

# **Tackling Abuse of Officials: Attitudes and Communication Skills of Experienced Football Referees**

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## **Abstract**

Many Australian and overseas sports bodies are experiencing difficulties retaining referees at the grass roots level, especially young referees. Abuse and aggression from players and spectators are the most commonly given reasons for referees leaving. This paper uses in depth interviews to explore the way a small sample of experienced, successful football (soccer) referees think about and deal with abuse and aggression.

Experienced referees ultimately judge their own performance by the correctness of their decisions and application of the rules. Central to experienced referees' communication is a deliberate projection of calm and confidence in themselves and their decisions.

Player abuse is perceived to be driven by frustration, disappointment and partiality. Referees adapt their response according to situation. They articulated an extensive repertoire of verbal and non-verbal techniques for enhancing player acceptance of decisions, and dealing directly with player abuse and aggression.

Spectators are generally considered to be partial, poorly positioned to judge, and lacking in understanding of the rules. By focusing on the game and reminding themselves of their own expertise, referees are able to 'block out' most spectator abuse.

Some of the attitudes and skills of successful referees may be passed on to inexperienced referees through explicit teaching, practising communication skills, and performance evaluation systems. Their strategies for projecting confidence and enhancing acceptance of decisions may be transferable to other professions and situations.

**Keywords:** Referee, Retention, Communication, Abuse

## **A Personal Reflection on Early Refereeing Experiences**

*My first game was a 'Ladies C Grade' fixture on a freezing night, a good fixture for a new referee because it would be played at a gentle pace in a competition known for its good sporting conduct. I left work later than I had intended and had to put my uniform on when I arrived at the ground. Five minutes before kick off, as I scratched around in my bag looking for my pen and whistle, managers were asking me for the official 'match record card' which hadn't yet arrived at the ground. I was reflecting-in-action that I needed to be earlier and more organised for future games.*

*In the interests of establishing an air of authority I had planned to be in the centre of the field with my assistants at kick off time, whistle the teams to the centre for a jewellery check, coin toss and pre match talk. As it turned out the teams were in the centre before me, and as soon as I arrived we tossed the coin. My assistants did the jewellery check and I hurriedly, and to no-one in particular, said something about playing fair and having a good game. Fortunately it all slowed down after I blew the whistle for the game to start! Be organised!*

*Five minutes into the game one of the red team's players, in the penalty area and going towards goal, was sandwiched and felled by two of the white team defenders. I immediately blew my whistle and signalled for a penalty. Immediately the response from the two defenders was 'she ran into us and*

*fell over'. Others on the white team also said they felt the decision was harsh. I said that it was clearly a foul and a penalty. The penalty was taken and scored.*

*There were very few heavy tackles and fewer fouls in the game, but those that were committed were by and awarded against the white team. The red team stayed just within the rules of the game, but I sensed that the players and crowd felt I was showing bias when I started getting comments like "It has to cut both ways". "There are two teams here ref". My confidence in my own decisions started to waiver. I began to wonder if I had blown the whistle for the penalty too immediately (had I allowed time for a properly considered decision?), and questioned whether I had seen the penalty correctly. I noticed myself looking for fouls by the reds so that I might award something for the whites and at least appear to even the ledger. The reds continued to play within the rules and I didn't even the ledger at all, apart from twice allowing the whites to rethrow the ball when I could have given a foul throw over to the reds.*

*At half time I joined the assistant referees in the middle of the field. As I approached, one of them, aged 14, said "What about those idiot defenders saying it wasn't a penalty – what do they expect when two of them hack her down. I've never seen a more definite penalty". Instantly my confidence in my decision making was restored.*

*Some of the comments from the players and crowd continued through the second half of the match, but I was unperturbed because I had stronger belief in my own judgement and neutrality. After the game I was told that the loss meant the white team were out of the semi finals.*

The personal narrative above was written by the author two weeks after officiating his first full football match at the age of 44. It is used here to give the reader an insight into a referee's experience of pressure from spectators and players, albeit relatively low level pressure (Markula and Denison, 2005). It shows a vulnerability to dissent and abuse that led the referee to doubt his own judgement. This contrasts with research with experienced football referees. One study found that many have attitudes to abuse and dissent that help them to externalise the causes of, and avoid being influenced by, abuse and pressure (Neave and Wolfson, 2003). Mellick et al found that elite level rugby and football referees employ a range of communication strategies that enhance player acceptance of decisions and influence those involved in the game (2005). What do inexperienced referees have to learn or become to deal effectively with abuse and aggression?

### **Communication and Aggressive Behaviour in Different Settings**

Referees are tasked with ensuring that the rules of the game are observed by the teams playing in the match. The world's best known football (soccer) referee Pierluigi Collina says the most important quality a referee can have is the courage to decide and take difficult and important decisions 'even when it would be easier not to' (Collina, 2003).

The prevention and management of aggression is a concern in many professions and civil settings where decisions are made and communicated. The perception of justice has been linked to lower levels of student aggression and hostility in a study of US college classes. In particular, student perceptions of procedural justice (belief that the evaluation process was fair) were found to be more important than distributive justice (the outcome or teacher decision) (Chory-Assad and Palsel 2004). If this notion is applied to the football context, players will be more accepting of decisions against them

and their team if they perceive that the decision is made in accordance with the rules and that the rules are being consistently applied. Referees might enhance perceptions of fairness if they communicate links between their decisions and the rules, and to other incidents and decisions in the game. In the context of mental and other health care, Duxbury distinguishes the focus of three models for explaining and managing aggressive patient behaviour. Insofar as the health care context can be transposed to football matches, the staff/patient relationship may be applied to the referee/player or referee/spectator relationships. Duxbury (2002) says that an 'internal model' views patient variables as the cause of patient aggression and violence. In mental health, patient variables studied have mostly been age, gender and mental illness. An 'external model' "directly opposes the internal model and highlights the impact of environmental factors upon patient aggression" (327) including space, privacy provisions, timing and overcrowding. It also includes staff characteristics such as gender, experience, training and seniority. The 'situational model' is multidimensional, covering the internal and external factors as well as combinations of factors, and the interactions between staff and patients. She says that despite evidence showing the complexity of aggressive behaviour, lending support to the situational model, the internal model has dominated research efforts because of the relative ease of isolating patient variables for study.

The internal, external, or situational focus that health care services use to explain aggressive patient behaviour influences the strategies they use to manage it. While staff tend to have an internal, patient focus the result is the use of a narrow, reactive and sometimes inappropriate range of strategies (especially chemical and physical restraint) for managing patient aggression and violence. She argues that a multiperspectival focus on internal, external and situational factors will yield strategies that prevent and manage aggression more effectively (2002). A study of patient violence and aggression in three mental health wards found that patients and nurses differed in their perceptions of the causes and solutions. Patients attributed aggressive behaviour largely to environmental conditions and poor communication, and they advocated training in nurse communication skills to improve management. Nurses attributed aggressive behaviour mainly to the patient's mental illness, and suggested organisational solutions (Duxbury and Whittington, 2005).

The parallels between referees and hospital staff as authority figures tasked with making final decisions will not be examined at length here. However the final discussion will consider referee attitudes to player abuse, and communication skills, in terms of internal, external and situational focus.

### **Aggression and Referees**

Referees routinely experience dissent and abuse and other forms of aggression at all levels of match. They experience hostile reactions to their decisions and aggressive attempts to influence them from players, coaches, parents and spectators. Abuse of sports officials is widely understood to be the main reason for a decline in the number of sports officials in Australia (ASC, 2004) and other countries. In 2003/4 the Australian Sports Commission funded a national public education campaign to discourage abuse of officials (ASC, 2004).

Although there have been many investigations dealing with sports fan and other aggression in sports, "... there is a lack of studies that have focused on the situation of sports judges/referees/umpires exposed to aggression

(Friman et al, 2004, p653). Little is known about the reasons for aggression and abuse, the place of official abuse in cultural practices, situations and strategies that lead to or prevent abuse, the outcomes of abuse for those involved, or the relationship between abuse and decisions by referees to discontinue refereeing.

Many of the research that focused on referees and pressure or aggression have been done by psychologists using various forms of self-report by experienced referees. Studies have identified individual referee differences in perceptions of (Friman et al, 2004) and response to (Folkesson et al, 2002) aggression and abuse, and high levels of self-confidence among experienced referees that help them to externalise and cope with abuse (Neave and Wolfson, 2003). Explanations advanced for the abuse of officials include lack of respect for authority figures, young people imitating professional sport role models (NASO, 2002), spectators acting-out their feelings and frustrations (in Friman et al, 2004), and excessive importance of sport to the identity of small communities (in Friman et al, 2004; NASO, 2002).

Referee skills in communication have been incidental to previous research findings, rather than the focus of the research. This paper reports a preliminary, exploratory study of successful football referees' attitudes towards, and communications skills for dealing with, abuse from players and spectators. The purpose of the study is to gain insights that might help with the training and development of inexperienced referees, many of whom are leaving refereeing. The next sections review the problems of abuse and referees leaving, and the findings of interviews conducted for this study.

#### **Abused Referees are Leaving**

Elite football in Australia has recently established the successful national A-League, entered the Asian confederation, and qualified for the World Cup finals. These achievements are likely to result in a surge in grass roots football participation, and an expanding need for referees. But football, like many other sports in Australia, Europe and North America at the non-professional level, has problems retaining officials. Australia's largest state (NSW) loses and has to replace approximately 25% of its referees each year (Oke, 2002; Oke, 2005). An FFA survey of state referee bodies identified abuse of officials, poor club and association attitudes to the safety and protection of referees, and poor retention of experienced and inexperienced referees were their largest concerns at the grass roots level (Lorenc, 2005). An Australian Sports Commission survey of a random sample of Australian households suggested that abuse in non-professional sports is a frequent and increasing in occurrence in non-professional sport in Australia (2004:9), and that 77% of those involved in non-professional sport are very or somewhat concerned about abuse of officials (2004:11). Instances of abuse were most commonly observed at AFL games, followed by soccer, rugby, league, rugby union and netball (2004:15). Although the majority of people (81% of people attending, playing in or officiating at non-professional sport) believed abuse of officials is never acceptable, 16% believed that abuse of officials is sometimes acceptable, and two per cent believe abuse is always or mostly acceptable. Three per cent of those involved in sport as players, officials or spectators admitted abusing (insult or violence) officials in the previous 12 months (2004:19).

Studies have found that aggression directed at referees commonly results in referees losing concentration, performance, motivation, and doubting their

own decision-making (Friman et al, 2004), and that the effects are worse for younger referees (Folkesson et al, 2002).

You do get affected and if you have no prior experience, it will nearly kill you. I was almost dead after a specific game, I was feeling sick (From Friman et al, 2004:664-5)

Abuse is experienced by referees of all ages, but young referees have been found to be “notably more exposed to occasions of verbal aggression” (Folkesson et al, 2002:322) and players are more likely to try to obtain advantage with younger referees (Oke, 2005; Friman et al, 2004).

The transition of football (soccer) referees from inexperience to experience parallels development in other fields that require practitioners to deal with aggression and abuse, such as teaching, policing, nursing and many front-line public sector positions. However the issues of abuse may be more acute in sports officiating for several reasons. The sports field is a forum for heightened physical and emotional stressors (Folkesson et al, 2002) and levels of dissent and direct challenge to the authority figure may be higher. For many referees, organisational back-up is not readily available if control is lost. Training for sports officiating is often counted in hours, not months or years as it is for most professions, and the trainees are often as young as fourteen.

Drawing from definitions used by Friman et al (2004), Folkesson et al (2002) and a survey by the Australian Sports Commission (2004), this paper understands abuse as verbal (including insult, threats, swearing, criticism, dissent) and non-verbal behaviours directed at referees which the referee experiences as unpleasant.

### **Previous Research with Experienced Referees on Abuse and Pressure**

Some referees are much less affected by dissent, abuse, threats and violence than others. Experienced referees often employ strategies for coping with and handling aggression and other on-field situations. Some report dealing effectively with aggression by ignoring or “keeping it out”, others by staying cool while confronting and dealing with the perpetrators, and others by reminding themselves not to take it personally (Friman et al, 2004).

A British study found that a sample of 63 experienced referees (average age 40 years and ranging from 4-25 years refereeing experience) displayed a range of coping mechanisms that made them highly resilient to criticism and verbal abuse (Neave and Wolfson, 2003). The referees believed that dissent and abuse were much more likely to result from people not understanding the rules of the game, and bias towards their own team, than from real referee errors. The referees reported low levels of stress from the physical and psychological demands of the game and high levels of optimism and confidence in themselves before and after games. Their confidence was reflected in an ability to reflect positively on their own mistakes, including reminding themselves of all the good games they referee, and that their errors are rare. When asked to compare themselves with other referees they showed a high level of self-confidence, scoring themselves higher than the majority of other referees in terms of honesty, decisiveness, confidence, knowledge of the rules, reading of the game, and fitness (Neave and Wolfson, 2003).

The Neave and Wolfson study paints a picture of successful referees having a range of internal strengths and mechanisms for coping with dissent and abuse - including a belief that most abuse is beyond the control of

referees, and is not to be taken personally – and very high confidence in their own ability and decision-making. This is consistent with findings from a study of elite level rugby and football referees, and best practice in referee communication of decisions. Mellick et al say that there are “few other societal roles wherein an individual accepts the risk of being held accountable for decisions made with such frequency”, and that mishandling the communication of decisions can lead to stress for referees and other participants (2005:43). They found that elite referees communicate decisions effectively by engaging the offending player in a decision interaction, projecting confidence in the decision, and promoting perception of the decision as fair. They identified seven main interpersonal verbal and non-verbal actions that influence the quality of the communication of decisions: whistle; gaze; posture and movement; hand/arm signals; verbal explanation; control; style and composure; and time management (Mellick et al, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

The aim of this study was to explore the way experienced, successful football referees think about and deal with abuse and aggression. An open ended approach to gathering data was used to answer two broad research questions:

- What are the attitudes of successful referees to criticism, abuse and aggression?
- What communication strategies and techniques do successful referees use to deal with abuse and aggression?

### **Methodology**

The author held discussions with senior refereeing officials, the NSW Referees Development Officer (Wes Oke) and Australia’s National Refereeing Manager (Richard Lorenc), when gathering background information for the study. The findings report three subsequent in-depth interviews conducted in March 2006. Two were conducted face to face, and one on the telephone. Three active high level referees were selected as examples of successful practitioners. Each has refereed at the lowest levels of the sport where matches are played with very small audiences, and at very high levels of football in Australia where their practices and decisions are openly accountable to large live and televised audiences. Each had officiated more than 200 professional or semi-professional games, and had been refereeing since their teenage years. Two had been refereeing more than 20 years, one for 16 years. Interviewees were all male aged in their thirties. All had a tertiary degree.

### **Interview Guide**

The interviewer had no previous relationship or established rapport (apart from asking permission in advance for a recorded interview) with the interviewees, and the interview guideline was structured to take the interview through several stages. Interviewees were advised that the study was about ‘referee communication and reactions to aggression’, and given assurances of confidentiality. The first questions were straightforward, non-controversial questions (Silk, 2005) about length of experience in refereeing, age, education, and employment outside refereeing (unlike elite players, elite referees are semi-professional).

The second section asked very open ended questions designed to allow interviewees to speak about general themes relating to refereeing, without tainting their responses with preconceived ideas (Silk, 2005) about abuse or referee communication strategies. (What is it about refereeing that

you like? What are the worst aspects of refereeing? What makes a good referee? Tell me about poor refereeing – what makes it poor?).

The third and longest section of the interviews used a standardised open-ended interviewing approach (Silk, 2005) as the interviewer imposed, or sought to explore in greater depth, preconceived themes deriving from previous literature and relating to the research questions (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). The nature of the responses to most of these questions was still “left open to the individual being interviewed” (Silk, 2005). These started with general questions about communication strategies (What do you think is the most effective way to communicate decisions on the field? Do you have special techniques?), followed by probing for information about perceived audiences, specific techniques, and perceived pressures on decision making. The questions then moved to questions about abuse and aggression, sources, perceived reasons, and factors that might affect abuse of referees such as the reputation and age of the referee. The last questions asked about their memories of teenage refereeing, and advice they would give to young referees. As anticipated, many of the preconceived topics were raised by the respondents themselves in the very open ended second stage of the interview. The interviewer took care to adapt the line of questioning while covering all of the preconceived topics relating to the research questions.

### **Findings**

#### **RQ.1. What are the attitudes of successful referees to criticism, abuse and aggression?**

Interviewees attend more to abuse and aggression from players and coaching staff, than from spectators. This is consistent with Folkesson’s finding that referees find player and coach aggression harder to cope with than spectator aggression (2002). Physical presence plays an important role in referee attitudes to abuse.

*It’s a little bit easier when the people can’t get directly at you, but when you’ve got a player in front of you demanding an explanation or demanding some sort of justice you’ve got to be able to speak to them and come up with some retort that pacifies them, satisfies them, explains it to them.*

Two of the referees mentioned that at lower levels of the game, where “you might be in some paddock in Pagewood and there is just a rope between you and 2,000 people”, angry spectators and parents raise security concerns that are intimidating for referees.

#### **Player abuse - Frustration and disappointment**

They felt that abuse mostly arose from player frustration and disappointment. These in turn derive from their team losing or performing poorly, and important referee decisions – such as players being sent off and penalty kicks - going against their team. Important decisions were described as catalysts for outbursts of abuse. Consequently the interviewees were very aware of the importance of ‘selling their decisions’, to promote player understanding and acceptance of the decision, and minimise disruption to the game.

They also talked about player perceptions of referee mistakes and bias, and to a lesser extent actual referee mistakes. Two referees mentioned actual and perceived non-intervention by referees, especially in instances of dangerous play, as important triggers for abuse.

*I think it comes from frustration, and it comes from the referee not intervening when they should. If there’s a late tackle that wasn’t pulled up, and it’s hurt the player, then they can get aggressive and abusive*

*towards the referee .. Or if for example there's two players who are getting frustrated with each other, two opponents, and the referee doesn't intervene to draw a line somewhere and stop it.*

Some players are much more likely to be abusive than others, and abuse and pressure from players takes many forms. They described instances of players talking and criticising, yelling, swearing, waving, running at, and surrounding them.

### **Player abuse - Constant chipping away**

Two of the interviewees were quite certain that some, but not a majority of, coaches, teams and players use dissent and abuse in a deliberate way to influence the referee's decision making in favour of their team. They maintained a general awareness of attempts to create uncertainty in the minds of referees and unsettle their confidence in decision-making. One reported instances where players had been encouraged to intimidate the referee by mobbing at critical decisions. Otherwise they had little knowledge of the extent or specifics of orchestrated attempts to undermine referees on-field.

One referee said that he seldom experienced angry outbursts of abuse directed at himself. But he, and another referee, said some players at all levels of football are "constantly chipping away" during games with comments and claims that suggest the referee is biased towards the other team, and should try to even things up.

*I think they use it to try and influence your decisions and influence future decisions. "You're giving us nothing", and they can say that quite aggressively, but the reality is that you may very well have been giving them free kicks and cautioning other players.*

### **Spectator abuse - Partial and ill-informed**

Referees acknowledged that their own mistakes cause some of the abuse they receive from spectators, but thought most spectator abuse and criticism resulted from spectators' partiality for their own team, poor judgement, and ignorance of the rules. Their thoughts on spectator abuse echoed the attitudes of Neave and Wolfson's (2003) and Friman et al's (2004) findings in Europe.

*people don't understand the game, they don't understand the off side rule and they can't see it from the referee's perspective. They're looking from 200 metres away on an angle. The assistant referee is looking dead set straight on.*

*from a spectator's point of view, abuse can come simply from the fact that you're the referee and their team's losing. They think, they appear to think, that their team is losing because of the referee.*

One said referees have to get used to "the out of control abuse, the random abuse not directed at you from a player but maybe from somewhere in the grandstand. That's been part of the game since the game was invented".

*you can tell your mind, 'I'm going to shut that out, this person knows not what they are talking about. They have not a clue'. You have to tell yourself 'I'm the man in the middle, we're in the black, I know what I'm doing and I'm not going to listen to that'. You have to .. tell yourself that week in and week out when you go out there.*

During top level games in large stadiums, they are aware of the pressure from "50000 people who are booing and whistling at you", believing that with enough noise and protest they might influence decisions in favour of their team.

One said that spectator pressure might influence referee decisions, but all were determined that it would not affect them. Conscious that the most important measure of performance is the correctness of decisions, the referees felt they were able to shut out spectator noise and abuse by concentrating their attention on the game. One said that in a game watched by 50000 people he made several controversial decisions. After the game he realised that he had only been aware of the crowd once or twice during the 90 minute match.

### **Learn from mistakes**

Wolfson and Neave identified experienced referees' positive attitudes to mistakes as a skill that helps referees cope with the pressures of football (2003). Each referee in the present study stressed the inevitability of mistakes, and the importance of having a constructive attitude to learning from them.

*If you cannot accept that you've made a mistake you're never going to be a good referee.*

*if you do have a bad game you have to come off and say yes, 'I had a shocker'. An average referee would come off and blame the players or the coaches.*

They felt that blindness to one's mistakes is an obstacle to improvement for all levels of official. Each referred to the value of being able to debrief openly with assistants and inspectors after the game, for the purposes of discussing and learning from match incidents. One related an incident in a very important recent game. Players on one team were very aggressive and abusive after a tackle they felt should have been called a foul. The referee said "If I've made a mistake, I've made a mistake. But from where I was I thought that the ball was touched". The players accepted his intent and calmed down.

### **Personally, but not to heart**

Experienced referees avoid taking criticism and abuse 'personally', and feel that people who take criticism personally don't last long as referees (Friman et al, 2004; Folkesson et al, 2002). In the present study all said it was important not to take abuse during the game personally. One said his resilience to abuse and criticism had grown with experience and success as a referee.

*When I first started I think I took criticism more readily and personally than I do now. Most of the time it's water off a duck's back.*

*I never take it personally, I think people that do take it personally don't stay in the game.*

Interviewees live with the accountability that comes with large audiences, TV critics and slow motion replays of critical incidents. They said they do attend to opinions after the game, and distinguished between justified and unjustified criticism. They were disappointed when they made mistakes, but, in different ways, tried not to let criticism overcome them.

*I go back to see if the criticism is justified or not. And if it is I'll say 'Well even though I may not like it, I really did stuff that one up'. If they're criticising just for the sake of criticising and I know that I have got it right, I couldn't give two hoots what they say.*

*I tell myself it doesn't matter. I've got a family to go home to, I've got a good job, I don't let it worry me. I just don't take it personally.*

*I take it personally in that of course I was the person that made that mistake so it's an attack on me personally.. I take it personally but not to heart, I don't know if there is a difference.*

*you know a certain type of personality will say 'no worries, they can say what they like'. But some people do take it very personally and that's why there's such a high turnover of referees.*

## **RQ.2 What communication strategies and techniques do successful referees use to deal with abuse and aggression?**

Each said they consciously communicate to their assistants, the spectators, coaching staff and substitutes.

*You want them to see that you're in control, and that you've taken action. You want them to see that you've seen a foul and you've waved the player on, that's a critical one. You don't want spectators to think that you're missing anything. So no hand signals for foul play makes people in the crowd angry, not only the players. 'Yes the referee's seen the foul but he's allowing play to continue'.*

### **Appear to be in control**

The appearance of calm and control is extremely important. They use numerous strategies to promote the perception that they are in control of themselves and the match. From first impressions to the end of the game, each referee emphasised the importance of appearing confident, but not arrogant. Before the game, referees manage their appearance and interactions in ways intended to create an impression of professionalism. Head and body positions, haircut, uniform and even shoe shine were mentioned as helping the desired impression.

*A confident and approachable person .. Rather than someone who is arrogant or aggressive. It certainly does help. And during the game you convey yourself as someone who is firm but fair, and not aggressive. I think that helps also.*

In the emotional football atmosphere, with noisy crowds and players moving and interacting all around, referees are under constant pressure to make accurate split-second judgements and implement decisions fairly. Referees want to be seen to be confident in the decisions they make, believing that player perceptions of referee uncertainty will undermine the referee's influence, create tensions and diminish control. Even when not entirely sure of decisions, it's important to appear calm and confident.

*If you're confident and seem to know what you're doing - even if that might be the furthest thing from the truth - if you appear to know what you're doing and you're confident in conveying - 'Yes that's a free kick. That's a yellow card' - The players are more likely to accept it. I try and make sure that those looking at me see from the outside that I'm not affected by the pressure. One of the crucial aspects of a successful referee is that no matter what's happening in the game you must give the outward appearance that it doesn't matter to you, that it's still easy even if it's the greatest drama in the world.. So it is about maintaining good body language, maintaining a good tone of voice, maintaining all of the features of a good referee when things are easy and there's no pressure. You try and keep that calm kind of feel and that look about you even when there's a lot of pressure on.*

### **Adapt for the situation**

When confronted by abusive and angry players, referees select from numerous verbal and non-verbal techniques to restore order to the game and player conduct. They differentiate their approaches according to the requirements of the situation, and their perceptions of players. Some players receive yellow cards of caution straight away. In other situations the referee

will speak in short, sharp terms such as “that’s enough, move away now”, or, retaining his authority, give the player two alternatives “either you move away now or I’m going to caution you, the choice is yours”.

Non-verbal strategies are also used to promote player acceptance of decisions as correct interpretations of the rules of the game.

*Sometimes you won’t speak at all, so you sell your decision by the tone of your whistle. If it’s a small free kick you might use a very short sharp whistle. But if it’s a really serious foul you’ll use a loud, strong elongated whistle.*

*I find that using open palms and a bit of a shrug to say ‘Well what do you expect me to do?’ communicates it much better than giving the signal for the direction of the free kick.. using the open palm rather than pointing to players has more of a calming effect, a more neutral aspect.*

*I would maybe use some hand signals, you know, fingers pointed up and maybe patting down. Maybe push the pressure of the moment down. With one hand say ‘Just calm down a bit’.*

Referees choose whether to communicate publicly, so that other players will also hear and heed the message, or single a player out. This can be done conspicuously, or discretely ‘on the run’, or during a stoppage of play.

*If I can see that a player is getting a bit hot under the collar and there’s going to be a goal kick I might go over to him and say: ‘You know you’re an experienced player and you’re getting frustrated. Be careful, you don’t want to get sent off for something stupid’.*

Two said that player outbursts of anger tend to go on for only a few seconds, and that the best strategy is to accept the outburst as a way of allowing the player to let off steam. One said he used to respond to player aggression by being aggressive himself, but has learnt more effective ways.

*You’ve got to let them have their say, as long as they don’t go over the top and push you or swear at you or anything like that. But if they are being aggressive you’ve got to let them have their say, not stand there and argue with them .. Once it’s off their chests - generally it will only be a burst of about 5 seconds, if that- then you deal with it. Either in a calm manner or through your facial expressions. I find that works really well.*

In some situations referees pretend emotions. For example when a dangerous tackle occurs, although not feeling angry, referees will feign anger to exaggerate disapproval and add weight to their verbal threats.

Another listed a range of techniques he uses to calm players down and restore control, while staying mindful of the needs of the game.

*At times I feel the game is getting a little bit out of control, but I like that. I like to feel when it’s time to bring it back, and I’ve got plenty of strategies to do that.*

*Free kicks, long breaks between free kicks where you stand on the ball, yellow cards, red cards – you can bring it back. A long talk to an offender wastes a minute or so, then the edge dies off the tension. There are plenty of things that you can do. Sometimes it’s good to keep the pressure up. It’s a real fine balance, I remember once we were told a game’s like a balloon, you pump it right up, the pressures right up, it’s just about to burst. You don’t want to totally spoil it by deflating it.*

## **Discussion**

Interviewees were very clearly aware of a range of pressures, including abuse from players, coaches and spectators. The greatest pressures came from themselves, and their determination to make the right decisions in accordance with the rules of the game.

*The way that I class my games as good or otherwise is 'Did I get all of the decisions right? And did I make any mistakes?'*

The evaluation they focus on is the informed opinion of referee inspectors and peers, and their own reflection with the aid of match replays. They reported that the opinions of emotion-charged players and biased and uninformed spectators are largely external to what really matters to the referee. Focus on performance also helps them to 'block out' pressure from large crowds of spectators.

Referees require players to observe the rules of the game and respond to their directions and decisions. Referees in this study emphasised the importance of appearing calm and confident to achieve player respect for their decisions, and use numerous verbal and non-verbal techniques to manage their own presentation and body language. They articulated a large repertoire of non-verbal communication techniques used to 'sell' decisions, and deal with aggression and abuse.

Their attitudes to player aggression and abuse indicated (Duxbury's, 2002) internal, external and situational focus. They were mindful of individual differences in player propensity to abuse or 'chip away', but felt that most abuse was caused by external factors such as incidents that occurred during the game, including team performance and referee decisions and mistakes. The referees were also aware of the importance of their own interactions with players, this was reflected in the range of very deliberate strategies they employed to manage perceptions and communicate decisions in ways that would enhance acceptance. There were many instances mentioned where referees displayed sensitivity, proactivity and responsiveness suggestive of a situational focus in their approach to preventing and managing aggression. Referee responses indicated that they felt spectator abuse and aggression is the product of internal spectator, and perhaps environment, variables. Although the referees deliberately communicate non-verbally with spectators in mind, they don't interact with spectators. At the highest levels of the game, where spectators are prevented from entering the field of play, referees are able to try to ignore spectator abuse. Where referees are not physically protected it might be necessary to have superior spectator communication skills that reflect a situational focus.

## **Conclusion**

The data reported here are based on the self reports of just three elite level referees and conclusions must therefore be tentative. The attitudes and skills of the interviewees have been developed through years of on-field experience, intensive training and expert reflection. Their level of mastery of situation and technique is only achieved by a few, and only after many years. However they provide insights suggestive of strategies that might aid in the development of all inexperienced referees.

The evaluation systems available to elite level referees through mentors, referee inspectors and match replays enable referees to debrief after games and learn from their own performance. By providing a performance measure the referees respect, the evaluation helps referees to externalise abuse and criticism from other sources. Such resource-intensive evaluation can't be

made available to all referees. But their value, even to referees with experience of hundreds of matches, underscores the importance of sustainable and constructive mentor, evaluation and other feedback systems for non-professional sports officiating (Cuskelly and Hoye, 2004; Oke, 2002). Referees need performance feedback that they trust to be neutral and informed, to help them learn from their mistakes, to separate justified from unjustified criticism, and develop confidence.

This research has not examined referee training, or alternative views of players, spectators and coaches. Players, like patients in Duxbury and Whittington's (2005) study, may have quite different perspectives on the causes and prevention of aggression. However the findings support calls for improving education that helps referees to deal with abuse (Oke, 2002; Haynes, 2005; Cuskelly and Hoye, 2004). Training might include assessing abuse and aggression, and practising verbal and non-verbal communication techniques.

The insights provided here by three referees suggest that referees should also be taught very explicitly:

- that a decision made by a neutral, competent and well-positioned referee is likely to be more correct than an observation made by people with an interest in one of the teams
- techniques for depersonalising abuse and criticism
- to expect to encounter, and how to recognise, player, coach and spectator behaviours that create uncertainty in the referee's mind, or somehow deter the referee from awarding against their team by making the consequences unpleasant
- that they will make mistakes, and it's important to learn from them.

'Decision communication skills' are important for reducing player and referee stress, but there is a lack of evidence to use as a basis for training programs (Mellick et al, 2005). The findings here support calls for further research (at elite and non-professional levels) that aids understanding and teaching of strategies that help referees prevent and manage abuse and aggression.

There is a paucity of research into the experiences of referees in non-professional sport. Little is known about their attitudes, skills, or the reasons they are leaving. Future research should explore referee and other perspectives, and look beyond the manuals to examine the training referees actually receive in communication skills and the management of abuse.

The projection of confidence in self, decisions and advice is a valuable communication skill. The very deliberate strategies used by the referees in this study to promote confidence and enhance acceptance of decisions provide insights that might be transferable to teaching, medicine, customer service and other professions and situations.

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