# Where da'ya get ya whistle from ref?

George Ayoub

Simple as this may seem, the focus question which I will discuss in this paper becomes a complex issue and one that will shed light on the types of people that strap on the boots each weekend for eight months of the year, because they get some kind of enjoyment out of it.

The following paper will endeavour to highlight the reasons why people become referees, what background they come from, what they want out of the game and what motivates them season after season.

A quick perusal of the NSW Referee Association shows a diversity of backgrounds by individuals who have decided to take on the challenge of controlling a game of rugby each Saturday for the sheer enjoyment of it. Having said, this, the underlying question must be, Why?..... Why would anyone in their right minds want to keep apart thirty gorillas for eighty minutes; told continually that "You're having a shocker, Ref!" by players on the field; fifty percent of the crowd wanting to invite you over for dinner and the other fifty percent wanting you *for* diner; and an assessor biting at the bit waiting to tell you that you lost control from the kick off; your shorts are too faded; you're too short, you're in too close; you're out too far; why didn't you see that punch fifty metres away ... etc; but apart from these minor things, you're doing just fine!

Then, if you are lucky enough to do first grade, comes the mandatory bagging (ragging?) you get at the after match drinks. If you happen to be short... "Stand up!"; even though you've been given ten chairs to stand on. "I'd like to thank the two teams for such a great game today. I had a great time? \* # @  $\sim$ !". Then its off home to ponder on what might have been if I didn't give that penalty, or disallow that try under the posts. Can't wait till next Saturday!...

This paper will deal with five issues related to the rugby referee:

- 1. Why do people become referees?
- 2. What is their background?
- 3. What do they get out of the game?
- 4. What motivates them season after season?
- The problems associated with career referees.

Since I am a referee, it would be only proper that I start by giving you the reasons why I chose to take up the whistle.

Attending a school that was rugby mad, our only highlights were the weekend games, where we could show off our skills and pretend we were world beaters, if only for an hour or so. It was here I received my grounding in refereeing. The big craze in those days was to obtain your referee's badge and referee the junior teams in the morning, then back up for your game during the afternoon. So, for me, refereeing was introduced at an early age. I tried coaching after I'd left school, but found that my hair was starting to fall out at an alarming rate (I've since found out it wasn't the coaching!). I decided to play for the local club and many years of enjoyment were had, although towards the end, my body decided that enough was enough. Now, I'm sure every rugby player reaches a crisis point in their career when their body says "No!", but the little devil inside says "Yes, you can do it! Just one more year..." Having decided to retire from playing, I was still very keen to be involved in the game, and still thinking that my loss of hair was due to the stress of coaching, that was out of the question. Still too young to be involved in the administration of rugby, refereeing looked very promising. With a lot of hard work and dedication on my part, and never being one to just relax, I could see I had a future in refereeing.

I made a conscious decision at the start of my refereeing career to pursue it to the best of my ability because there were rewards both on and off the field. You may ask what these rewards might be? A great number of people who referee do it because they like it. Others do it because it gives them a chance to run around the park and stay fit. And there are others that referee who both enjoy it and strive for the ultimate goal, to represent your country at your chosen sport. I fit into the latter. I realised at an early age that I would not represent my country playing the game of rugby, but there are other avenues that I could pursue to reach that goal.

So why do people become referees? The following is a collection of responses given after interviewing referees of rugby, administrators, - layers and then further afield in other sports that require an official to control he game.

### **Wayne Erickson** (Test referee and a member of the NSW RRA)

Wayne was asked to respond to a number of pertinent questions on his role in becoming a referee and pursuing this career.

• Why did he become a referee? Wayne commenced his professional life as a schoolmaster and whilst playing, was also involved in coaching and refereeing boys at school. When he stopped playing, the choice between coaching and refereeing was made easy, due to the commitment of a hectic school calendar. Wayne saw refereeing as a good opportunity to stay involved in the game, as well as opening new doors for him both on and off the field.

Like most players, Wayne was generally dissatisfied with the standards of refereeing and felt he could, given the chance, do a better job. Wayne says he quickly realised that his was a harsh and unrealistic view, acknowledging the effort which most referees put into the game.

- Were there any problems early on? Like most frustrated players in the referees' ranks, Wayne had to resist the temptation to move into the rucks and mauls and tell the players what to do. Some might say "Nothing's changed!". Another problem, both on and off the field, was the rather negative attitude most people had to the referee. Wayne sometimes had the feeling that we should be issued with a "leper's bell" when we received our law book. He believes that things are slowly changing and maybe the attitude is an acceptable part of the initiation process.
- Pursuing a referee career: Wayne outlined the fairly tortuous path in his quest to reaching the top, or aspiring to reach the top, of the referees' ranks. He says study the law until you know it backwards and it becomes second nature. In this way, real situations in play can be bathed in the light of your understanding of the law, without necessarily being a strict interpretation of the words.

Philosophy plays a big part in developing one's own style. Wayne indicates that establishing your own philosophy on foul play, scrum, ruck and maul, lineout, positional play and offside and develop this to the utmost, even if this does go against the conventional wisdom. Wayne says "Don't let anybody change your mind without a damned good debate." Identifying your strengths and working on them, so that they become the pillars of your temple is something that Wayne puts a great deal of emphasis on. We should all become experts on something. Similarly, identifying your weaknesses and trying to eliminate them because these will be highlighted game after game. "Don't give anybody an opportunity of zeroing in on anything you do which can be shown to be a deficiency."

Finally, looking ahead at the challenges and not behind at the challengers, is a philosophy that Wayne follows. Make yourself fitter, faster, stronger and technically better. Wayne advises that selection is somebody else's decision and all you can do is make them pick you.

What do you get out of refereeing? Like most things that people enjoy doing, Wayne says he gets 'satisfaction – guaranteed'. Being involved at the highest levels is immensely satisfying from every point of view. He says: "There can be no doubt that the adrenalin rush which comes from a test match appointment is worth bottling as the most valuable intoxicant. The fringe benefits are nice, but really they are superfluous to the buzz."

#### Lyn Shaddock (NSW RRRA)

Unlike Wayne, Lyn began his refereeing career at a later stage. After playing at school and a few years later, Lyn took up squash and made his career in this field for over twenty years. At the end of this time says Lyn, there was a gap in his life and having enjoyed watching rugby and running, Lyn decided that he would give refereeing a try, officiating at the lower levels. His competitive spirit took over and he soon found himself refereeing senior games, particularly the control problems.

Because of the gap in time since he had played, Lyn found trouble reading the game and understanding the correct positioning, so that he would be in a good position to apply the laws. He says that after a season and a half of some frustration and some excellent coaching, it came together and he quickly moved up the ranks in the association.

To pursue a satisfying career in refereeing, Lyn attended law courses, gave lectures, talked to senior referees and others, and to help understand the motives of the players, he completed a level two coaching course developing further skills necessary to progress up the ranks.

• What does Lyn get out of the game? He says it relaxes him after the business dealings of the week. He is also quick to comment that the friendships fostered in rugby have been invaluable. And last but not least: it's Fun!

#### Gayl Youell

I asked Gayl Youell for her thought on refereeing, because not only was she the first woman to pass a referee's course, but her story makes interesting reading.

Why become a rugby referee? Gayl was watching a rugby match almost twenty years
ago when a call came out for more referees. As a teacher, Gayl knew she could control
players and parents prompting her to break new ground and attempt to became a new
face on the fields of rugby each Saturday.

Apart from the initial worry of being given permission to referee, the majority of problems Gayl faced had been the normal spectator comments that are made about, or to, most referees. Being a woman, Gayl face a couple of problems that have been a little different during her long refereeing career. The following two extracts occurred while Gayl was touch judging a grade game:

#### \* The amusing one first

At one Sydney grade club the spectators assumed that Gayl must be a 'gay' guy and then proceeded to taunt their own touch judge by asking him if he done his nails and shaved his legs. He was not impressed! Gayl had a giggle.

The other incident is one that rugby can do without. At another Sydney grade club game Gayl was the recipient of lots of sick sexist comments from the lower grade players, which outwardly she ignored, but which made her feel sick. As she left the field she considered submitting an incident report, but decided against it. (My own thought on this is that the only way to get rid of this kind of pathetic abuse is to report it and let the administration handle it.) Gayl decided never to return to that ground for whatever reason.

Gayl has, over the years, gained much enjoyment from the game and in 1986 was made to feel rather special in New Zealand by being interviewed on the local radio station.

• What does Gayl get out of refereeing? Friendships both on and off the field have been a highlight in her career along with a sense of satisfaction in knowing that she has tried to make each game as enjoyable as possible for each player.

I asked two people from the media for their views on referees and the following is an extract from their comments.

## **Gordon Bray** (Rugby Referee/Commentator)

I felt Gordon was in a unique position where he could give both an insider's and spectator's view on the referee, having reached a high standard in his own refereeing career, while also being a respected sports commentator.

Gordon began his refereeing career in 1986 after accepting a challenge by a former first grade referee during a live interview on the ABC's match of the day telecast. Realising his knowledge, understanding and application of the laws was deficient, Gordon saw the opportunity as an excellent way to improve his TV commentary as well as allow him to get an even closer handle on the game from a player's perspective.

The benefits of refereeing have been numerous, says Gordon. Over the past decade, he has acquired a sound knowledge and practical application of the laws which has enhanced the effectiveness of his commentary. (Dare I say, Gordon, that others might dispute this?) Whether refereeing or touch judging, Gordon has definitely gained a greater appreciation of coaching developments, and law changes which have significantly increased his overall enjoyment of the game.

Gordon also highlights that refereeing a match is an ideal exercise in man management. Whether it be schoolboy or senior games, Gordon confirms that it helps in his private as well as in his professional life.

Another great benefit for him is physical fitness. Refereeing grade or top schoolboy level requires a high degree of fitness and stamina. It is necessary to follow a daily training program to meet the demands of controlling a quality game of rugby. This aspect is a major part of Gordon's motivation for refereeing because he enjoys the feeling of well being when you are on top of your fitness.

Last, but by no means least, Gordon speaks of the camaraderie developed among the referees and the rugby fraternity in general. He states that he has met a whole range of interesting people and made special contacts. Being recognised and respected as a referee enhances your credibility in the game. As a result, Gordon has enjoyed an excellent rapport with representative referees which is an obvious advantage when commentating.

**Greg Growden** (Rugby writer/critic Sydney Morning Herald)

Unlike Gordon, Greg has not acquired his referee's badge, but his experience as spectator and writer on the game goes back many years. Greg's background stretches back to Adelaide where he played and wrote about Aussie Rules, League and very little Rugby. It was not until Greg moved to Sydney that he saw the true light and became involved in rugby, and is now respected as a rugby journalist throughout the country.

I asked Greg a few pertinent questions on referees and the types of people he things they are

Why not start with the obvious: What types of people make referees? This is too
broad a question, says Greg, relying too much on generalisation to be properly
answered. As Greg has discovered, refereeing attracts a broad spectrum of people. But
if there is one general trend among referees, it is that the individual involved has a high
tolerance of criticism; an ability to excel under pressure and an eagerness to remain a
clear thinker.

Refereeing is not an enviable pastime, adds Greg, primarily because everybody else at the ground honestly believes they could do a better job than the person out in the middle. For this reason, a referee has, first and foremost, to have the ability to not get affected or swayed by criticism. Subsequently (consequently) referees have to be the most tolerant human beings.

• What are the problems facing referees? Greg believes that the greatest problem for referees is the rugby law book, which makes a manual on how to split the atom look like easy bedtime reading. The law book is too pedantic, giving referees far too many unnecessary reasons to interrupt a match. (I'm sure this topic alone would generate wide debate, but this is not the forum I would like to highlight. Though many people agree with Greg's views, there would be an equal amount that would argue that these laws are necessary for the game to run, but it's how these are used that's critical.)

The easiest way to upset spectators and the two teams is to adhere to the strict letter of the law, because in just one minute of play there are about twenty reasons to penalise a team. The good referees ignore most of those reasons by trying to think like a player and attempting to free up the game. The bad ones take relish in pointing out all those twenty reasons with twenty interruptions. Greg goes on to say; a referee can easily complain "Hey, I'm doing my job!" – but a common ground has to be found.

Greg finds it aggravating when a touch judge is trying to raise the attention of the referee after observing some indiscretion. He believes it is farcical that the touch judge is not provided with a whistle so that he/she can provide an immediate signal to the referee that he/she wants his/her attention. It would stop the current situation where sometimes, for several minutes, the touch judge is running up and down the field with his/her flag raised trying to remind the referee of his/her existence.

• What is the media attitude towards referees? Greg says some referees may think otherwise but he believes that the Australian rugby media is generally positive towards referees. He does not think that any journalist takes any delight in lampooning referees, as they are fully aware that they are as important as the two teams in the running of the game. Without referees, there is no such game as rugby. Greg's view is that he will only criticise a referee if he believes the decisions have had a detrimental impact on the game. This could come through erratic or confusing decisions, or a wrong ruling changing the sway of a match. Greg states that he attempts, if space permits, to make the criticism constructive.

Greg believes the bulk of the media has a good working relationship with the referees. He goes on to say that he is no expert on the laws of the game, but believes he has the right to criticise or praise a referee. It is the good referee who can handle both in their stride. As an aside, Greg feels that referees handle criticism far better than players. That all goes back to the important ingredient of tolerance.

• How can referees help themselves in the public's eyes? Simple, Greg says. Try not to be over-officious; be clear and direct with your ruling; attempt to think like a player, letting the game flow wherever possible. What irks a spectator most, says Greg, is that they do not know what half the rulings are for. Too many referees, including most at first grade level in Sydney, get away with an airy-fairy wave of the arm when penalising a team. This only has the crowd thinking that the referee is not certain him/herself why he/she has pinged a team. Do the crowd a favour by clearly indicating what the penalty is for, even if it involves a bit of theatrics. In journalism, rule number one is – if in doubt, leave it out. In refereeing, rule number one should be – if in doubt, get whistle out of your mouth. (Good point, but I also feel that most rugby audiences need to become law friendly.)

#### **Peter Slattery**

Next I spoke to a leading Wallaby, Peter Slattery, on his thoughts of why people become referees and the problems they might encounter.

#### • Peter highlights five areas why he thinks people become referees:

- 1. To keep involved in the game after having played it. (There are many ex-players out there who have not considered becoming a referee an option. This, I believe, is a tragedy because there could be so much talent out there that is untapped.)
- 2. The person's ability may have prevented him/her from playing, but would like to be involved.
- 3. To keep fit and still keep involvement in the game. This seems to be a common theme by the vast majority of refs.
- 4. In general, the love of the game and wanting it to be refereed the right way. There are so many people on the sidelines each Saturday screaming that they could do a much better job. So why don't they take up that challenge? Because those that scream out at the referee would probably not have the temperament for such a difficult job.
- 5. To make a career out of it. There are many that go into this wanting to make a career but very few succeed, leaving many disenchanted. It is those who continue and work hard at it that succeed in many different ways.

#### • I asked Peter what problems he thinks referees encounter on, and off, the field.

Players, coaches and spectators, with a lack of knowledge of the laws, refereeing the game. (How often as a referee have I heard from leading players that "You're having a shocker, Ref!". Mind you, if they are worried about **our** game you can bet your bottom dollar that **their** game is well below par.) Most coaches these days are very approachable and any problems that he/she has with the referee will be discussed in an adult manner.

Keeping the same fitness level as the players. Well, let's say this is now being addressed by most referees in Australia.

Players trying to pressure the referee. Players like coaches, will try to gain as much advantage in trying to win a match; therefore referees need to be focused and well attuned to the pressures that can be placed upon them. One way is to experience that kind of pressure now and again (time and time again?) so that it will become easier to handle. Players who don't shut up is another problem that Peter stresses as being of

importance. It is up to the referee to decide how much chatter he/she will tolerate and this should be clarified in his/her mind well before the match.

A general negative attitude towards the referee by players and the public has and always will play a role in sport. This negative attitude is usually directed by those who let out their frustrations on others ie. the ref. For whatever reason, the referee will never please everyone but he must remember that he/she is out there to do a job to the best of their ability.

In regards to career referees, Peter states that there will be an ability to dedicate more time to becoming a complete (competent?) referee. In general, Peter highlights all the points mentioned in the early part of his discussion, "Why become a referee?" also adding the benefit now of being paid to do so. This does put greater pressure on the referee to perform, but the benefits of this can be enormous.

#### **Peter Fenton**

A paper on refereeing would not be complete without the maestro of the vernacular, the long-time Eastwood supporter, Mr Peter Fenton. Having played, coached and refereed over a great many years, also having written many books on the game, I figured Peter was an ideal choice to answer the few questions on the game they play in heaven.

Why do people become referees? Peter starts off by saying that some obviously retire
from the game and wish to continue an association. They may coach, administer and
referee. Not enough players take up the latter, in his view. Peter believes some have
tried, but become frustrated with the lack of progress. Others, like Gus (Wayne Erickson)
make it.

Some youngsters no doubt, referee because they feel they cannot play so well, but wish to have some involvement in the game. Others, Peter says, like the status that the job gives. Gus and others apparently now like the money....!

• What problems are faced by referees? Peter states that it seems rather a thankless job, particularly below top level. Lower standard players are often tougher to control. Peter found this having coached for many years; and he goes on to say that they accept penalties with less good grace but are also recalcitrant. (I should have asked Peter is he was Paul Keating's speechwriter.) Hence they infringe again rather than pull their heads in; an inability to end the argument. Peter states that he could not have refereed poor quality games just as he never coached low standard sides. It must be hell. He goes on to say that promising young referees should be trained on schoolboy games as opposed to sub-district games; they accept decisions and play positively.

Further, Peter states that referees tend to be ignored when they do well and are blasted when they make errors. A little like husbands, he thinks. They have a problem that all law enforcers have and that is: Who do they trust? Is a coach being generally polite because he appreciates you or is he trying to get on side? (Are you speaking from experience, Peter?) Peter once told Kerry Fitzgerald (RIP) he had a good game when his side, Parramatta, lost to Gordon. (One of the few occasions the pansies beat us.) Kerry was down on exchange. He took some convincing that Peter was not the Gordon coach; no losing coach had ever praised him in Brisbane.

One problem, Peter states, is trying to balance what the appointment board bloke wants, and what they think is correct. Peter says he made a point of talking to appointment blokes all his coaching career. Some had much more knowledge than feeling for the game. He always maintained the best referees have the best feeling. That is, they

understand what the players are trying to achieve. This must be difficult for referees who have not played.

Peter believes an on-field problem that referees sometimes have is assuming what will happen in a game. They tend to referee the team they think is weaker and therefore more likely to infringe. (I'm sure a few first grade coaches might agree with you, Peter.)

- What do they get out of the game? Free passes, of course, and the occasional jug of beer. Peter says at the top level, in this country at least, referees are held in high esteem by players and coaches. (How many red wines have you had, Peter?) Blokes like Kinsey, Flip, Gus are good diggers who do a good job. That does not mean you always agree with them but you know they have real ability and do their best.
- What more can anyone do? Peter thinks anyone who becomes reasonably efficient will
  have a good time. You don't meet many sportsmen with a better attitude than rugby
  players. One hopes that players' new found affluence does not change this. Even our
  bloody cricketers have forgotten how to behave. There should be genuine satisfaction
  knowing you have refereed a game well.

Some useless trivia: Peter believes a player or coach will accept anything from a referee except arrogance. When Peter was a sixteen-year-old fullback (I'd like to see that) he told a leading test referee the bell had gone to end the game (Parramatta High vs Homebush). He was ignored. He told him again, thinking he had not been heard. The referee told him to let him referee the game or he would be sent off. Peter says he spoke to him thirty years later. He had no option; they were both in the same car. (We forgive, but we never forget! Are you sure you're not from Lebanon, Peter?)

Peter never agreed with the ranking Sydney referees were given. Too much was made of appearance, style, call it what you will. Too little was made of who missed the knockons, forward passes, etc.

Two reserve grade referees whom I thought were incompetent were promoted to first grade within weeks of my telling the appointments board chairman of my thoughts. (Thanks for the leg-up, Peter!)

When Heaven challenged Hell to a game of Rugby, the Devil had a huge bet on his team even though he had fewer good players. Why? Because he had all the referees.

Finally, Peter refereed a first grade schoolboy game when he was a reasonable player, but not a referee. He had an above average understanding of the laws, but it was bloody terrifying. When he incorrectly ruled a twenty-five yard dropout, instead of a five-yard scrum, he was devious enough to claim the player had lost the ball. It was a lie but it worked. It got those whingeing bloody players off his back. Pretty cunning, eh? Peter thinks he could have made it as a top class referee.

Finally I asked a number of students at the school I teach at why they have become referees. Like most others, they wanted to become familiar with the laws so that they would become better players. They also stated that it was a great feeling controlling a game and helping out the younger players at the school. There are a few that have ambitions to do well and maybe progress to the grade ranks of refereeing in the future. Their biggest worry in refereeing at this stage is being confident in their own ability and handling difficult players. This comes with hard work and a great deal of experience.

# **Summary**

Having perused through the answers of the interviewees and gathered other information not written in this paper, it is easy to see that there is not one true and tried answer to the questions I posed; nor the replies that were given. It can be said that on the whole people become referees and continue to referee because they enjoy the game and feel that they can contribute something each Saturday.

The backgrounds of those that referee are as varied as those that watch the game or play. There is not one particular field that these people come from, as well as which people make the better referee. Each individual brings to the game his/her own style and experience as well as personality that will hinder them or progress them through he ranks to bigger and better things. Also, not all those that referee want to make it a career. There are those, like some players, that do it for the sheer enjoyment and the thrill of being part of a team.

The friendships that are made and the good times that can be had are a major factor for the majority of those that run around each week for the better part of half the year.

There are going to be those that become referees for the wrong reasons, but I feel that they are quickly sorted out and either fall by the side or change their ways. The best things about refereeing for me and, I know, for the majority of those that referee, is that there are avenues to cater for the different styles, ambitions and personalities of a vital part of "the Game they play in Heaven".

Having become an "open game", there is added pressure on those that referee, and time will tell how we, as a group, handle this. No doubt there will be mistakes made along the way and that some referees will be affected in some way; but in the end, it can only make the game stronger and, with that, the referees that administer it. Good luck!