is the right call, sometimes an immediate blast is needed. Sometimes you can avoid sanctions through a well-timed call/downtime management, other times you need to move from encouragement to enforcement. For repeat offenses do not be afraid to use a card, but make sure you build up to it - accelerate your sanctions from telling (may be a penalty), warning (some penalties), insisting (team warning + penalty), enforcing (card). You want to be like Goldilocks – not too strong and not too soft – just right!
- iii) **Chat** – key to your credibility during volatile games is the manner in which you respond to chat. Never tolerate dissent in any form, but do not go nuclear as soon as it occurs. Be firm but calm and insist on the right behaviours. Ideally because you are consistent, accurate and fair, this should not be a problem. If it is, accelerate your sanctions. You are entitled to respect and you should not give it up by allowing players to challenge your authority (but nor you should not wear it like a badge)

In conclusion, the softer skills of refereeing are absolutely key to maintaining control. The more we work on these, the better we will become. One important way you can do this is by taking time to reflect on your performance after each game, especially the difficult ones. Ask yourself questions about the game and what you did. What was making the scrums wheel? Should you have penalised more or less? What do you wish you had said when the captain kept badgering you? What will you do next time?

Another valuable way of improving your game management is to watch and learn from others. Listen to what good referees say during a game. Try to spot patterns. Ask yourself if you would manage the game in the same way. Always seek to learn and practise your learning until it good habits form.

Our game management has a major bearing on the strength of feeling of those around us on match day. If we are credible, competent and in control, we will be playing our part to stamp out abuse.

A solid refereeing performance is the best retort to any idiot that thinks they have the right to abuse us.