

PROFESSIONALISM AND REFEREEING:

LIFE ON THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL REFEREES SQUAD

by Michael Jennings

Level 3 Referee 2001/2

I would like to sincerely thank **George Ayoub, Andrew Cole, Stuart Dickinson, James Dickson, Wayne Erickson, Matt Goddard, Greg Hinton, Peter Marshall, John McCarthy** and **Scott Young** for their open and honest answers on a wide range of issues. Their comments are invaluable to Australian refereeing.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present an idea of what life is like on the Australian Rugby Union National Referees Squad in the early days of professionalism. All referees interviewed are either current or former members of the squad. Many opinions were put forward and this report is a collection of those opinions. It is a guide to young referees aspiring to join the squad while also aiming to provide feedback to the ARU on the squad referees' views on refereeing in Australia.

The Current Situation

Australia has been at the forefront of refereeing in recent years. Australia has four referees on the IRB 'A' Panel (the recently retired Wayne Erickson was also on the 'A' panel), more than any other country in the world. The national squad is now made up of nine referees (down from a high of 17 in the mid-nineties), four full-time/professional and five part-time.

The game

The game of rugby is vastly different now that it is professional. The skill level is much higher, the pace is much quicker and there is a much higher element of professionalism in the attitude of players and coaches. Teams are spending more time than ever before preparing for games and the intensity of the games is now not only week-to-week, but much higher.

A result of this is that teams and referees are working more closely together to achieve better results. Some examples of this are a biennial conference on the game and Super 12 conferences. Teams spend time analysing the referees they have been appointed. There is a much better working relationship between coaches and referees, even though the stakes are higher and people's employment are on the line. There is now accountability as referees are assessed on every game and they also receive feedback from team management reports.

Expectations

There are now greater expectations from players, coaches and spectators. Unrealistic though it may be, there is a greater expectation of perfection, which in part is due from an increased number of cameras and countless replays. One positive aspect is that there is greater acceptance by players. Both groups are now professional and the players are acknowledging the hard work referees are putting in. The barriers are breaking down.

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There is, however, a lack of understanding by outsiders. Due to the theatrical nature of TV sport, referees are often criticised by commentators who show a distinct lack of law knowledge. No one is beyond criticism, but disappointingly, referees have no right of reply. Referees need to accept that they will always be criticised and therefore must become accustomed to it.

Time and Work

Being a full-time referee allows you the time and freedom to prepare adequately, both physically and mentally. Referees are now much more self-reflective. Watching videos of your own games then accepting your weaknesses is important in becoming a better referee.

The Super 12 and Test Matches referees spend on average 3-4 months away from home. Other squad referees spend 2-3 months away. This is obviously hard for those with families and jobs. While seeing the world is fantastic, living out of a suitcase can become a bit tiresome after a while. You miss family and friends' birthdays and weddings, just to name a few. The counter to this is that when you are home, it is quality time with your family. For those full-time referees, this can mean being at home all day.

All five fulltime referees do some work outside refereeing. Andrew Cole has his own dental practice, while the other three referees participate in a range of public speaking activities. For the part-time referees, time off is a problem. In previous years we have seen referees such as the late Kerry Fitzgerald and New Zealand's David Bishop facing quite substantial problems getting time off work. The current full-time referees say the same thing when they were still working. The part-time referees have introduced support systems which make getting time off work less of a problem. However, it is not easy, particularly if you have just started a new job with a new employer.

The full-time referees train during the day and part-time referees are expected to attend. However, due to work commitments, it is impossible for most part-time referees to train during the day. Instead they either train by themselves or with their local association. Their fitness can be as good as the full-time referees, yet they can be discriminated against for not training with them.

Fitness

The standard of fitness of referees is much higher than before. Gone are the days of pounding the road. These days it is all about training smartly. Swimming, cycling, rowing and the gym are

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now major components of training programs. There has been an increase in knowledge about training in recent years due to extensive research. The top referees now have specialised, individual training programs and are trained by professional trainers employed by the ARU. It is hard to believe that until very recently, top referees all had the same training program.

Most referees train everyday, yet they may only have one or two running sessions a week. With the increased level of skill and higher intensity of games, referees need to be able to cope. Travel and jet lag all have an impact on the physical well-being of a referee. Referees must train smartly.

Remuneration

Life as a professional referee can be financially rewarding. Given the amount of time and effort these referees put in, it is well-deserved. Remuneration for the part-time squad referees, however, requires an urgent overhaul. The expectations of the part-time referees with regards to training and performance have increased, yet remuneration has hardly changed at all in the past seven years. They are expected to be professional, yet they get paid as amateurs. Refereeing for the part-time referees is a second job, and subsequently they are taxed at the highest rate. When these referees are selected to go overseas, they have to take time off work, usually without pay, yet they are not recompensed enough.

Although it is easier in hindsight, some referees may not have joined the squad had they known how few opportunities they would be given and also how poor the remuneration would be for the amount of time they put in. Referees don't referee for money; they do it because they love it. But if they are required to take time off work, unpaid, then they should be recompensed a sum worthy of their time, effort and contribution to the game. At the moment, this is not happening.

Opportunities

Australian rugby and refereeing suffers due to the fact that there is no competition between 1st grade and Super 12. New Zealand has the NPC; South Africa has the Currie Cup. Australia has nothing. Despite the efforts of various people to introduce a national competition, as well as a fourth Super 12 team, Australian rugby is lacking in high quality games.

The full-time referees have seen an increase in refereeing opportunities due to more countries playing rugby and a professional seven-a-side circuit, yet there are not as many opportunities for the next group of Australian referees. As the employer, the ARU wants the full-time referees, their employees, to referee the top games. This is fine, provided that there are enough chances

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for up-and-coming referees to referee more challenging games. Unfortunately this is not the case in Australia at the moment and there is a big logjam of referees just below the national squad.

The appointment of the full-time referees to the majority of the top games has a flow down effect to local associations. Whereas once a part-time squad referee would be appointed to a touring game, they are now given a lower representative game that would have normally be given to a promising local 1st grade referee. However, one positive aspect since the inception of Super 12 is that when the squad referees are away during Super 12, there can be good opportunities to referee higher grades in your local association.

It is very difficult for a referee who has been refereeing at 1st grade level and possibly a couple of sevens tournaments to go out and referee a Super 12 match. In the last two years, there have been some 'A' or 'B' games, but not enough to bridge the gap. Being in the squad does not necessarily mean more opportunities. Some squad referees have been given very few opportunities in the many years they have been in the squad.

There have been some pleasing developments in the structure of refereeing in Australia in recent years. In pre-professional days, there was no youth policy. The current full-time referees spent years refereeing sub district rugby, several years in second grade before finally being given a shot at first grade. Usually their first first grade game was at the end of the season involving the bottom team. If they were lucky they might get a couple of first grade games the following year. There were no such things as fitness or recovery programs nor were nutrition or psychology parts of refereeing. There was no Level 3 program. The younger referees now have access to all of these things mentioned above. This has been a great development for Australian refereeing, yet there are still limited actual refereeing opportunities.

In previous years, the path to the top was relatively simple – you refereed a couple of first grade games. If you showed promise, then you were given a minor representative game, then a major one, then Qld v NSW and then a Test Match. Now the sequence is: 1st grade, National Championships, Squad seminars, Minor Representative games (incoming schools), squad selection, Super 12 trial/'A' or 'B' game, Overseas 7's, Inbound tour games, Super 12, Nomination for IRB, IRB 'B' Panel, IRB 'A' Panel, Minor Test, Major Test, Six Nations and Tri Nations and finally Rugby World Cup. While the sequence is more structured than previously, there are many more hoops to jump through. Due to having four or five of the best referees in the world, opportunities are limited, so often only one up-and-coming referee is chosen to make this journey (depending on where you come from). Therefore less referees actually progress right through. The natural conclusion to this is that you must make the most of your opportunity

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when it comes. What cannot be overstated is that only a very small number of referees make it to the top.

The Australian Way

“Australian referees (have traditionally) referee(d) like Australians in Australia for Australian conditions.”

Australians in general are known for their laid back attitude towards life. This comes through in refereeing as well. The game is bigger than the individual. There have been several wonderful Australian referees over the past 20 years who have facilitated some of the most enjoyable games ever played and watched. But the style of Australian refereeing has changed.

Accuracy is far more important now. “Continuity at all costs”, as some have called it, will no longer get you to the top of world refereeing. The current assessment system is all about compliance. You start with a score of 100 and go down from there. Points are deducted for non-compliance. Things that Australian referees might have once turned a blind eye to, such as the tackle and scrum feeds, will now cost you valuable points. The current full-time referees (and other part-time squad referees who have been refereeing for a long time) found it difficult adjusting their philosophies and styles from the Australian way to the new way, but they have all succeeded and now have reputations as being the best in the world.

Some referees kept their own style, others made bigger changes. It is important to have a style you are comfortable with that will only take very minor adjustments as needed. Referees have come unstuck in the past by refereeing for the man in the stand (the assessor) and trying to change from game to game. You are selected on your ability and confidence in being able to do the job is half the battle. If you try to do things you are not used to you will not portray confidence. It is also unfair on the players to change from one match to the next. Philosophies should remain the same and this then allows you to make minor adjustments to adapt to the style of the game.

In truth, most referees now have similar styles - it is how they react to new situations or pressure that distinguishes them and whether they referee with confidence. "Referee the obvious" - combined with accuracy, consistency and confidence - these are the keys to success.

One positive to come out of this new assessment system is uniformity. Refereeing is now much more uniform throughout the world. Everyone is refereeing under the same laws, and these laws must be followed. The standard of refereeing throughout the world has definitely improved and

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there is less variation in performance due to the time spent in preparation.

It does seem, however, that some people in refereeing circles are jealous of Australian referees and Australians in general. For the size of our population, we are way ahead of the rest of the world in many sports. There are several reasons for this. We are the leaders in sports medicine, we have some of the best coaches in the world and our climate is conducive to sport. We have four referees (five until recently) on the IRB 'A' panel and the Wallabies are the only team to have won the World Cup twice. Australians are a confident race. There can be resentment of Australian referees, not of a personal nature, but as an Australian.

Perceptions

Perceptions play a very big part in refereeing. Unfortunately they are a fact of life. Much can be said about perceptions, but let us say that they can make or break your refereeing career. Disappointingly, they mostly work against you.

It is a well-known fact that referees consistently get better marks when they referee overseas. They are seen by assessors and coaches for the first time and these people usually don't hold any perceptions of them. It is very difficult to change people's perceptions of you, but you must work at it. Some suggestions on the removal of perceptions are included in the next section of this paper.

One panel referee said, "You can only do your best and hope it's good enough."

The Future

It is not unforeseeable that, due to retirements, Australia will only have one or two referees on the IRB 'A' Panel in the near future. Having five referees on this panel for so long has led to a catch-22 situation. On one hand it shows that Australia has some great referees who are showing their skills on the world stage. On the other hand though, it has unfortunately meant that there has been a lack of development in other referees. Retirements after Rugby World Cup will open up opportunities for the next group of referees and hopefully this group can quickly develop their skills at the next level.

The decision to limit the number of Super 12 referees in 2003 to four from each country will have drastic consequences. Not only does this hamper referee development, but also it places

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extra pressure on those four referees chosen. They will have more games to referee and touch judge and there will be more travel. Injury and burnout are major concerns.

Some referees have said that the ARU needs to do more with regards to opportunities. Suggestions include bringing assessors to Australia to watch games refereed by Australians and sending Australian referees overseas to referee representative games. Whilst the latter is an excellent idea, other countries may not agree given that Australia has very little to offer in return. New Zealand, for example, would be reluctant to allow an Australian referee to referee a NPC match if all they would be offered in return is a QLD 'A' v NSW 'A' game. All referees said that a national competition of some sort is a must, not only for referee development but for player development, too.

While the players and referees have gone professional, the assessors have not. There continues to be inconsistency too often at the international level. The number of assessors should be cut and as they would then spend more time away, they should be employed by the IRB. A rotation of Australian assessors, as well as some new blood, has also been suggested. This should help with the changing or removal of perceptions.

While the game has gone professional, the IRB still retains an amateur mindset. The focus by the IRB is on fitness, an easy point to focus on. Unfortunately there is no technical research or attempts at improvement of referees. Fitness is placed ahead of skills. There needs to be work on decision-making capabilities.

Another talking point is the fact that the IRB selects the referees for all Test Matches and Rugby World Cup. Yet these referees are not employed by the IRB, they are employed by their own unions. The referees are responsible to two organisations, yet only one of these organisations pays the referees!

Advice to young referees

All the referees interviewed were asked for some advice to pass on to young referees. This following advice should be read carefully.

“If professional refereeing is your goal, you need to approach refereeing in the same way as has always been the case i.e. performance = results = opportunities = further opportunities. Don't think of the end result but concentrate on making the best of the next opportunity ("One game at a time!"). Realise only a small percentage make it to the pro ranks so continue working

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towards a "normal" career and life but make whatever sacrifices you need to prepare well for games and subsequently make every opportunity your best effort. If you are then refereeing well the rewards will come. Take advice when offered but work out what is best for you. Remember you cannot be everyone's referee but you need to perform at a consistently high level. Work with teams as much as possible - game knowledge is crucial."

"Enjoy the journey and perform at your best, regardless of the standard of the game."

"Never stop learning."

"Always strive to improve on your last performance."

"Never be afraid to ask questions."

"Enjoy!"

"The young tree that bends with the wind stands taller when it grows older."

"Expect nothing and when you get something, be happy."

"Keep doing it for the love of the game – the reason why you started."

"Stay away from the politics."

"Listen to all advice and take notice of people you respect."

"Enjoy the ride and the successes, but it's not the be all and end all of life."

"Go to uni, get a career, enjoy life, referee sometimes!"

"(Depending on your personality) learn to play the political game."

"Don't buck the system."

"Be yourself."

"It's about meeting people and having a good time."

"It's about enjoying each moment."

"Destiny is not in your hands."

"Don't look at the appointments sheet."

"The Holy Grail is not out there – it's the journey itself."

Conclusion

This paper has been a collection of opinions, opinions of the top referees in Australia. The decisions of administrators directly affect these referees, so their opinions should be carefully noted. The needs of fulltime and part-time squad members differ between individuals and should be accommodated wherever possible. Administrators have to be mindful of this. Like all employer/employee relationships, loyalty breeds loyalty.

As refereeing is now professional, the referees should be treated as employees under a normal working environment. The assessors and selectors need to be made fulltime. They should be

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rotated so they do not build perceptions of referees. The suggestion that assessors from overseas be brought in to look at Australian referees should be acted on. It is clear that a national competition of some sort is needed, for both referees and players. At the moment there is an enormous player and coach exodus overseas and something must be done to stop this. As there will be considerable changes after the 2003 Rugby World Cup, a review of the current top referees is needed.

For the young up-and-coming referees, take note of the advice given by Australia's top referees. Remember that only a very small percentage of referees make it to the top. Do not forget the reason why you started refereeing.