HAVE WE GOT IT RIGHT

The game of rugby has changed greatly over the last few years with professionalism being introduced at the Elite Level (eg Test & Super 12). It is not only with the game being professional, the speed and sport-specifics training methods of the players, and the advanced coaching techniques at the elite level. The law-makers have made changes to the laws of the game to make it more attractive to play and for spectators to watch at all levels. The game is still played majority by amateurs at the highest grade level in which their skills mainly allow.

What steps have the Australian referees taken since the introduction of professionalism?

Firstly I would like to mention the Referee Game Plan in Australia:

To provide a sufficient number of quality Officials to ensure the best possible rugby for the enjoyment of all participants

Lets look at our system in 1999 and see what we are doing for everyone in rugby. At the elite level we have five full time paid referees and six part time paid referees who now receive specific training programs, advanced coaching, diet and nutrition information than ever before. Below this level we have established development squads of talent indentified referees who receive extra training and coaching. We have identified that we need to develop young referees below the age of thirty and rapidly advance them through the ranks by means of development squads and appointments. We preferentially appoint the young referees to matches rather than the older (30+) referee because they are our future. For referees who are not involved in squads some receive coaching but their main training is at referee meeting nights (if the referee attends).

So are we doing enough for referees at Club and Junior rugby or are we too busy concentrating on providing referees for the Elite Level of rugby? Remember we have said that we will provide sufficient numbers of quality Officials for all levels of rugby. Shouldn't we make these young referees as good as the older referee before promotion? How do we encourage people to referee if there is no real chance of them receiving the opportunity to referee at the highest level they are able to? This may only be second grade in their local competition? We are now creating a gap between the higher grade level of referee and the referee of lower grade games because development is only targeting at a few.

Over the past four years the **Referee Development Officers (RDO)** have been continually working on recruitment and retention of referees but with minium success. With the production of a recruitment and retention document in 1999 this may help with more success in these areas.

We are continually recruiting the young referee, encouraging them to referee and providing the extra coaching towards them that we have forgotten our aims and that's providing quality officials for all levels of rugby. Is it a reality to tell the young referee that you can make a career out of refereeing when there are only five full time paid referee in Australia?

What about the persons who has contributed to rugby by refereeing over the years or the person who has started refereeing at a later age after this person has contributed to rugby in a different area?

What do we do for the rest?

The majority of referees only receive referee meeting nights training and hopefully they might receive a coaching report during the year. This is an area, which has to improve.

Firstly I think we should look at the areas where the referee starts their introduction to refereeing. The level I referee course is aimed for U/19 rugby. We need to provide a pathway for referees to advance. After completing the one day course we should have these new referees start three refereeing with U/9 to U12 rugby where there are less numbers on the field and it's easier for the new referee to learn the art of refereeing. After the referee has completed their one day course a more introduction of refereeing is needed. The local Union or referee association should arrange an evening or half day session that could cover more on safety, communication, whistle training, warm up and routines and also do the law examination. These sessions also could be used for more detailed introductions about what refereeing can offer the person (eg fitness, travel and friendship). Session for the new referee should be followed up about every six weeks so we can find out the problems that these referees are having in their first year. These novice referees should be the main concern for referee coaches at the start of the season as they are new and need confidence building to continue in refereeing. It should not matter what level the referee coach is at to assist in this area.

What if the state or sub-union in which the course is run does not have junior competitions only a senior competition? Most seasons start with Seven or Tens Tournaments and is another area where the new referee can start refereeing. Try and arrange Level one courses before these events where there is not so many players on the field so it's made easier for these new referees to learn the art of refereeing. If this is still not possible a senior referee could follow the referee around in his/her first game while they are refereeing and assist them. Inter club and school trial can also be used.

The next level of the pathway of rugby is from U/13 to U/19, which is the first introduction to the fifthteen, a side game of rugby. It also includes school rugby as well as junior club rugby. We should use this as the next level of refereeing

pathway. Again we have sessions, which cover areas about how we referee this level of rugby. These sessions should cover more on the phases of the game eg Scrum, Ruck & Maul, which have more players, involved and how to deal with these different age level. Other issues could also be covered such as dealing with coaches and spectators.

The referee who attends these sessions will be identified as the ones who are willing to advance in their refereeing. Referees who mainly referee senior rugby during the season and are occasionally appointed to U/19 games during the season could also use these sessions to familiarise themselves of the style of game played at this level. The sessions will also assist the referees who only referee U/19 rugby. Senior referees who referee junior rugby could run these sessions it may keep them interested in refereeing and referees development

The next levels of rugby is club senior rugby, suburban and then up to the third grade levels which we run sessions for referees who referee this type of rugby. Referees at this level are encouraged to attend the level two referee course, which has been structured for referees who wish to referee senior rugby.

The areas, which we cover, are the difficulty of refereeing this level of rugby because the players are not as skilled and fit as the players at the higher level are. The way in which the referee should communicate to these players and how to deal with the way the game is played at this level should also be addressed.

Finally we have sessions for the referee who are refereeing the second and first grade games. The games are quicker and the players are more skilled and more advanced discussions on the phases of the game could be held.

Referees who attend these sessions during the year are the referees who are identified as those willing to learn and advance in there refereeing. Having these sessions we are providing the extra training for referees and this could help with our game plan aim of providing a sufficient number of quality officials to ensure the best possible rugby.

With all these extra sessions is there a place for referee meetings? These meetings could be used for topics which sometimes are forgotten which are important parts of refereeing. Training methods, pre match routines, diet preparation. You could make a long list of different types of topics, which my help with attendance at meetings and could keep referees interested in attending referee meetings.

So what about the person who shows potential to reach the highest level in their state or association? At the current time we have these referees in squad meetings every two weeks and providing extra training.

Are we teaching them to enjoy the journey or because of the pressure we put on them to reach the elite level before they are even capable of refereeing the level they are already at that they forget why they referee?

Are we asking them to do more development work than some of our part time paid referees? With the talent identified referee we could have an introduction session before the season commences which covers more advance topics of the game in which they will be exposed at the current level they are refereeing at.

Should we be putting more of a mentor based system in place for these referees where they work with a senior referee and have more one on one discussions about their refereeing? You can appoint the potential referee with their mentor for several weeks were the mentor could view the referee and provide the referee with weekly feedback. This could be done for a three week period and then they would be able to have discussion on their games and solve problems they are having. They would also have the opportunity to build a relationship with each other.

These mentors could also be referee coaches who may also assist in coaching these referees. You may sometimes appoint these potential referees to higher games with the mentor referee doing the previous game. He could give assistance by running touch for the referee or could view the game and pass on more specific coaching. These referees with their mentor all meet as several times during the season where they can discuss the experience they are having during the season.

This all sounds easy but the area we need to look at is referee coaches and developing referee coaches. At this stage we are lacking referee coaches who assist at the lower level of referees or the new referee to guide them through their learning years

Do we have a pathway for referee coaches? Do we put new referee coaches in areas where the referee expects a little bit more than what they can give? The new referee coach course participant should work with only U/19 referee. The person who has just completed the Level One referee coach course could have even been experienced referee but they should learn the coaching trade. An experienced referee doesn’t necessarily make a good coach. Then when the referee coach has completed his coaching report they should also be handed not only to the referee but also to a level two referee coach for feedback so the new referee coach can get feedback on their reports.

Referee coaches meeting night sessions should be held for the new referee coach so they can discuss how they should be coaching referees at the junior level and learn more about the act of coaching.

Then after the referee coach shows that he has the capability of coaching referees at junior level than we should encourage this person to complete the level Two Referee Coach Course.

We could have referee coach nights for the senior coaches so they can talk about coaching senior grade referees and the different type of coaching which is needed for the referees at the different level of senior rugby.

Having referee coaching meeting nights we can have consistency with referee's coaches who are coaching at all levels of rugby.

We have part time paid referee coaches at elite level who are paid to watch the paid referees. We could have them travel interstate so they could give lectures or work with coaches at club games and view different referees from other state. They may observe the referee coach and give them feedback. It will give the referee coach and the referee different style of feedback. It could help identify potential referee and referee coach who may reach a higher level. We need to expose more referee coaches to national carnivals by inviting a couple of local referee coaches daily from the local association so they can watch and view how the more experienced coach watches matches and their feedback they give to the referee.

I know these are my ideas and many people will disagree with what I have to say and there may be a better way. We need to work to a common goal, which may have a person just in charge of the Elite Referees and Referee Coaches and setting up programs for them. Then have a person responsible for developing programs for the recreational referee so that we can achieve our game plan.

As the game of rugby develops the referees and referee coaches must develop with it so its more enjoyable for the rugby community at all levels of the game.

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