

TIME FOR ACTION RATHER THAN WORDS?

As a referee for over 40 years, I have noticed gradual changes in the approach to refereeing in general, and the way referees are coached. Back in the 1960s and 70s, referees were taught to restrict their verbal interaction with players to a minimum. Then came the era of extensive verbal communication from the referee to players. Referees were expected to keep up a barrage of commands instructing players on all aspects of compliance with the laws of the game.

Around 2003, some administrators began to question whether this aspect of communication had perhaps been taken too far. Referees, rather than taking the traditional "31st man" approach, had in some cases made themselves the centre of attention with loud and sometimes aggressive communication methods. With the increased verbalisation came a more flamboyant style, leading the then national referee manager Keith Lawrence to observe "that people do not go to matches to see a guy with a whistle blowing it and waving his arms around." While the more extroverted style of refereeing may have been acceptable to a point in a large stadium, it did not come across well on suburban sidelines only metres from spectators. Increasing incidences of verbal and physical assaults on referees were seen by some to be a reaction to this more aggressive refereeing style.

In my view, there is definitely more spectator reaction to the louder, more verbal referee. It also does not instil a sense of self-discipline in players, who become totally dependent on the referee's verbal commands to determine whether they are onside, whether a lineout is over, whether the ball is out of a scrum, ruck or maul, or indeed whether they have retired 10 metres at a penalty. I always thought rugby was a game for thinkers. And think about this; there have been tournaments for deaf players, where whole games have been played to completion without incident, when many of the participants were unable to hear any verbal communication at all from the referee, or indeed even the whistle. Obviously a referee's primary means of communication is body language, which of course includes the use of signals, or these matches would have degenerated into chaos. So how important is the verbal aspect, really?

A major reason that the use of verbal instructions has increased over the years is the change in style in which the game is refereed at top level. Once the philosophy from the top down was that the referee was there to ensure fair play by adherence to the laws of the game, but otherwise to take a back seat. Now the referee at top level is expected to be a game manager rather than an adjudicator, charged with producing a marketable entertainment package. Has this expectation worked? Spectator numbers are down at all levels of the game, although there is obviously no single attributable cause.

The laws of the game are surprisingly light on spelling out how verbal a referee should be. They set out who we may consult with, and when a player should be cautioned or admonished. No mention of what we should say in these instances; that's entirely up to us as individuals. And these situations take place after we have blown the whistle to stop play. The laws make no mention at all of verbalisation on the run, and place no onus on referees to do so.

Thankfully, it seems that there is a dawning realisation that the experiment has not worked. We are beginning to hear that in terms of verbal communication, less may be best. Jono White's recent talk to our association suggested that perhaps it's time we backed off a bit on the verbal aspect. I am sure that many of us have already concluded that while we should not be going back to the old silent days, there are situations where adding our own loud voice to a tense situation can only make matters worse. It has been observed that players in a confrontational situation often simply do not hear what is said anyway. In such cases, a quiet word at a subsequent stoppage in play may achieve better results. A barrage of loud commands does not necessarily ensure control of a situation, and there are situations where actions such as a penalty or a card speak louder than words.

We are all individuals, and as such we each tackle the various aspects of refereeing in our own way. It is my opinion that coaching of referees has been too stereotyped; we are trying to

produce clones of the perceived ideal referee, rather than building on the character traits of the individual. We need to focus more on outcomes when judging referee performance. Did the game have a good outcome for the players? Was it played in a good spirit? Did anyone even notice the referee? To me, being in firm control but “invisible” is the mark of a good refereeing performance, and quiet, one to one verbal interaction can produce more rapport than the continual issuing of instructions in a sergeant-major manner. Oh, and one more thing. We need to stop counting penalties. No referee should refrain from awarding a justifiable penalty because they think there have been too many penalties in the game already. Referees are not responsible for the number of penalties in a game, players are.

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