

# When it comes to respecting the ref, football coaches can learn a lot from their rugby counterparts

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*SHOUTING MATCH: Stoke City boss Mark Hughes makes his feelings known to the referee*

- **Disrespecting the referee is woven into the culture of professional football.**
- **Heavier penalties should be introduced, and, just as importantly enforced, for abusing the referee.**
- **The behaviour of coaches cascades down to the players.**
- **A player can't control the referee's decision, only make it worse**
- **Young players are impressionable. Parents and coaches have a responsibility at grassroots level to act appropriately.**
- **The introduction of technology in football could help football referees.**

It was a moment of high drama that sparked a collective gasp that was heard around the world.

Heartbreak for the Bravehearts as an edge-of-the-seat 80 minutes of rugby climaxed with a controversial last-minute decision that condemned Scotland to the cruellest of cruel defeats.

But while a nation turned its ire on referee Craig Joubert for awarding a penalty for deliberate offside – an incorrect call, World Rugby later admitted – the players incredibly, and some might say miraculously, kept their frustrations in check.

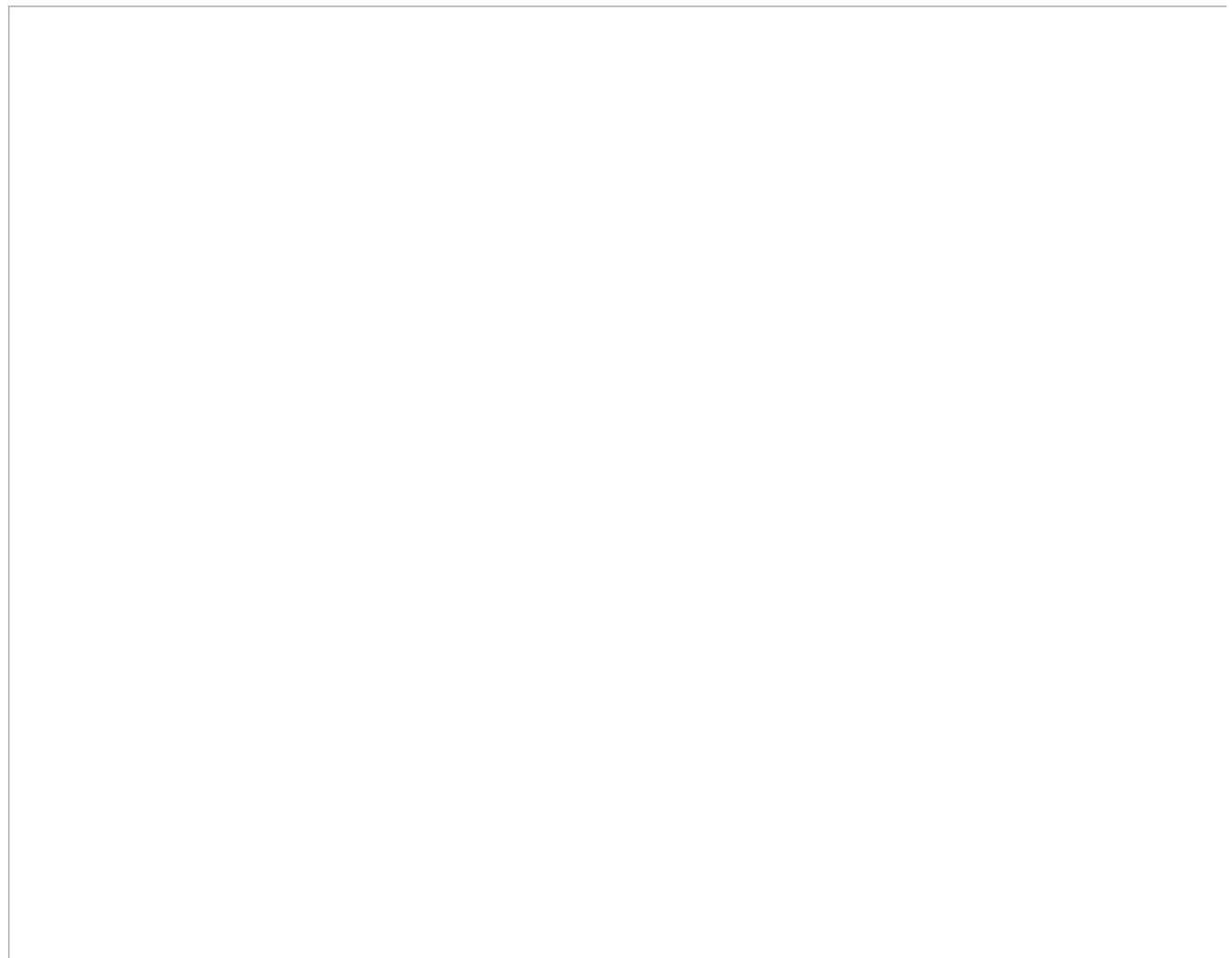
*Captain* Greig Laidlaw, speaking pitch-side minutes after the final whistle, and again in the press conference, stated he thought Joubert should have referred the incident to the television match official

(rules, however, meant he couldn't). He didn't rant, despite his emotions running high. He answered every question calmly and eloquently and his professionalism was exemplary. How he maintained his composure under the circumstances is unfathomable, even if his outer countenance failed to fully camouflage his inner turmoil.

Now, imagine a different scenario. Scotland, or England (or any top Premier League club for that matter), have just been knocked out of the quarter-final of the World Cup (or Champions League), after the referee awards a highly contentious penalty in the dying seconds of the match, with the scores level. There would be absolute carnage.

A tirade of obscenities would be directed to the referee, who would be besieged. Yellow cards would be issued, possibly a red or two, and it would take several minutes for the penalty to be taken while the furore died down. When it is duly despatched, the mayhem would kick off all over again.

And in the post-match interviews, there would be no biting his tongue by the skipper, you can be sure of that. Disrepute charges, fines and bans would be heading his way in the not too distant future.



*CRUSHING: Scotland captain Greig Laidlaw reacts with shock after referee Craig Joubert awards a penalty to Australia in the last minute of their World Cup quarter-final*

**Yes sir, no sir**

A total lack of respect shown to match officials is a criticism that is often thrown at professional football. And it is a global problem.

I asked England women's rugby league head coach [Chris Chapman](#) if the label is justified.

'I agree that with rugby union and rugby league, there appears to be more respect shown to the referee than in other high performance professional sports,' he begins. 'Addressing the referee as "Sir" is part of the culture and tradition of the game in rugby.'

'There's almost an expectation of disrespect in football. Again, it comes down to the culture of the game.'

He lists some examples of how the culture of refereeing in football and rugby differ.

'In rugby league, if a player backchats the ref, they can award a penalty. Referees are instructed not to take a backwards step, so if a player comes into their personal space then they are warned and if they don't back off the consequences can be significant. You can be sin-binned or sent off for that.'

'Also, in rugby league, if a decision is given and you don't agree with it, you get marched back a further ten metres. There's a territorial consequence for answering back. Because the match officials adhere to that, it benefits the game and cuts down on dissent.'

Technically, players cannot encroach on a referee in football either. However, the rule is seldom enforced.

'In football the mandate by the FA to Premier League officials is you step back when you feel threatened, which puts the referee in a submissive position,' Chris adds.

'I think that has contributed to the culture of backchat within football. There is an acceptance of dissent.'

### **Control the controllables**

As an elite coach – Chris led England to third place at the last World Cup and preparations are already well underway for the 2017 tournament in Australia and New Zealand – how does he control his emotions and how important is it that the players toe the party line?

'At the elite level passions run high and sometimes it does bubble over but, basically, you have to concentrate on controlling the controllables. You can't control the referee's decision, the only thing a player can do is make a situation worse.'

'At performance level we talk about how you can influence a situation for the better or for the worse. The reality is referees make decisions, some that we agree with and some that we don't. One thing is certain, how you react to those decisions on the field of play can have a significant influence on the game. It can shape the official's approach to 50-50 decisions later in the match.'

'So respecting the referee is an important topic for coaches at performance level in rugby league. We look at it as a way of gaining a performance advantage.'

Chris agrees that a bad attitude from the coach can cascade down to the players, so it may help that professional rugby league and union coaches sit in the stands, removing any possibility of direct conflict with the officials – which could in turn set a bad example to the players.

'I go pitch-side infrequently. Sometimes I will go down towards the end of a game, when I need to motivate the players. I want them to know how I feel and feed off my emotions.'

'But I think the important thing to consider is, in football, nobody can enter the field of play until the official stops the game. That isn't the case in other sports. In rugby league the physio can enter the field of play at any time. A trainer can enter the field of play when you make an interchange at domestic level, and even if they break this rule and go on when a substitution is not being made, they will probably get a warning before any sanction.'

‘The good thing about this is, if people are getting het up then there is an opportunity for a message to go on to the field. I send my assistant coach onto the pitch to give some empathy. It can be as simple as, ‘Look, we know a lot of decisions have gone against you. We’re seeing it too but don’t take it out on the referee.’

### **Hubble bubble, toil and trouble**

Chris, who is sports coach UK’s Development Lead Officer for Talent and Performance Coaching, has two young sons who play football and says the clash of cultures is obvious even at grassroots level.

With parents and coaches so close to the action, and a winning mentality encouraged from an early age, it can be a tinderbox and a real recipe for disaster.

‘Everyone wants to win when they play sport. It’s the attachment that people make to that win that can cause problems,’ argues Chris.

‘If I go into a game telling the players I want to win but in reality I’m not expecting to win, my approach to that is, if we win it would be great, if we don’t then, as long as we give it our best shot, I’m not going to be too disappointed. But if I go into a game expecting to win and we’re not performing and I start having a pop, I see 50-50 balls going against me and I see players not trying. That’s when it bubbles over.’

And when it comes to bubbling over, nobody does it better than footballers.

‘People see the red mist and react in every sport where the stakes are high but the difference I think in football is it happens more frequently and the smallest infringement or niggle becomes significant. That does affect things on the side of the pitch.

‘The coaches of my son’s teams fully support the match officials and respect the referee’s decisions. But you do see a lot of verbals from the sidelines in grassroots football, with coaches – perhaps not offensively or aggressively, but certainly inappropriately – challenging almost every tackle or offside. And that does permeate onto the field.

‘I watched a junior football match a few weeks ago where the opposition looked very structured, had a well-organised warm-up, and the expectations of the coach were significant. But as his team went 1-0, 2-0 and then 3-0 down, the coach began inflicting his frustrations on the players. They started making some silly challenges, so he started shouting at them for that and then blaming the referee. The situation was bubbling because things weren’t going his way.

‘With the best will in the world, and it’s not a matter of me taking the moral high ground, but as a coach you have to back up what you say. You have to take yourself out of that environment. Sometimes you don’t do it, and that’s the humanistic side of coaching, but it’s trying to be more aware of what you do and coaching your players to act appropriately.’

### **Pipe down, parents**

Crowds that engage in coordinated chanting, abusing the referee, are not unique to football, although, arguably, they can be more vitriolic. And this too can filter down, affecting the attitude of the coach and players.

‘I wouldn’t agree that abusive chanting only takes place in football stadiums but there’s probably a greater level of tolerance in rugby,’ says Chris. ‘That’s probably the difference. If a number of decisions go against a team in rugby, the fans will become irate. But in football, it can be absolutely nothing, such as a legitimate off side, or any decision that goes against a team, that results in barracking.’

Lack of consistency is another stick used to beat football referees with.

‘When you are dealing with people and emotions, consistency is crucial,’ says Chris. ‘Most people accept poor decisions, rightly or wrongly, if they are poor for both sides.’

But when you consider Premier League referees, on average, make a decision every 12 seconds during a game, and get 95% of their decisions right (according to statistics from Professional Game Match Officials), they are heading for a fall before they have even stepped on the pitch.

We have established, then, without too much wracking of the brain, that the badgering mentality of coaches and players has become ingrained in professional football and is part of the culture of the sport.

So what chance is there for the grassroots game, bearing in mind footballers, and coaches too, are role models to the young generation, who grow up copying the behaviour they see week in, week out from their heroes?

And if their parents are also guilty of conducting themselves in an impolite manner every Sunday morning, children can end up getting the wrong message from all directions. It becomes a vicious cycle.

‘At grassroots level you’ve got young people playing for the enjoyment of the game. Their passion can be heavily influenced by the parents and the coach, as it’s a very emotive environment,’ says Chris.

‘I always tell coaches that parents make the wrong decisions for the right reasons. The reason they are shouting at their own son or the referee is they think it’s making a difference. Often though, it’s having a negative influence.

‘Parents can surround them, they are close to the pitch, they sometimes stand behind the goal, and the feedback from young people is they don’t like that closeness.

‘Young people are impressionable and they are influenced by role models, probably no more so than that junior age group. So if a coach is calm and collected, the players are more likely to be too. If the parents are respectful of the match officials and complementary to both sides, then the chances are the spirit the game is played in is very different to two hostile sets of parents jeering and cheering.’ (*Jon Woodward’s blog [The Need to Educate the Audience and the Spectator](#) provides some great tips on how you can support the process of educating the spectator in your own coaching*)

## **Filthy lucre**

The solution sounds simple doesn’t it, but while 99 per cent of parents might agree with the sentiment, how many actually practice what they preach?

And what about the referees? Shouldn’t they be taking some responsibility towards improving the triangular relationship with coaches and players?

‘I was talking to a parent the other week who said there was an older referee who penalised the players just as much but talked to them more. It was great feedback from a mum because she felt her son learned more because he was being told why he was being penalised. So there was a learning process going on between the player and the match official. The environment was better as a result, with no shouting from the crowd.’

The root causes of disrespect to officials are piling up but one motive we haven’t yet touched on is the influence money has on the attitude of sports stars.

The astronomical wages that exist at the highest level can have a detrimental effect in terms of behaviour. And the nominal fines relative to income hardly deter Premier League footballers from transgressing.

‘Regarding professional football, I wonder, genuinely, whether the money that’s involved has a big role to play,’ says Chris.

And when vast sums of money are at stake, enormous pressure is typically a by-product.

‘When Jose Mourinho first came to Chelsea he asked a player how long he needed to settle in. He said he thought he would need 10 or 11 games. Mourinho replied that he had 3 and if he failed to perform in those games, he was out.

‘That’s the reality of the expectation of the fans and it piles constant pressure on. So every marginal game, the pressure is on, and that’s when the referee gets challenged.’

Perhaps the introduction of a fourth official in football could help referees. Back-up in the form a ‘third eye’ in the stand would improve their chances of getting the big decisions right, bolstering their authority and discouraging petty acts of remonstrations.

But copying rugby’s lead by adopting ‘ref cam’ would need a parental advisory warning. Its use at the Rugby Union World Cup has been a resounding success, enlightening viewers as to the official’s reasons for penalising a team in the heat of battle.

Sticking a camera and microphone on a football referee in the current climate would be an unmitigated disaster. The air would turn a blasphemous blue on Super Sundays as petulant players effed and jeffed at the ref after take exception to every decision. Evolution is a slow and steady process – and we’re a number of years off that particular broadcasting breakthrough.

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