



Whistle Talk

News from the British Columbia Rugby Referees' Society

Volume 2 ed 3

Big Questions

Lately, the Rugby community has been asking questions about refereeing in BC. Besides the usual “How could he have missed that call?!!!”, the “big two” questions are: ‘Why do we NOT have a referee for our game?’ and ‘Why is the referee doing our game NOT good enough?’ BC is not alone in asking these questions, they echo around the Rugby world.

The answers to these questions are not simple or easy to hear.

Refereeing Rugby is hard.

Not everyone can do it. Not everyone has the right stuff to become a referee. Not everyone has the physical, mental and psychological skills to do the job. I have known people who, despite long experience in Rugby, become lost and disoriented when given a whistle.

Fitness is a must for a referee. They run several kilometers in a game, often at a sprint. Yes, they do not have to deal with the physical hammering on the body felt by players but they are susceptible to injury caused by the distance they run.

Rugby referees make thousands of decisions in a game: What happened? Is it illegal? Does it have any real effect on the game? Has there been enough advantage to let the play go on? Is it a penalty, free kick or scrum? Where should the PK, FK, scrum happen? Does the player deserve a yellow card? Red card? (The 1st three of these questions go through a referee’s mind at every point in the game... even if play is happening properly)

The 3rd question (Does what happened have an important effect on the game?) is one of the special issues that makes refereeing Rugby hard. In most sports a foul is a foul and must be called. If you’re offside in the North American species of football the flag is thrown and the yards marched off... even if you had no part in the play. In Rugby most infractions such as being off-side are only penalized when they change the outcome of the game. This principle is called “materiality” and is responsible for so many of the gray areas in Rugby refereeing.

As it is for any game official, the pressures “to get it right” on a Rugby referee are huge. Not only do referees want to do a good job for their own self-satisfaction, there are 30 players on the pitch relying on them to make the game fair and as good as it can be. Referees have to have the strength of will (some wags call it arrogance) to make their calls and live with the consequences.

The Referee Societies in BC focus a lot of effort on making their members better at refereeing. They meet monthly during the season for workshops, discussions and exercises to improve member's knowledge of the Laws of the Game and refereeing skills. To keep their certifications, members are required to attend these meetings, referee many games and write tests on the Laws. (If you would like to try your hand at one of the tests send me an e-mail... you'll need to get 80%). In each society, there are members who have taken IRB courses on how to coach referees (we seldom "assess" referees any more). These people watch referees, note areas of concern and help them improve their skills. Referees are often videoed and then required to analyze their performance. Each referee's over-all performance is annually graded into 3 general levels: local level (C3, C2, C1), BC level (B3, B2, B1) and Canada level (A). These levels are used as guidelines to assign referees to games, ie. CDI Premier games are assigned to the A and B referees.

Players and fans expect referees to be perfect in their 1st game and get better from then on. The reality is that it takes years of experience to become a good referee. "Newbies" have to see all of the situations that can crop up in a game so they can deal with them correctly. It takes years to deal with the mechanics of refereeing before they can grapple with the finer points. Take a look at the people refereeing BC's top games. They refereed for 5 to 7 years in lower divisions before they got called to the Premier level. In 10 years, the referee of your club's Div 3 games could be called by the IRB !

Referees are treated badly.

Lord knows, Rugby referees are better off than hockey and soccer counterparts. (You-Tube is full of examples of these poor referees running for their lives). It seems to be part of the culture of hockey and soccer that players, coaches and fans have the basic human right to rip into their referees as hard and often as they wish.

Traditionally, that feeling of "entitlement to abuse" has not been part of the Rugby culture. Still, at times the members of the Rugby community move from "fair comment" about the referee to personal, venomous attacks. Referees have to put up with fair comment ("that pass was forward!") but no one should be harassed in a vigorous, hate-filled way. No sane person would continue to referee if weekend after weekend they felt gutted by the response of the players, coaches and fans. (An interesting exercise is to replace "referee" in the preceding sentence, with "play for a club")

In the past years a number of people who were active referees, walked away because of the treatment they receive. Just as concerning, unknown numbers of people don't even try refereeing because of the vitriol they see heaped upon active referees.

When faced with their actions, most people who abuse referees say they are sorry and just got caught up in the moment. They even will acknowledge that their lost focus (whether as a player or coach) ultimately only hurt themselves. Unfortunately their remorse often doesn't translate into a real change in behaviour. It's only when they try to referee that they come to deeply understand the effects of their abusive ways.

There are mechanisms in the Laws of the Game and the BCRU regulations that can be applied to people who abuse a referee. Referees can issue penalties and cards. The BCRU Discipline Committee can hand out suspensions. While these sorts of punitive, reactive methods might stop some people, they do little for the overall Game or life of a referee.

Clubs and the Unions don't care about referees

This may be putting the point a bit strongly BUT clubs and the Unions are really focused on growing the game and increasing the number of players. Their time and thoughts are on how to run the leagues, increase the competition, recruit players, and develop the high performance side of the game. Referee development is way down the list of priorities.

The clubs and the Unions do not see that they have a major role to play in the development of referees. They don't see that they have a responsibility to educate players on a career path in refereeing. When referees talk to clubs about recruiting new referees, they say "its your problem". The reality of the situation is that referee societies do a very good job of training and developing referees ONCE they join a society. The problem is finding out who would make a good referee.

Players see their career only in terms of playing the game... 'Will I make the 1st team?' 'Can I play for BC?' 'Can I be selected by Rugby Canada?' Few if any players see that they could have a career as a referee leading them to the national and international levels. Ask most players and they will say that they might referee once they get too old or too hurt to play the game. Referee societies have to work very hard to persuade a young person to begin refereeing. Few women become referees. Most who begin a family have to drop out of Rugby all together... the time commitment is too onerous. Few realize that refereeing = NO Tuesday/Thursday practices, just some personal fitness training and a couple of hours on Saturday.

The referee societies have, in the past, tried to gain more members by increasing the number of people in BC who are certified referees. There are currently almost 500 IRB certified, carded referees in BC. (144 people's certification lapsed on Dec 31, 2012 !) Yet only about 90-100 of them are available on any given Saturday (a number that hasn't really changed in the last 10 years). The other 400 certified people are players, coaches or people involved with the school game. Even the 100 or so active referees are not available every weekend that games are scheduled. Family, work and injury all mean that we often don't have enough referees for a weekend's games.

So, running lots of courses isn't helping us get more referees on the pitch on Saturday. The referee societies' Plan B is to focus our efforts on people who will become active referees. Who are these people? The referee societies don't know. BUT the clubs do! They know the people who are drifting away from the game, who know and love The Game and who have the right stuff to be a referee.

It is now time for clubs and unions to step up and take part in the efforts to recruit and retain referees. They need to educate their players on the referee's career path. They need to encourage their members (with the "right stuff") to take up refereeing. They have to make it known that their club will not tolerate any player or coach who abuses a referee. They have to make it known that their club's fans appreciate and welcome referees (even if they won't always agree with their decisions). Clubs have to realize that these actions are in their own best interest and in the bigger interest of The Game.

Rugby's "Urban Legends" - 2

Rugby has many myths.... things that players, fans and {blush} some referees believe to be true... but aren't. Here a few. Read the description and figure out what you believe the referee should decide. Is the legend true or a myth?

- 5) Your opponents have kicked the ball high and you make a brilliant catch just inside your own goal area. Rather than dotting the ball down you show great flair and belief in open rugby by passing the ball back to your fullback near the dead-ball line. While a little surprised, the fullback catches and then kick the ball 40m up the field. As soon as the ball is kicked you set off up the field because you know that you can't be off-side inside your own in-goal.
- 6) You're playing #10 for your side. Your opponent's #10 has the ball and decides to exert their physicality by running you over. You skillfully avoid being knocked down and instead, remain on your feet, grab them by the jersey and push them down to the ground. You end up on your opponent's side of the tackle with a death grip on your opponent's jersey. You let go of the jersey, and because you tackled your opponent, you reach down, grab the ball and flip it to one of your teammates.
- 7) The ball is passed to you about 5m from your own goal line. Rather than kicking ball into touch, you attempt to pass it one of you props. Unfortunately the ball sails over their head and into your in-goal. Before your shocked prop teammate can turn and chase it, your opponent's flanker sprints by and dives to score the try. As the fates would have it the ball bounces as the flanker dives, ricochets off their head and out the back of the in-goal. Because your opponent put the ball into touch in your in-goal, you gleefully grab the ball and head to the 22m line to take the drop out.
- 8) Your opponent tries to kick the ball up the field but only succeeds in popping it up high in the air. You leap gracefully into the air and cleanly catch the ball. Immediately some of your teammates and some opponents (who were on-side at the kick) latch onto you and a titanic maul forms. Neither side is able to push the maul or gain control of the ball. The referee blows the whistle and you fear the worst... the "use it / lose it" rule will mean your opponents have an attacking scrum on the spot.

See the decisions below.

If you have any situations or questions about the Laws of the Game, send them along.

Decision 5) Option to the opponents: penalty kick 5m from the goal line or scrum 5m from the goal line, in line with where you were standing. The sanction for being off-side on kick is, scrum where the ball was kicked or penalty kick where you were offside... since both are in-goal, their mark is on the 5m line. The Law says you're off-side if you are in front of the kicker and makes no mention of which part of the field. So you must be put outside before chasing the ball even if you're in-goal. (See Laws 11 and 22)

Decision 6) penalty kick for your opponents. Though your opponent was tackled, you are not the tackler (despite putting them to the ground) and thus you have no rights to the ball. In this scenario, there has been a tackle without a tackler... weird huh?. The Law defines a tackler as a player who takes the ball carrier to the ground AND ends up off their feet too (ie. on the ground). As you stayed on your feet, you must move around and come to the tackle through the gate on your side before playing the ball. (See Law 15)

Decision 7) 5m scrum your opponents put-in. The key point in this situation is who put the ball into the in-goal, not who made the ball dead. If the ball becomes dead after the attackers put it into the in-goal, the game restarts with a 22m drop-out. If you put the ball into your own in-goal there will be a 5m scrum (opponent's put-in after it becomes dead). (See Law 22)

Decision 8) Set scrum, your put in. This is the exception to the maul "use it / lose it" rule. If a maul forms immediately after the ball is caught from a kick (that is not a kick-off or 22m drop out) and the maul is unsuccessful, the team, who caught the ball before the maul formed, gets the scrum put-in. (See Law 17)