

**DEVELOPING A BRISBANE REFEREE-COACHING GROUP
& THE EVALUATION OF THE MENTOR SYSTEM IN 2002**

Introduction

The last three years in Brisbane has seen the significant expansion and formalisation of a referee coaches group. Currently, in 2002, there are 22 active referee coaches with varying degrees of commitment to referee-coaching. The coaches observe, report and comment on games from Under 11 to Premier grade rugby matches each weekend of the season from Friday night to Sunday afternoon. In 2001, 25 active coaches reported on 243 matches and in 2002 to date 22 coaches have written reports on 251 games. In 2001 the group met 8 times over the season for 1-2 hours depending on the focus of the session and in 2002 there have been 6 sessions of similar duration. Attendance has ranged between 15 – 20 referee coaches at each meeting.

Until 2002 referee coaches reported on referees in a random and what could have been described as a “movie critique” manner. A referee coach might see a range of referees over a weekend and not see these referees again for some time. There was no formal monitoring of referees across the Association except those at the top end. At selection time for the finals choices were left in the hands of a few.

In 2002 the QRRA after considerable deliberation adopted a mentor-coach model as well as continuing with the more random approach. It has been a transition period. The program is not unique and has been tried in other Associations. It initially required the identification of referees that had “potential”. These referees were invited to participate in the mentor program and conditions were outlined before they were accepted and made a commitment to be a part of the program. Accredited referee - coaches were also invited to apply for consideration to be part of the mentor system. At the end of the 2002 season, 33 referees out of a possible 180 and 16 out of 22 referee coaches form part of the program. Some referee coaches indicated that they wished to continue with the more random method of coaching as this suited their time constraints and the way in which they wanted to coach.

The referee-coaching group profile, reflects a membership consisting of active senior referees (more than 6 years experience), active premier rugby referees about to make the transition to coaching, recently retired referees (old farts) and those well experienced in referee coaching and the appointment of referees at various levels in and out of Queensland. The referee profile included, apart from the elite, 12 referees from pool 1 (Premier, first grade, colts I, GPS First XV), 11 from pool 2(all other grades, schoolboys and women) and 12 from pool 3(jnr. football). Seven referees declined the offer due to other commitments and most of these did not referee during the season. In hindsight, the referees chosen while meeting the criteria and worthy of being included in the mentoring, were too many. Coaching resources were stretched. The 16 referee coaches each had 1, 2 or even 3 referees to mentor-coach and the advent of premier rugby meant that some senior referee coaches were asked to report on premier games and other mentees were not observed as much. Referee coaches in the mentor program also were randomly reporting on other referees who were highlighted for attention.

This paper will explore and provide information and detail about important considerations in the development of a referee-coaches group based on the Brisbane experience and reflect after 12 months on evaluations provided as feedback from those involved. Perhaps the findings, evaluation and recommendations may be of use to other Associations willing to explore the mentor approach. Associations around the world and within Australia are distinctly different and the acceptance of a referee coaching focus is subject to and relies on the historical and cultural context of the Association. It is perhaps worthy to note here, that referee coaching as distinct from assessment and ranking has been an accepted practice in Brisbane for many years. It has been part of our rugby refereeing culture and carried out without formality until recently. The QRRA have deliberately steered away from public referee ranking. However the mentor-coaching approach can produce problems as will be explained in the evaluation section of the project.

One of the most significant issues to raising the standards of refereeing involves the development of consistency, game knowledge and observation skills amongst referee coaches. There is a much better chance of raising refereeing standards if coaches can relate to the modern game and provide solutions that are consistent with contemporary thinking. In the past too much discussion has been prefaced with, implicitly or explicitly, “in my day” that reflects past achievements and practices that are not necessarily best practice for the present. The referee coach requires an equal or better understanding of player coaching and the game today. There lies the challenge in the education of referee coaches. How do you train referee coaches without 1st grade or representative experience to coach at higher level than they refereed at? It is possible. In short knowledge understanding and practice.

So where to start. The formation and on-going growth of a referee coaches group is significantly influenced by the recognition and self esteem of the group and understanding individual needs. Recognising and addressing needs, education and challenging the ways of looking at referee performance whilst respecting the experience of the individual are what will drive the group and act as a positive force. These are important considerations in the evolution, planning and development. The process is evolutionary and changing culture to bring about change is challenging. It will not happen over night or even in a season.

In 2001 there were 8 sessions of 1-2 hour duration for the coaches group and if there was a focus for the season it would have been “the education of the coaches.” Over the season this was achieved by workshops, law exams, touch judge and video analysis of the major phases of the game – the breakdown, positioning, scrum, foul play and advantage. The group was very diverse in its referee experience. It ranged from a former test referee, national referee appointment chairperson to some that had in recent years only refereed juniors. Early in the season we had had a talk from the national coach regarding mentoring but the group were at that stage not ready to embrace such a big cultural change however that talk layed the seeds for planning and promoted a lot of discussion.

The end of 2001 brought with it much discussion about a new model of coaching for 2002 and a power point session entitled “A New Model 2002”. (Presentation is attached)

2002- Establishing a group identity

Referee Associations around the world were initially set up to provide Unions with accredited officials. Referees were provided with an instant identity. They had uniforms and equipment that distinctly differentiated them from players. Uniforms that promoted identity, their organisation and the associated behaviours that with it. Nowadays the IRB have replaced referee national uniforms at international matches with the IRB strip. One can imagine that some test referees found the transition to the more anonymous strip and the conformity required by a non-compliance list as stifling of national expression. However the IRB have managed to distinguish those referees on the panel and give them a clear identity while allowing for some notional difference.

Australia and I suspect other parts of the rugby world have changed with the advent of coaching. The greater emphasis placed on supporting documentation, analysis of the match and challenging in the one-on-one situation as in other sports such as golf and athletics has been a healthy development. Thus establishing a referee coach group identity of integrity is as important to coaches as it is for the referee. It is a cornerstone and a building block to referee development. An articulated path or opportunity to participate further after retirement from active refereeing is of paramount importance. A group profile needs to be built by establishing an identity through the Association Newsletter, at development nights for referees and through the referee coach group having a strip that distinguishes their tasks and acknowledges their contribution to referee development.

2002 - Contemporary game understanding and knowledge of law

Most referee coaches, like referees, bring with them the “baggage of experience”. The agenda of experience with a dominant personality can be formidable and negative. The expert of experience can be dangerous and small associations can suffer greatly from their kudos and power. The group needs to be empowered. That empowerment relies on the integrity of members and a developing understanding of the modern game. Group formation and development needs to be based on providing similar experiences built up over 2 –3 seasons, access to elite referees of today and regular law updates.

At the elite level, **“Referees are expected to be accurate, play the obvious, have a low tolerance for illegalities, make the tough calls, be calm not emotional, give players what they want and don’t try to manufacture anything”** (Keogh). If this is the Australia focus then how do you ensure that coaching coaches to this?

Perhaps the most significant key to effective coaching is for a group to be trained to be consistently accurate when it comes to say non-compliance indicators. However the issue goes further than that. It is one thing to observe the non-compliance, the other is to establish and articulate why the referee did not see it. Like the golf professional who works on swing it is the slight adjustments in grip and stance that result in accuracy over time. So how do we get a group of coaches to the point where they observe and can accurately articulate non-compliance and assist the referee in finding solutions?

They say a picture is worth a thousand words and this is true for referee coaching. The video gives access to the understanding of non-compliance and if supported with continuous audio and good camera work is a powerful tool to ensuring that even the inexperienced referee who becomes a coach can develop skills to assist the referee. If there is a common experience between coaches then the potential for growth and development is increased. An exercise worth considering is dividing the group say of 15 three ways. A group to observe the non-compliances, a group to observe and track position and a group to do both. Or groups of three do the same.

A New Model for Coaching in Brisbane (Power-point Presentation)

Mentoring (Power-point Presentation)

Non compliance indicators – Use them for coaching

Taking statistics and interpreting them

Foul play

Positional Analysis (Power-point Presentation)

Advantage

Modern game trends and positional analysis

Evaluation & Recommendations for 2003

Evaluation and Recommendations for 2003 and beyond

At the end of the 2002 season an evaluation was carried out with the referees and referee coaches who were involved in the mentor program over the year. Attached to this project is a copy of the evaluation forms sent to coaches and referees. There were 33 referees in the program and 26 responded while 12 of the 16 referee coaches completed the surveys. Below is a summary of the evaluation responses and recommendations for 2003.

Question 1 Reporting (Variations from 3 – 8 observations on referees; 2 – 8 written reports on referees)

There was a difference between the number of observations made by coaches and the number of written reports completed and sent to referees. More observation and verbal feedback were given to referees than written reports. This variation is perhaps an indicator of time constraints, the range of writing skills, educational backgrounds and confidence in identifying issues by referee coaches. In reading the written reports by the coaches many nearly all of the coaches used positional analysis statistics as part of the reports. and many of the referees commented in the later part of the evaluation that they had positional analysis feedback as part of the report which they were appreciated because of its power in providing solutions to some of their problems.

Related Recommendations

- Further work needs to be done with coaches on report writing. Referees clearly expect written reports as a follow-up to the verbal discussion and confirmation of discussion. The coaching group development program should ensure that on-going sessions on report writing are an integral.
- All written reports to be reviewed again in the off season to identify individual referee issues
- One of the conditions to be set for next years program is that coaches are to write a minimum number of reports for their mentee.
- The number of referees and coaches in the program be reduced to ensure quality.
- The practice of the use of positional analysis in report writing be developed and encouraged amongst coaches.

Questions 2 – 4 (Video taping of matches)

The Association under sponsorship from the QRU club purchased equipment that allows the video-taping of matches and the uninterrupted audio of referee communication. Of the 33 mentored referees only 18 were taped in this manner. All 18 received feedback from coaches and all of the referees and coaches remarked on the valuable feedback that they had gained from both watching and listening to their match performance. There were restrictions caused to the number of referees sighted through video-taping due to the complexities of appointments, ground locations, the availability of the volunteer camera operator, aspect and height considerations at the grounds and the availability of mains power.

Related Recommendations

- A second portable semi-professional camera with audio equipment be purchased.
- A second operator identified and trained.
- Steps be taken to try to ensure that all mentored referees and coaches have access to at least one tape during the season and that the both view the tape together and the coach provide supporting evidence of comments in his coaching report.

Questions 5 – 6 (Goal Setting)

All referees established written goals for the season. had written goals that that they had set goals for the season. All but two discussed these goals with their coach. However there were indications from referees that coaches had gone beyond season goals. One had outlined goals for the next 10 years and the Irish Test he wanted to referee.

No question asked about group goals for the coaching group or individual coaching goals

Related Recommendation

- Meeting time be set-aside before the season commences where the mentor –coach program, goal setting with program participants is outlined and discussed. and at that meeting time be set aside to establish referee and referee coach goals for the season.
- The referee coaches group also establish and set goals as a group and individually for the season.

Questions 7-9 (Value of advice & contact)

As expected those referees who were not seen more than twice and given written reports rated the advice from coaches at less than 5. In fact the five referees seen less than twice felt that the program had not benefited them. Apart from these referees contact by phone, e-mail ranged

Question 10 (Ways to improve and support for the program)

Summary of main points made in the comments

- Mentors need to be committed. Active referees not be a part of the mentor program but should and could still coach in the more random manner
- Main focus of coach should be on pool 3 while pool 1 receive only 3 coaching reports.
- Careful consideration be given to who is with who.
- Greater involvement of Panel referees.
- Video-taping is an excellent tool.
- Limit of one referee per coach.
- Perhaps looking to extending the “Pool 3 Advice to other Pools”. Sunday can be difficult
- Pleased that coaches pick referees rather than the other way round.
- Disappointing
- It has provided me with a solid, consistent and informative source for improvement
- Both parties need to be committed
- Consistency in feedback a problem, minimum number of sightings to be set, honesty and frankness in reporting and receiving written reports soon after sightings.
- A more transparent grading system and less of the “Smoke & Mirrors Approach”
- More information about the goals of the program
- Appointments Committee consider appointing all mentees associated with a coach to the one ground
- Improve levels of Communication to referees
- Great steps in coaching have been achieved
- Strongly recommend the continued practice of videoing referees with audio
- Greater commitment by the referee coaches
- Change criteria for referees to join program to be with the potential to reach premier grade rugby
- A more targeted approach to who we coach. Take on fewer referees

Related Recommendations (in no particular order of priority or significance)

- The mentor program should continue in 2003 but be revised.
- Identify from across the Association a smaller group of referees who are committed to self-improvement and have the potential to referee at Premier, 1st grade or at First XV level within 2 – 5 years. Consideration will be given to a demonstrated commitment to the Association during 2002 through regular attendance and participation at training, meetings and not pull-out of appointments be they touch judging or refereeing.
- Prior to the commencement of the season hold a meeting of the mentee referees and mentor coaches to set clear guidelines as to the goals of the program and the commitment required of both groups.
- Upon acceptance by referees and coaches cells of seven members will be formed that have 1 senior coach with a single referee and three junior coaches each to coach 2 referees over the season. The progress of this “cell” of participants over the season is to be monitored by the senior coach involved. This group will meet at least three times during the season.
- At the first meeting of the “cell” the group will set individual goals that will be monitored and evaluated on another two occasions during the season
- As part of goal setting the referees will take part responsibility for their own self-analysis in consultation with the “cell coaches”. Detail of this will be outlined early in the season and monitored.
- Coaches will be required to observe and write reports on their mentees, be they other coaches or referees, in the case of senior coaches, or referees in the case of junior coaches, on at least three occasions during the season.
- The senior coach will observe on at least one occasion during the year the post match interview of one of his coaches and referees. The video may be used.
- The selection of coaches for mentoring should be based on, suitable accreditation, demonstrated commitment over 2002 to the coaching group and satisfactory feedback reports from mentored referees in 2002 and give a firm undertaking of commitment. Coaches unable to meet the selection criteria who wish to coach may do so through the more random method.
- The selection of the referees and coaches for the program will come from a sub-committee whose membership will be decided by the Management Committee but should include at least a referee, coaching group delegate, appointments board delegate and Management Committee delegate. This committee task is to set expectations for those to be involved, identify participants and communicate this to participants. Their on-going task is to review participants during the season and report to the MC.
- Referees accepted into the program be required to take responsibility for some of their own self analysis in consultation with their coach and they also to be involved in the coaching of new referees to the Association.