Australian Rugby Union

Level 3 Referee Course

Major Project

Good better best - the difference between Coogee and Twickenham

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First Grade refs and the refs at the International level – the hypothesis

You may well ask, "What is the difference between Coogee and Twickenham?" - a couple of things spring to my mind. Take the crowd. A crowd at Coogee in August is the most astute in Australia. Not only have they read the law book the evening prior to the big match, they are well versed in its application. The crowd at Twickenham on the other hand have spent Friday night fine-tuning their singing voices. In fact it was William Webb Ellis, "…who with a fine disregard for the laws…"

The setting is another example. On a fine winters afternoon at Coogee you can see the coast of the Kiwi's beloved North Island. On a typical winters afternoon at 'Twickers' you are unlikely to see the base of your pint glass.

What about the guy in the middle? Ever thought of the difference between the referee sponsored by Telstra and the referee with IRB plastered across his chest? Sure he has a fancy bit of communication equipment, but how did he get there? What is he doing differently to the guy who just awarded a try in the shadows of the Ella Stand? The whistle sounds the same. He has similar running lines. His positioning for that try wasn't bad either.

So what does this all mean? Anecdotal evidence collated from discussions with referees points to one simple answer. The difference between the referee at Coogee and the referee at Twickenham is mental toughness. Certainly by the time you reach first grade level in Sydney you demonstrate a high degree of refereeing talent. But like any sport, focus, dedication and desire (which encapsulate mental toughness) play a part in propelling yourself to the next level. No revelations there.

The next few paragraphs aim to shed some light on the issue. What *does* it take to make it to the top? Is it more than mental toughness and mental skills? Is it just simply a question of desire - do you dream of listening to Martin Johnston give you advice in the corner at Twickenham, or do you dream of smelling the ocean air at Coogee?

Project background

This project has been undertaken to fulfill the requirements of the Level 3 Referees Course, as run by the Australian Rugby Union. Over a year, candidates are required to complete a series of activities that focus their thinking on the challenges of refereeing the modern game. A key aspect of the program is mental skills – a sub element of the course run by Illan Kogus. Personally this was the most intriguing element of the program and thus I intended it to form the basis of the major project. Alas, this was not be.

In my efforts to answer the burning question above, I decided to survey those I knew in the refereeing community. It was hoped that they would all come back with the same answer – Rob, the difference between you and Stuart Dickinson is mental toughness. It was not to be. Rather a more interesting story unfolded.

Responses to the questionnaire

Question 1

Identify three key development areas for referees starting their junior representative career. By this career I mean minor representative fixtures; those referees doing their Level 3 course.

The recurring response to this question was player empathy and game understanding. Young referees must expose themselves to all things rugby. That means attending local training sessions, talking to players, talking to coaches and fellow referees.

Reference was also made to communication – not just verbal communication but to overall physical presence as a form of communication.

Question 2

As a referee at the international level, what are (or do you believe should be) the qualities of an IRB accredited referee. List only three.

Clearly areas for development in a young referee (question 1) are strengths for referees at the IRB level. Player empathy and communication skills featured heavily. Also, correct decision making under pressure was identified as an additional quality for referees at the IRB level.

In terms of how these elements can best be nurtured, it was simply self involvement. Self involvement through self analysis, being involved in informal discussion groups, listening to others and being receptive to coaches' thoughts and ideas.

Again, as a referee at the international level, what changed in your in refereeing to help accelerate you to the heights of international rugby?

None of the international referees identified anything critical that changed in their refereeing. It was a case of treating each game the same and continuing with honest self analysis and continuous education.

Question 3

As a first grade referee (Sydney club rugby or equivalent), what do you believe it takes for you (personally) to referee at the Super 12 level (or equivalent)?

Mental toughness was a recurring theme for this question - a view that I share. Once young referees have the basic skill set, the elements discussed above can be only be nurtured though game time and further commitment to self analysis.

Question 4

Do you believe age to be an important factor when considering referees for selection at the international level?

The overwhelming response to this question was no – at either end of the scale. A few respondents did however make reference to the realities of trying to get selected for an IRB panel at age 45, for example.

Question 5

As a referee administrator/coach what do you see as limiting factors in the development of young referees?

The key limiting factors identified were:

- Young referees want it all so quickly – they must realise that they need to earn their stripes
- Experience in tough matches
- Changing the mindset from hobby to outright commitment
- Business career
- Ability to make sacrifices
- Ability to listen to coaching advice

Question 6

Should money be an incentive to referee at the international level?

Yes to the extent that referees need to make a living and no to the extent that it should not be a motivation to referee at the top level. This question brought some interesting responses - certainly there needs to some financial recognition to attract and retain top talent. My suspicion is that those motivated by the financial will be eventually be found out by those who are committed to becoming the best international referee.

Question 7

You make it to Super 12 Level, but cannot make it past the IRB 'B' panel. In what circumstances would this be the case?

The responses were split evenly between the more sympathetic, look at Chris Whitaker types and the more hard lined cannot handle the pressure responses. Essentially, hard work and luck will combine to create the opportunities. There was one important point made – the x factor; some simply do not have what it takes.

Question 8

Finally, in your view (one word is sufficient) - what do you believe is the difference between referees at the first grade level and those at the international level?

Each of the responses are documented below:

- Mental toughness and ability to cope with pressure
- Experience
- Dedication
- Man management skills
- Communication skills
- Ability
- Consistency over time
- Game understanding of rugby
- More accurate on most occasions
- Commitment and desire
- Personality

And the difference is…..

Put simply, there is not one factor that *is* the difference between first grade referees and international referees. It is a combination of factors, with mental toughness being one of them. As the response to question 8 indicates, there is a diverse range of views. My belief is that mental toughness and mental skills are an important element in the development of young referees. The benefits of mental toughness are clear - it improves the referees decision making skills, commits the referee to gain the experience required and reduces exposure to pressure during the tough matches required to make it to the top. But what does mental toughness actually mean?

Mental toughness is a referee's ability to stay focussed for the entire game and is reflected in his ability to simply get it right. Mental toughness is difficult to assess and it is best described using a few examples.

Take a high tackle in the first minute of the game that clearly prevents a try being scored. Some referees might say, 'first minute, I will just have chat to him.' Aside from being wrong in law, the referee has taken the soft option – a mentally tough referee would make the decision based on what he saw and not on what he thinks is the right thing to do based on the stage of the match.

Some referees may be influenced by parochial home team support. There may be a tendency to blow 50/50 penalties to the home team early on. Mentally tough referees must be willing to make the hard calls in any circumstances, regardless of home team support.

Mental toughness also manifests itself in a referee's attitude. This includes attitude towards players on and off the field, training, as well as player and referee coaches.

Simply put, a mentally tough referee is focussed referee who is professional and willing to make the tough calls.

In conclusion

The referee's capability document is a complex one. There is no one factor that stands out as being critical over and above any other element. I would be very interested to see the advertisement for an IRB A panel referee in the newspaper – trying to fulfil all the criteria would be very difficult indeed. Like any profession, it is tough at the top, refereeing is no exception.

Contributions

A thank you must go to those who responded to the survey:

Current referees
Andrew Cole, Stuart Dickinson, Andrew Lindsay, Damien Mitchelmore and Bernd Gabbei

Referee administrators and coaches
Peter Marshall, Kim Lees, Brian Kinsey, Bruce Cook, Russell Trotter and Dick Byers

A number of other referees were surveyed but were unable to respond due to personal commitments:

Current referees
Matt Goddard, James Leckie, Dan Cheever and Giulio de Santis

Referee administrators and coaches
Colin High, Ed Morrison and Mick Keogh