# STRESS!

IN RUGBY REFEREES

1994 LEVEL III COURSE
MAJOR PROJECT

ROSS NACEY

# STRESS MAKERS

# STRESS TAKERS

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# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources and Intensity of Acute Stress in Adolescent and Adult Australian Basketball Referees: A preliminary Study.

Angelo N Kaissidis &
Mark H Anshel
Psychology Department
The University of Wollongong

The Australian Journal of Science & Medicine in Sport
September 1993

A Psychological Profile of Top Australian Soccer Referees

Richard Evans
Illawarra Regional Director of Coaching

Sports Coach
April-June 1994

Interview

Mr Terence O'Donnell
Director of Coaching
Footscray District Football League

# INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of research completed over time concerning the physical stresses experienced by athletes during training and competition and the resultant information has been modified to assist rugby referees prepare for and cope with the demands on their bodies.

Conversely sports psycological studies have tended to focus on the demands of competition on athletes and while referees have gained assistance in learning preparation techniques, the mental stresses they experience have not been the subject of detailed research.

Recognition of the lack of information on this topic has prompted other sporting codes, such as basketball and soccer, to commission studies on their own officials and the stresses they experience.

While some of this has been useful to my research, most of the content of this paper will be based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience.

I have developed the topic by firstly defining the various stresses experienced by referees and then by using information from my research I have offered some solutions.

## STRESSED OR STRESSFUL

There are two types of stress affecting referees and the game of rugby.

Pose this question:

Is the referee stressed or stressful? Is he affected by what is happening to him (stressed) or affecting what is happening around him (stressful).

This is an important difference as a referee can be quite relaxed in himself, but can be putting considerable pressure on the players and events around him. Thus he is having an adverse effect on the players and the play; causing frustration, foul play, etc. That is a **stress maker**.

Conversely the referee that is stressed is one who is influenced by the events around him. He will be reacting to play, players, etc in a stressful way; a stress taker.

The stress taker is reacting to stress; the stress maker is causing it.

It is important to make the differentiation before deciding what remedial action should be taken; correct diagnosis to achieve appropriate action.

**If we are wanting to develop effective stress management in Australian Referees, we must train both our Coaches and Referees alike to recognize this important difference.**

For the purpose of this report each stress is treated as a separate topic.

## SOURCES OF STRESS

Tests in other codes:

The first function in developing stress management programs is to define the major sources of stress in Rugby referees.

Following the recognition that stress was a significant factor in the performance of referees, some other codes have conducted studies involving their members to firstly identify the major sources.

Experience in these other codes can assist us to define major sources of stress in Rugby and possibly assist in the development of a similar program for Rugby Union in Australia.

In 1993 **Basketball** Officialdom in Australia conducted a survey of a cross section of their referees in order to learn the major sources of stress.

They defined the following as their major sources:

Abuse by coaches
Abuse by Players
Arguments with Coaches/Players
Threats of physical Abuse
Abuse by Spectators
Working with a partner
Making a wrong call
Controversial call
Mistake in mechanics
Wrong location
Presence of supervisor
Presence of Media
Experiencing and injury
Calling a technical foul

They also noted the age and experience of the referee and developed some conclusions from this information, namely:

- Younger referees were more likely to be intimidated
- More experienced referees had a higher fear of failure; they were more stressed by referees of their own level or slightly lower levels.
- Younger referees were more likely to drop out than older ones although those who adjudicate at a higher level tend to be under more stress than their junior counterparts.

There are slight variances between this survey and those conducted by other codes, for example:

**Soccer (1988):**

Interpersonal Conflicts
Fear of physical harm
Time Pressures
Peer Conflicts
Role-Culture Conflict
Fear of Failure

**American Football (1992)**

Fear of Physical Harm
Verbal Abuse
Pressure Game
Time Pressures
Fear of Failure

- Fear of physical harm was higher than in other codes

- The survey also noted that few referees had the skills required to deal with criticism, arguments and abuse.

By modification of these results here are some suggested areas of stress that could form the basis of a questionnaire for **Rugby Referees**:

Abuse:
Coaches
Players
Spectators
Physical Harm
Foul Play
Fear of Failure
Pressure Games
Injury
Physical Fitness
Making Wrong or controversial decisions
Positional errors
Presence of CAB
Presence of Media
Personal desire for perfection/success

The degree to which a referee will be affected by stress will vary depending on the personal profile of the individual.

## REFEREE PROFILES

You will note that these surveys uncovered offield sources of stress and indeed the individual profiles of the participants give reasons why particular stresses are more acute to some than others.

Similarly the reaction to a particular situation varies dramatically depending on the age and background of a referee.

The conclusion is that there is a value in compiling a profile on referees in each association/union when they commence their careers.

This is possibly the most effective means of commencing a preventative management program. If the results of other codes are true, people of similar age, work and social backgrounds will respond in a similar manner to each of the identified stresses.

Further the experiences of referees who have no trouble with a particular stress can be used to assist those who do.

So lets consider some of these additional factors.

AGE:

There has been a lot of discussion over time on the issue of age.

As the game of Rugby gets faster the need for younger fitter referees increases.

At the top level the acceptable age range for test appointees has reduced by about five years in the recent past.

Presumably this trend will continue and with it the stresses on referees due to their age.

The aforementioned studies have found age to be a major influence on the decision making process. The concerns of younger referees are quite different from older ones.

The basketball survey found, for example, that a younger referee would find spectator abuse and fear of making mistakes major causes of stress. Older referees were more likely to be unaffected by abuse, many finding it a source of amusement and an opportunity to influence the players by making light of it. They found mistakes to be an acceptable part of their game and something to be quickly forgotten in order to avoid a recurrence; and an opportunity to improve their performances by learning by them.

The stresses of older referees in the same survey tended to revolve around the pressure put on them by younger developing participants who were potentially going to take their place in the hierarchy off them.

Thus fitness and fear of injury are more likely stress factors the older a referee. becomes and these are trends that can be possibly easily identified.

Interestingly, the objectives of referees are quite different depending on age. For the young there is the pressure of the desire to improve and 'get up the ladder', a factor less likely in the more mature.

On the whole stress was a greater factor the younger the referee in the surveys completed.

A good comparison in Australia is evidenced in the differences between Australian Rules Football Umpires and Rugby Union Referees.

On the whole at the top level in AFL, umpires are mainly aged between 22 and 32 as opposed to 35 and 45 in Rugby.

The need for youth in AFL relates to the physical requirements with umpires required to cover between 18 and 24 kilometres in a game. The work is more aerobic than that of the Rugby Referee who will only cover 8-12 kilometres in a more 'stop-start' sprint oriented regime.

The differences in stress reaction are quite noticeable with Rugby in my opinion being a clear winner. The incidence of technical decisions and free kicks given to make up for an earlier umpiring error appear to be a lot high in observing AFL Performances. Certainly, in many games the outcome is influenced by the umpire's decisions.

For example, in the Sheparton League in Victoria this year the grand final was decided on a free kick given just prior to the siren sounding in the last quarter. When the siren sounded one team was winning by four points. The free kick was given in front of the posts and the outcome was reversed as a result.

Adding 5 or 10 years to the umpire who made the decision in this instance may not have changed the result. However, all surveys completed recognize that the decision making process in older referees is much different than younger ones.

More mature referees tend to have strategies for coping with a stressful situation. They may, for example, have a mechanism for delaying the decision fractionally to give them time to evaluate rather than react.

The saving grace for AFL is the size of the support base for the code and the acceptance that the umpire does have a big effect on the game; so many umpiring decisions result in points. Three free kicks resulting from points being scored in the third quarter, for example, can be the turning point in a game.

I have had discussions with Metropolitan League Selectors in Melbourne as part of this project.

They are concerned about the stress factor, but more from the viewpoint of losing umpires due to abusive crowds, etc. than from the performance and outcome angles. They have a great deal of power on and off the field and use it to great effect to support their umpires whether they have good games or bad.

In Rugby Union our concerns are obviously quite different. When you are part of the marketing of a game that does not enjoy the support base of other codes as Rugby Referees are then the incidence of outcomes decided by the referee must be very low.

However, the comparison with AFL gives a good incite to the relationship between stress and age at the very top level.

Age is an accepted factor and certainly should form part of any stress research and management programs.

VOCATION:

I am certain that Rugby Referee Administrations have for a long time considered vocation as an important factor in deciding whether a referee can develop to the top level.

The importance of 'man management' in what we do is an indication that work history and experience will influence our on field performances.

Stress Management is something that probably starts for all of us long before we start refereeing.

Our duties at work will range between managing ourselves and our respective workloads to senior positions involving staff , customers and profitability of a business.

Whatever the vocation, we will have to cope with stress in various forms.

In my own case, I have found that refereeing and running a business are very similar. In both cases the whistle or enforcement is the easiest method of getting something done, but more often than not, but is largely a a short term solution, having a number of negative results at the same time. In the longer term most of the stressful situations are best dealt with in a different way.

At work staff management is an area of constant concern as in a service industry your people are your only real asset. Without them you don't have a business.

Thus, in business we are constantly working on our relationships with staff, constantly training our junior managers and supervisors to manage their people better and always looking at ways of self improvement. At a senior level we have to be tolerant of staff who are at different stages of development. Many clients would rather deal with the boss, but this is obviously not possible. So we accept that things are not perfect, are less critical of

junior staff and work hard to assist them improve their performances for our customers.

Refereeing both influences and is effected by this process. In my opinion, running a business is just another game of rugby.

**So how important is vocation to stress management**?

Of the test results I have viewed of other codes, This issue has not been discussed at length.

Its importance right now can therefore only be gauged by considering the vocational backgrounds of our referees.

For example in Victoria we have seven Group I Referees ( by definition: those capable of refereeing at first grade level). All bar one are professional people of which three are senior managers one is a business owner one a consultant and one an anesthetist.

I do not have similar information on the current Australian Panel, but would be surprised if the mix wasn't similar. Those I have seen in their professional environment, have tended to be very good stress managers.

So, there are two advantages in including vocation in stress testing.

1) to identify the effect the job background has and
2) to assist in finding effective training procedures to assist other referees overcome particular problems.

While many people are born with the ability to cope with the situations they find themselves in, most aren't; most either train themselves or are trained by their employers to develop effective stress management strategies.

FAMILY:

Of similar importance to that of vocation, is the family background of a referee.

This is one area that is discussed with most new referees usually in the form of " how does your wife respond to your refereeing".

Whatever the answer, family matters will have an effect on a referees ability to handle the situations he comes across on the rugby field.

For this reason we are all encouraged to maintain a balance at home and to look after the family. I am certain that most referees do their home improvements in the off season and at great speed to ensure they are finished by February.

Certainly, a referee that has everything right at home will be in better condition mentally

when he arrives at the ground to do his match.

Of greater interest to this paper is how a referee copes with pressures at home. **Does the experience of having a family assist us to cope on the field?**

As with the question of vocational background, there is only anecdotal evidence in this case.

In any survey conducted, age would be closely related with the question of family and it would be important not to confuse the results.

However, questions of how we cope with family situations may be of assistance on the field.

In my experience, of the three disciplines (refereeing, work and family) the latter is the most challenging and hardest to get right.

## THE NEXT STEP

Having considered the likely influences on stress, it is important to gather information by way of a survey to decide the specific stress factors influencing referees in our code.

To do this I have devised a survey which I would recommend be further developed and possibly issued around Australia between seasons to enable us to have some meaningful information on the types of stress experienced at various levels of refereeing and the contributing factors.

Once this information is received and evaluated a meaningful stress management program could be developed nationally.

It was my intention when starting my research of this topic to conduct a survey myself.

However, to be meaningful, it needs to be officially sanctioned and conducted in a controlled environment.

All other codes have made them like a test; i.e. at a referees meeting, with a time limit and probably anonymous. It is important that the contributors do not feel that the information will be used against them and complete the exercise honestly.

The enclosed document is my completed article. I have also included a copy of the Basketball Survey by way of comparison.

## SUMMARY

This section of my report has concentrated on the things that stress referees and the factors that assist us cope with our stresses.

The conclusions I have made are largely as a result of information gathered from other codes and anecdotal evidence.

The main recommendation I have made is to conduct a test within the ranks of Rugby Union Referees at all levels in Australia to draw our own set of conclusions idiosyncratic of our code of football.

Following this analysis I further recommend that we develop management strategies to improve our overall ability to cope on the field.

## PREAMBLE

In my introduction to this topic I sought to distinguish between the cause and effect stresses occurring during a game of rugby.

Section I dealt with a referee's ability to cope with the stressful things that effect him on the paddock.

Conversely this section deals with stresses that develop as a result of a the things a referee himself does.

The importance of this distinction is that the remedies are quite different.

In many respects, provided the profile of a referee is right the remedy in this instance is quite simple.

The alarming fact is that many referees are not aware of the stresses they are causing. I am sure that some never discover in a career spanning several years.

The best anecdotal evidence I have of this is my own case history and came when discussing my performances with CAB at a weeklong carnival.

The discussion went this way;

**"...your law interpretation is good, your fitness is excellent, but there is something there that I can't quite put my finger on.....I can't help wondering if , you contributed to or could have prevented some of the things that happened on the field..."**

Funnily, I discussed this situation with some other referees who said that they had similar discussions in the past, but had still not been able to work out what the **something** is and I guess this has a lot to do with our individual natures and why it is important to always consider the profile of a referee in conjunction with his reaction to stress.

So what are some of the contributing factors?

The Soccer referees' Leo Wilson, in his 1990 study describes it succinctly as part of the referee's makeup, i.e.:

**Mental Inclination**
**Body Language**
**&**
**Tone of Voice**

Each has its own input to the stresses a referee can cause in Rugby and therefore an

expanded discussion goes a long way to explaining the stress making side of the officiating process.

## MENTAL INCLINATION

The inclination or attitude of a referee can be either part of his makeup or something that is trained into him.

It basically begs the question of a referee ; "**why are you here and what are you here to do**" . Is a referee's role to dictate or to facilitate, constructive or destructive?

We often talk about **mental strength** on the field and it is obviously a very important attribute, but too often it its confused or used to define a particular mental attitude. Mental toughness does not for example mean inflexability or even strictness and very often I am sure that this is what a lot of referees interpret as strength when strength is in fact our ability to be unaffected by the pressures we and our environments place on ourselves.

It is probable that for every new referee that is introduced to the game there is a different interpretation of what he is there to do. Similarly, before the advent of a national CAB Policy, I am sure that the differences in opinion on this question between coaches were quite diverse.

Whatever your opinion on this issue, the fact remains that mental attitude has a great deal to do with whether a referee is causing stress on the field or diffusing it.

## BODY LANGUAGE

In business the issue of body language has long been the topic of in depth discussions, especially among sales people or those involved in marketing and many of us who face current and potential clients each day are very keen to read their thoughts by their involuntary actions. The famous ones are "arms crossed and sitting upright" means your going to have a real battle convincing me of anything, "eyes to the ceiling" unlikely to be telling the truth, "hands behind head and leaning back" very confident, and so on.

It is recognized that most people read body language and react to it subconsciously and so the truly gifted person can control a conversation with its skillful use. People can be made to relax, made to pay attention or made to feel ill at ease merely by the way the person they are with presents himself to them.

This is very much the case with refereeing. A "laid back" referee for example immediately has the players feeling comfortable because he looks relaxed. Conversely, the referee who looks a bit up tight will make the players feel a little strained dealing with him. Standing erect as opposed to having a slouched appearance will have the effect of conveying these opposites. Because of the speed of the game and the type of job refereeing is, the body language of the man in the middle will come across a lot "louder"

than in everyday life. A simple wag of the finger looks much larger from the players perspective than the referee's.

In the aforementioned Soccer Study, reference was made to the use of space. Soccer referees consider that the distance between referee and player during an on field discussion is of significant importance. They refer to four zones,

The intimate Zone: 0-18 inches
The Personal Zone: 1.5-4 feet
The Social Zone: 4-12 feet &
The Public Zone: 20 feet or more

The use of these "zones" gives a completely different message to the player being spoken to, the rest of the players on the field and the spectators on the sideline according to the soccer example. Up close generally means trouble to any of the people present.

There is little doubt that the way we look or "come across" to players causes a reaction. The more stressed we appear the more stressful we become and the harder it is for us to communicate with players.

The key to the body language question is in finding out what causes it as often it is not the result of an undesirable mental attitude to the game.

The shear concentration of a referee could make him frown, for example and that frowning could have a negative effect on the players; certainly more detrimental than smiling or relaxing the face. However, the cause of the body language, concentration is not negative; it is a positive sign.

So, body language is a matter of training and can be perfected in a relatively short period.

## VOICE TONE

In conjunction with good use of the body is effective use of the voice.

A voice under strain implies a person under strain and therefore of importance to the stress management process on the field.

Rugby referee's use their voices to good effect whether short and sharp, loud or very quiet.

Without further qualification the reader can approximate the impression that each different use will give to the players. While they can all have positive results, misuse can indicate stress, panic or loss of control.

The variance is most important and like body language is a practiced art.

## VERBALS

An unresearched topic (to my knowledge) is the use of spoken language by a referee and its relationship to stress.

I refer to the type and number of words used by a referee to convey his message to players.

Sports psychologists talk about left and right side of the brain in terms of player reaction on a rugby field. The theory is that at a time of high emotion, players will react differently to what they do in a relaxed training atmosphere, often doing the opposite of what the coach has instructed. In elite players this reactionary process is invariably what makes them so good.

The point of this analogy is to ask how a player will respond to what we referees say when he is at a high level of mental pressure and emotion.

Will he react differently to "get your hand off the ball, get your hand off, aren't you listening I told you to get you hand off" as opposed to a simple "hands off!!"

The answer of course is yes, but does the stress level change with the language we use?

My opinion is that it does although my evidence is only anecdotal.

## REMEDIES

The experiences of testing amongst Soccer Referees that I have mentioned have emphasized the importance of appropriate interaction with players on the field.

The Soccer People say that **"making quick and correct decisions is basic, but good judgment and self control are crucial to coping with the diversity of human reactions to those decisions."**

In plain English: by his demeanor a referee has a direct influence on the level of stress occurring in a game of rugby.

Of the various characteristics I have suggested make up the refereeing character, mental attitude is the most important; if attitude is right the rest will follow.

Like Stress Reaction Solutions, the first step in improvement is to identify the characteristics of individuals and the problems they experience.

Profiles of referees at the top level will give us the benchmarks of stress performance; early identification in more junior ranks will provide the areas that need work.

I mentioned that stress induced by a referee is far more easily remedied than is his reaction to difficult situations. It is simply a matter of raising the awareness of what we look like and instructing in the areas of body language, voice, etc.

Most referees respond to this type of advice quite quickly.

What remains therefore is the mental approach required to affect the right refereeing result in terms of player relationships. This requires a longer remedial process, as attitude is normally developed over a long period. If we are confident that referee's want to improve their performances then I am sure that the necessary mental adjustments will occur over time.

The right mental approach is a subject on its own; but briefly, it has to do with defining what we are on the field to do. It is about what people play Rugby for and what spectators go to a game to see, about penalizing things that are important and managing where a penalty can be avoided. These are only examples of a larger mindset that our game now requires of referees and while it involves greater risk, the result is much more rewarding to us as it removes the stresses we place on ourselves and the game we are adjudicating. More importantly it results in a better game for all the other people attending, players and spectators alike.

**SUMMARY:**

In my introduction, I referred to the apparent lack of research into the topic of stress in referees.

This is not to say that we don't have a consciousness amongst our instructors that recognizes the problem. Certainly, having now written about it, I can recall many times during my career when I have been given guidance on an aspect of the game or my performance that was stress related.

I have advocated a stress research program for referees at all levels.

This serves two purposes;
1) to gain a wide ranging knowledge of the things that cause us stress on and off the field &
2) to raise the awareness of stress as a topic for training as important as for example physical fitness.

I conclude by recommending the study and trust that my input has proved beneficial.

**STRESS TESTING**

AGE:.....YEARS REFEREEING:.....CURRENT LEVEL:.....

MARRIED/SINGLE:.....CHILDREN: Y/N

OCCUPATION:.....

SOURCES OF STRESS:

On a scale of 1-10 define your personal reaction to the situations listed below. (Note: a score of 1 means that you do not experience any emotion, a score of 10 means you get very stressed or threatened and scores in between test your level of anxiety.)

Abuse:

- Coaches ☐
- Players ☐
- Spectators ☐

Physical Harm ☐

Foul Play ☐

Fear of Failure ☐

Injury ☐

Physical Fitness ☐

Making Wrong or controversial decisions ☐

Positional errors ☐

Presence of CAB ☐

Presence of Media ☐

Personal desire for perfection/success ☐