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**The Occurrence of Referee Abuse in Rugby Union: Evidence and Measures  
Through an Online Survey**

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## **The Occurrence of Referee Abuse in Rugby Union: Evidence and Measures Through an Online Surveys**

### **Abstract**

Many national governing bodies are experiencing difficulties retaining referees at the grass roots level, especially young referees (Warner, Tingle & Kellett, 2013). Abuse and aggression from players and spectators are the most commonly given reasons for referees leaving. Without consideration of the development, nurturing and management needs of the referee there could be a decline in the participation numbers within the sport. This research paper used an online questionnaire to explore the levels of abuse that rugby union referees are subjected to in the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire. The results indicated that referees from various levels on the Rugby Football Union's referee continuum were subjected to a significant level of abuse. The sources of this abuse ranged from the players, coaches and spectators. Furthermore, the research illustrates that the referees believe that there has been an erosion of the 'core values' of rugby union specifically indicating a decline in the enjoyment factor of officiating within rugby union and its effect on the retention of referees.

**Keywords:** referee, abuse, retention

## **The Occurrence of Referee Abuse in Rugby Union: Evidence and Measures Through an Online Survey**

### **Introduction**

The game of rugby union has developed significantly during the course of its history. During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it evolved from a folk game played by ruffians to a recreational activity of custom and ritual for public schoolboys (Dunning & Sheard, 2005, p.19). From the 1820's rugby became an opportunity for gentlemen to demonstrate physical prowess and masculinity and in more recent times it has developed into an activity that reflected the changing attitudes towards professional sport and the divisions within society. For the most part of the last one hundred years, rugby union has been arguably the dominant winter sport of the British upper and middle classes and over the same period it became an important international sport that represented the nationalistic ideals of a number of countries. The latter decades of the twentieth century exposed rugby union to the realities of commercialism and the influences of a more diverse participating and spectating public, forcing the International Rugby Board to declare rugby union as an 'open game' on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1995.

The commercialisation of rugby union since 1995 has provided opportunities for advancement and wealth for a number of top players; it has also injected a powerful dynamic into the media representation of the game and the structure of its competitions, and above all in the need to provide triumphant teams. A by-product of this change of ethos has been conflict and disputes over rules and values associated with the game which has not only occurred with the rule makers at the elite level of competition but has also filtered down into the grassroots levels of the game. Several authors (Collins, 2009; Harris, 2010; Sayre & King, 2010; Van Krieken, 2012) note that since the game of rugby union has turned professional there is evidence that the core values, which had defined the sport and enabled the game to resist professionalism for over one hundred years, have begun to be eroded.

At the forefront of administering the change from an amateur sport to a professional sport have been the referees, who were first officially introduced into the sport of rugby union in 1875 although it was not mandatory until 1885 (Knight, 2009). In the professional era there have been some highly publicised incidences of abuse to the match officials with examples including Neil Back pushing referee Mr Lander in 1996

(Rainey & Hardy, 1999) and more recently Dylan Hartley's verbal abuse to referee Mr Barnes during the 2013 Aviva Premiership Final (Kitson, 2013). Responses to such abuse have been swift and publicly administered by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), however what is less clear are the levels of abuse occurring at the lower echelons of the game in England and if the RFU are acting as swiftly outside the professional game. While there have been a range of research investigating the match officials and abuse (Chiafullo, 1998; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Simmons, 2006), there has been little research into the instances of abuse towards the referee in rugby union.

The purpose of this study was to further explore the concept of abuse within rugby union from a referee's perspective and evaluate whether the core values of teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline and sportsmanship which have historically defined the game, are still part of the sport's ethos in today's society. The significance of this area of research is to explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their own experiences. It is this process that enables exploration of the evolution of the rugby union game from the referee's perspective alongside societal developments since the game was formally introduced into the realm of professional sport in 1995.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The population used for this study consisted of active officials in one of the four county unions under investigation, representing the five categories of referee level: Society, Federation, Regional Group, National panel and Elite. A total of one hundred and six referees (n=106) responded to the questionnaire of which 98% (n=104) were male and 2% (n=2) were female. The majority of respondents (48%) fell within the 45-54 age bracket. Those falling in the under 18, 18-24 and 65+ age groups were the least represented in the questionnaire with each category making up less than 10% of the overall respondents.

### **Questionnaire**

Following institutional ethical approval and in agreement with the RFU referees department, an online survey was sent via email to RFU referees within the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire in England. The survey included multiple-choice, likert scale and free text format questions. The inclusion of free text format questions within the survey was devised to "*provide a deeper understanding of social*

*phenomena than would be obtained by purely quantitative data”* (Silverman, 1999, p.8). The emphasis of qualitative data within the questionnaire design enabled more opportunity for the referees to comment on the type (if any) of abuse that they have been subjected too within the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire.

The survey was pilot tested by both the RFU referees department and the Hampshire RFU (n=10), to evaluate ease of completion, comprehension and to ensure that meaningful responses were possible. Minor amendments to wording and the physical layout of the questionnaire were made following feedback from the pilot testing before the release of the survey to the participating county unions.

### ***Procedure***

The RFU referees department disseminated the questionnaire to the participating unions via their RFU referees registered email addresses. The referees were informed that the questionnaire was only available for completion within a nine week timeframe to ensure that the project would be current and relevant in the societal period under review. The survey itself was administered through ‘Google Survey’ which provided an automatic storage facility to store the participant’s responses.

### ***Statistical Analysis***

The questionnaire data was descriptively analysed utilising content analysis to summarise the participants’ experience of abuse within rugby union. Content analysis was chosen to analyse the themes emerging out of the data, principally due to the vast quantity of data and the range of themes emerging. This format of data analysis enabled the research to be disseminated to colleagues for peer review developing the concept of trustworthiness in developing critical friends (Sparkes, 1995, pp.161-168). This process of data analysis and transparency allowed the researchers to acknowledge their role as an instrument in the data collection and analysis processes, which ultimately created the opportunity to be self-reflective.

The analysis itself required reading each collected data set several times to enable familiarisation with the content, allowing the researchers to become immersed in the narrative. Notes on points of interest, initial themes and ideas that emerged relating to the experiences were noted by each researcher. The data was then studied again and the preliminary themes were amended, developed, refined by the research team. Utilising phenomenological reduction in the data analysis process enabled the data to be reduced allowing the research to focus on its central meaning and develop General Dimension themes for the current research (Patton, 2002, p.264).

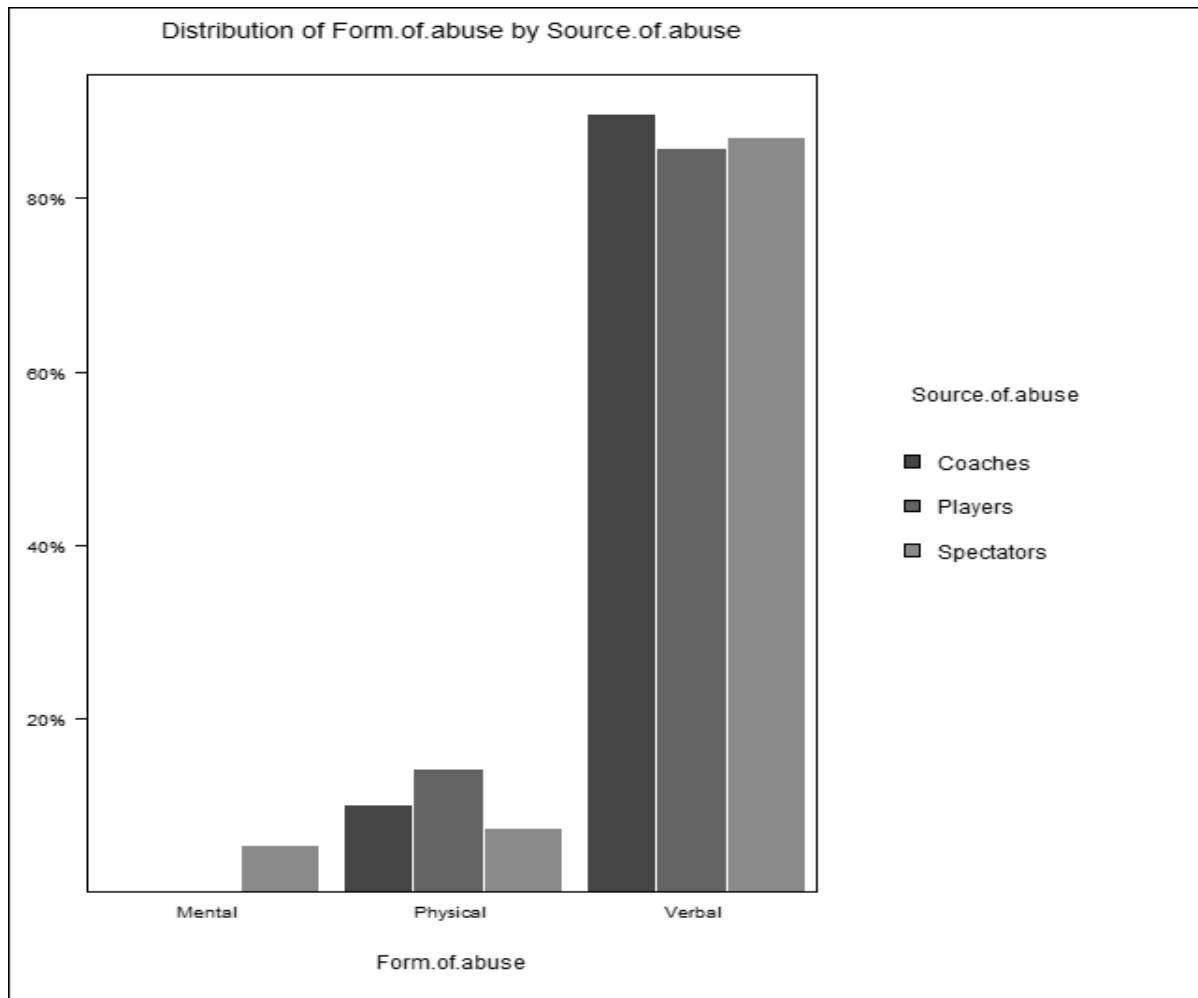
The themes were then analysed with continuous reference to the original text to check the validity of the interpretations and where they appeared to be linked and related, were clustered together to produce a list of super-ordinate themes. Some of the initial themes were dropped as the research team's focus developed during the analytical process and these appeared to be isolated or unconnected to the emerging theme clusters. Access to the data was limited to the researchers and at no point was further access provided to any other individuals. Alongside no access to the participants' personal details upon completion of the online questionnaire, the anonymity of the participants was further ensured through the use of a pseudonym to enable publication of data throughout this paper (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.53).

## **Results**

The following section provides information on referee perceptions of abuse and the assistance given to referees when abuse occurs during a match. To enhance the explanation of each of these general dimensions the discussion includes verbatim quotations to support and clarify the narrative. Additionally selected quantitative survey responses have been included to give further depth and detail to the qualitative responses where appropriate.

### *Form and Source of Referee Abuse*

Referees identified players, coaches and spectators as the individuals from which they receive abuse. In total, 71 (67% of all respondents) referees reported receiving abuse whilst 35 (33%) referees reported that they had received no form of abuse. Those referees that stated that they received some form of abuse were subsequently asked the form of abuse, with referees permitted to select more than one form of abuse. Referees identified spectators were reported as being the main source of abuse accounting for 28.8% of all abuse reported in the questionnaire, whilst coaches and players accounted for 25.3% respectively. The predominant form of this abuse was of a verbal nature making up 88.8 % of all reported abuse. Physical abuse accounted for 10.10 % with mental abuse the lowest reported form at 1.27 %. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the forms of abuse and the sources of abuse.



**Figure 1.** Relationship between the forms of abuse and the sources of abuse.

Referees that were subjected to abuse were also asked the source of the abuse that they received. Referees were permitted to select more than one source of abuse dependent on their personal experiences and from these responses it is clear that the sources of abuse are evenly distributed between the spectators (49 responses, 36.6% of referees receiving abuse selecting this option), coaches (43 responses, 32.1% of referees receiving abuse selecting this option) and players (42 responses, 31.3% of referees receiving abuse selecting this option).

There is a belief that the sources of abuse are becoming more frequent and that there is an emerging culture that suggests abusing match officials is acceptable (Ackery, Tator & Snider, 2012; Dell, Gervis & Rhind, 2014). One referee who has been involved in Rugby Union over a significant period (N>25yrs) of time believes that abuse and a lack of respect is now ingrained into rugby union at a number of levels:

“...the abuse disappoints me. It disappoints me because the level of abuse I hear today is not confined to senior rugby, but also youth rugby. When I started playing schools rugby in the 1970's and finished playing club rugby in the early 1990's, verbal abuse of the referee was frowned upon and team captains did not tolerate their players abusing referees. We as players respected the referee. Today, I feel that the level of respect has dropped dramatically. Coaches abuse referees from the sideline, and so parents think 'oh, it's alright to do that then' and they join in too. This then affects players and so it escalates. I enjoy refereeing but if there is one collective of related things that will lead me to stopping ahead of my intended "use by date", it will be the lack of respect, ungentlemanly conduct and general drop in standards of personal behaviour. I do not give up my time to be abused.” **(Author: Albert)**

The idea that the sources of abuse are interlinked and can be influenced by each other is something that another referee also commented upon:

“Spectators often misread the situation and the information leading up to an offence or an actual offence. With regards to coaches, who is coaching the coaches? It also appears to be a financial incentive at all levels of the game for coaches to win at all costs, when it doesn't go their way referees can often be used as the scapegoat in many ways...the coaches need to work with the refs as we as refs are encouraged to work closely with them. It should be part of the referee/coach pre match formalities”  
**(Author: Charles)**

Alongside the issues with coaches, referees have identified concerns regarding players. These problems are predominantly verbal in nature with one referee reporting that a “player called me a "(words removed)" after I gave a try with which he disagreed”

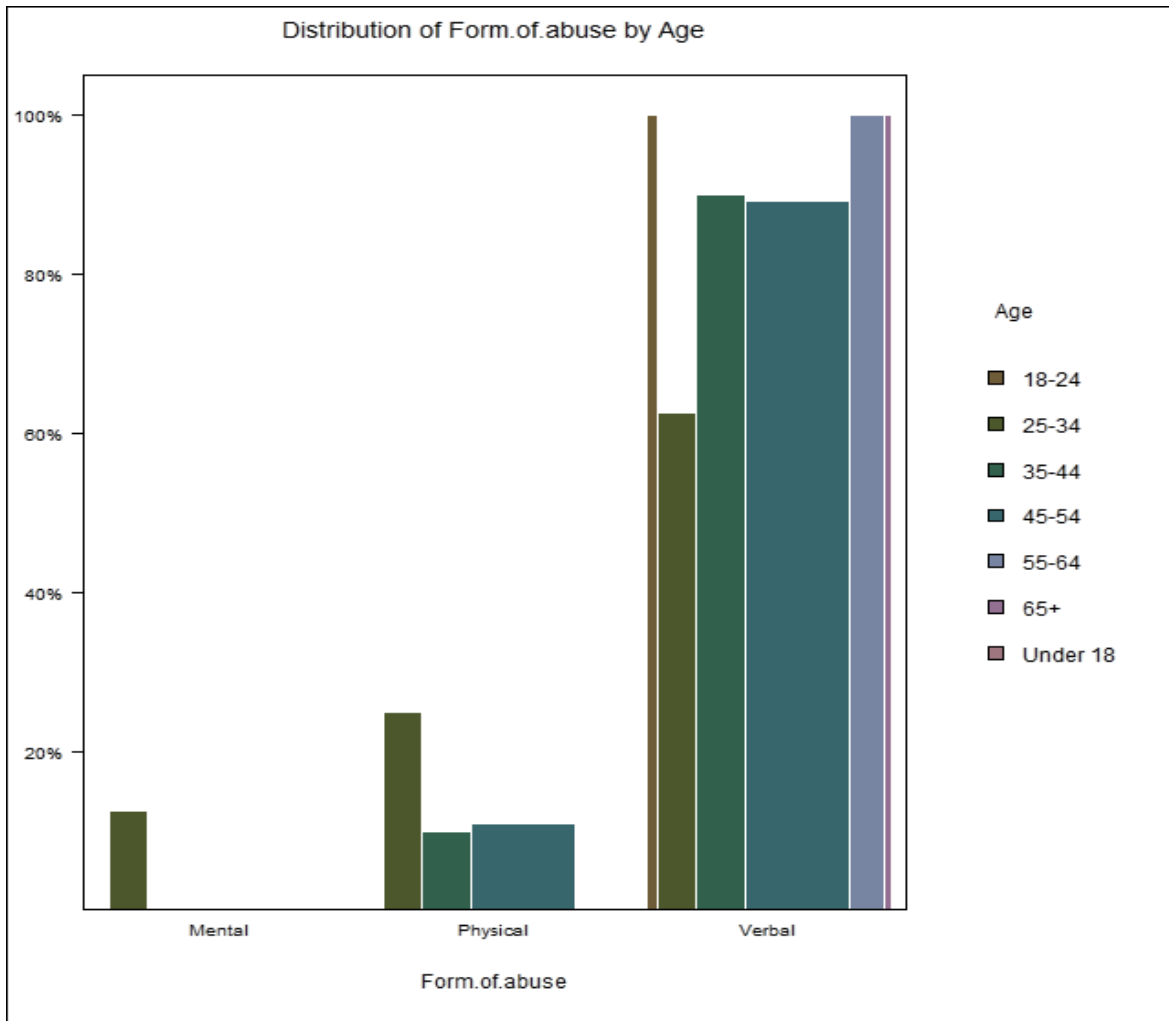


**(Author: David)**. Whilst another referee from the 'federation' category states that he has been "repeatedly sworn at by players and coaches in league games as well as at social tournaments" **(Author: Matthew)**.

These responses identify a trend of increasing abuse towards the match referee which is further illustrated by 86 % of referees in the questionnaire indicating a belief in the erosion of respect and sportsmanship towards the referee; elements of the 'core values' of rugby union. Furthermore, the same percentage of respondents (86 %) signified that the erosion of these 'core values' has affected their intentions of remaining a referee within Rugby Union.

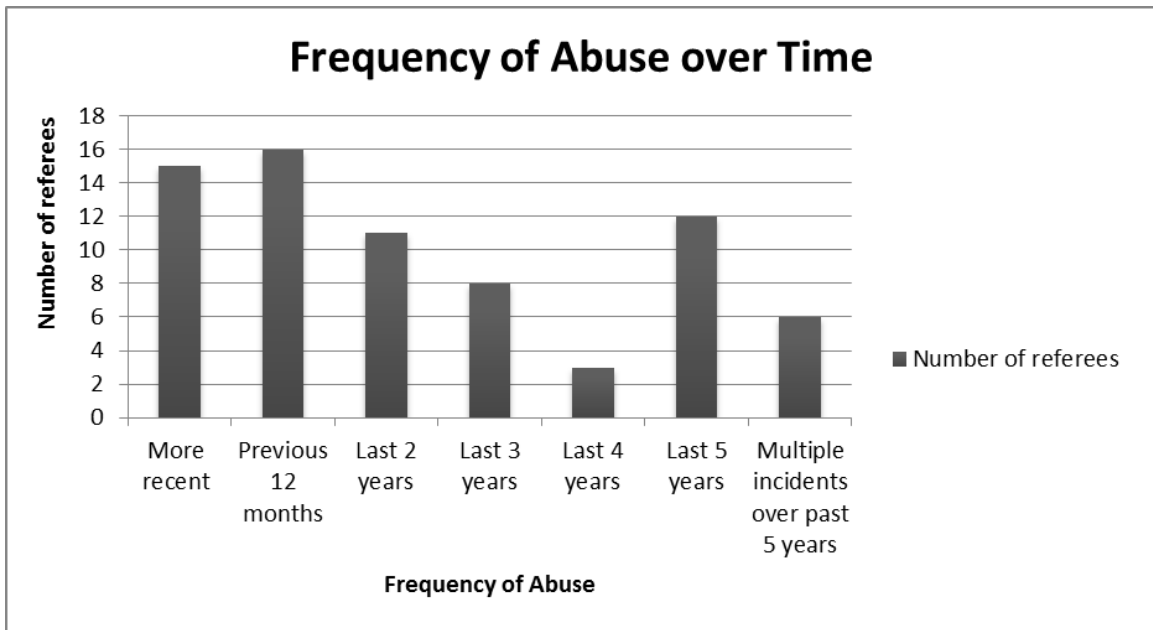
#### *Referee Age, Source and Form of Abuse*

The predominant form and source of abuse differ dependent on the age group of the referees. For example, referees in the 18-24, 25-34 and 35-44 age categories claimed that players were the biggest source of abuse. Whereas referees in the 45-54 age bracket cited coaches as being the main source of abuse and those in the 55-64 and 65+ age category cited spectators as being the main issue. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the age of the referee and the forms of abuse reported. The majority of age groups indicate that verbal abuse is the main or only form of abuse they have received. Referees in the 25-34 age brackets reported slightly more physical and mental forms of abuse accounting for 25 % and 12.4 % of reported abuse for that age bracket respectively.



**Figure 2.** Relationship between the age of the referee and the forms of abuse reported.

One particular referee from the 45-54 age category illustrates their view that coaches are the worst offenders when it comes to the erosion of Rugby Union’s core values, “...the desire to win overbears good sportsmanship. Some coaches are teaching teams to infringe, and this is a scandal within the game” (**Author: Phillip**). There is little doubt amongst referees that Rugby Union has changed markedly from the amateur enthused game that existed before professionalisation with 74% of the subjects suggesting that the levels of abuse they receive for officiating has not only increased in recent years but is impacting upon their levels of enjoyment with the game and increasing their chances of leaving the game.



**Figure 3.** Frequency of Abuse over Time.

The increasing levels of abuse is something that referees now find “more than normal”, indicating that they now expect some verbal abuse in most matches. A referee classified verbal abuse as “low level” and “accusations of a bias” as something that referees are used to experiencing during a match (**Author: David**). These incidents of abuse have also been noted to become aggressive in nature. Referees gave examples of situations where they had felt threatened, irrespective of the form that the abuse had taken.

“Coaches swearing from touchlines, substitutes swearing, spectators accusing me of bias, questioning my integrity and knowledge of the game! Sometimes there is a fine line between banter and abuse, but that line does get crossed more often than it used to” (**Author: Paul**).

The above response from a Federation level referee illustrates incidents of swearing, citing coaches and players, as well as accusations of bias and questions related to the referees’ impartiality. Not only is this a significant level of abuse, but also a level of abuse that the referee believes cites as acceptable in some form because they refer to the need for it to be carefully managed.

Ethnicity has also been highlighted as a rationale for an increase of personal abuse whilst officiating a game. "I am of West Indian origin and most abuse has been racially vocalised" (**Author: William**). Furthermore, the referee's sex has also been evidenced as a tool for abuse as a female referee stated, "I was pushed in the back; I stumbled, I didn't fall over but yellow carded the player. The player disagreed with the decision and blamed it on me being a female referee. The team captain then had the player subbed" (**Author: Clare**). This level of abuse can also be something that crosses over into concerns over the personal safety of match officials, as well as potential physical abuse. A society level referee reports that after receiving verbal abuse from the players that they were officiating they were then forcibly detained in their changing room, "obscene language used and later locked into a changing room" (**Author; Harry**). Moreover, another referee indicates that they received physical as well as verbal abuse, "...shoulder charged by a player and called an 'f'ing cheat!!!" Told I was the worst (word removed) refereeing and biased!! I was then called a cheat and squared up to!" (**Author: Mark**).

Referees have identified a culture of abuse, however how referees deal and contend with the abuse is something that is an increasingly important skill set as the abuse that they have to contend with becomes more prevalent.

#### How Referees Deal with Abuse

There are a variety of options available to referees that are abused whilst officiating. The actions of the referee depend on their perception of the abuse and whether they believe independently that further action is necessary. For example, there is a formal abuse form that referees can complete and submit to the RFU if they perceive the actions of the person committing the abuse as behavior that requires further sanctions. Many referees will chose a course of action that involves discussion with the individual, however, again, this depends on the level of the abuse. Of the 56 responses to the question 'what did you do about the abuse that you were subjected', referees who could chose more than one option identified 84 incidents where they preferred to speak with the individual/s responsible, 32 cases where referees reported the abuse, 24 incidents where referees submitted an abuse form and 5 scenarios where referees opted to do nothing. Referees also believe that the process of reporting individuals that are abusive towards them could be easier. Within the current research, 74 referees identified this process as a potential problem and reason for referees not reporting incidents of abuse.

These numbers are clarified further when referees elaborate upon the experiences that they have had and how they have dealt with issues that they have faced whilst officiating. Referees want to deal with any abuse quickly, and in order to do this they speak to the players, coaches or spectators concerned and attempt to reaffirm and enforce their authority; perhaps a reason why referees are not formally reporting more incidents:

“A player running touch, started to abuse the opponents when his team scored. I separated the antagonists and dealt with players as there had been some pushing and shoving. I spoke to the original player, showed a yellow card for abuse to the players, he then started to abuse me so I then showed the player a red card” (**Author: Ben**)

Referees reported that clubs and the RFU have acted decisively when referees have reported abuse. After suffering abuse from a young player the example given by a Regional Group level referee demonstrates that the players' club did not tolerate his behaviour, “...an U18 player who was verbally strong disagreed with one of my decisions. I gave him a red card. The club ensured he apologised to me and banned him for 4 weeks” (**Author: Harry**). The fact that the authorities and clubs act upon abuse suffered by referees can be linked to the ‘ethos’ of the game of Rugby Union. Despite the abuse of referees being evident across different levels and age groups, there is still support within the game for referees.

The abuse that referees receive in Rugby Union from different individuals such as players, coaches and spectators has been documented. How referees deal with this abuse has also been considered and referees have identified that there is support available from clubs and the RFU. However, that the abuse is occurring at all is a concern especially given the historical background of Rugby Union and the gentlemanly conduct that the game prides itself upon.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of this study have indicated that the referees involved in the research believe that there are incidents of abuse to suggest that rugby union's ‘core values’ are starting to become devalued throughout rugby's sporting landscape. The results have

shown that 66% (N=70) of the referees involved in this study have been subjected to abuse from players, coaches or supporters associated with the game. Furthermore, 88.8% of this abuse was reported as being verbal in nature, although there were also incidents of physical (10.10%) and mental abuse (1.27%). In addition, the referees have reported that the levels of abuse they have been subjected to are of a significant level for them to consider leaving the game. This data indicates that abuse of rugby union referees is not rare and is common enough to signify that it is a concern for the sport.

The RFU have created a procedure for the reporting of abuse towards the match official. However, the data in this research has indicated that referees preferred to speak with the individual/s responsible for the abuse. Furthermore, the data (N =74) illustrates the reluctance of the officials to utilise the 'complicated' reporting procedure of the RFU and have illustrated the process as a further mechanism that encourages referees to consider leaving the game.

Finally, while the results have illustrated a significance between the levels of abuse and intentions of referees to leave the game, they have not highlighted that all the RFU's 'core values' have been impacted as a result of an obvious level of abuse within rugby union. As Rainey and Duggan (1998) have indicated, it is likely that the unreported incidents of abuse signify that the referees have a level of tolerance towards abuse and use the complicated reporting system of the RFU as an excuse, rather than report incidents that could be detrimental to the overall image of the game.

This is the first of a series of studies about abuse received by the referee within rugby union. While this data is limited to the geographical areas of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire there are some consistent themes that have started to emerge from the research. The data obtained reported that referees from all levels of the referee continuum have recorded some form of abuse while also signifying that they prefer to deal with it themselves rather than use the procedures designed by the RFU. Furthermore, the data has illustrated that the referees believe that there has been erosion in the core values of rugby union specifically the ideals of Respect, Enjoyment and Sportsmanship. To further examine these issues, a cross-cultural analysis needs to be explored to obtain data from a representative sample from the member nations of World Rugby.

Furthermore, future research should examine the methods in which to reduce the levels of abuse received by Rugby Union officials and the procedures in which to report the abuse received. This is a particular concern for the governing bodies as the

processes in place to control levels of abuse need to ensure the referees are encouraged to report abuse rather than cause referees to leave the sport. While the Football Association uses the RESPECT campaign to attempt to curb abuse towards the match official and improve its referee retention rates, it is not simply a matter of like for like between the two governing bodies. A similar campaign in Rugby Union would require significant investment from the governing body and it would also need to reflect the nature of the sport whilst promoting the 'core values' which have been central to its development during the past two centuries. Thus, while some patterns have emerged from the current research project, there are a range of topics that still need to be explored.

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