

# SUSSEX SOCIETY OF RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION REFEREES

## ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE SEASON 2022-23

After two seasons affected by Covid we had a 90<sup>th</sup> season that was, in most cases, a return to normality, tempered by the aftereffects of a pandemic where some members have not returned because their lives have moved on or personal concerns have been a greater priority.

The Rugby Football Referees Union (RFRU), of which we are a member, has worked effectively as a Constituent Body (CB) of the Rugby Football Union (RFU). The shadow of the pandemic still looms large over the Game as it continues to struggle to rebuild playing and officiating numbers which, broadly speaking remain at 80% of pre-pandemic levels. However, it would be fair to say that this decline had been evident for a number of seasons prior to the pandemic: COVID simply exacerbated this trend. This decline manifested itself in the number of forfeited games, particularly amongst merit table competitions around the country with some areas experiencing drop-out rates as high as 50%. This was despite the availability of 'Game On' playing regulations. In contrast to the adult men's game, adult women's participation rates grew slightly, as did Age-Grade participation.

The season saw the biggest change in the organisation of the adult male leagues for 30 years. There was an additional Level 4 league at National Level and Six Regional 1 leagues together with changes to feeder leagues. We have got used to the titles of Regional and Counties leagues and we have embraced the necessary changes for match officiating on a National, Federation and Society basis on a seamless and trouble-free basis. As the season drew to a close, several of our match officials were involved in the business end of the new Papa Johns cup giving some new opportunities to work in teams of three and experience challenging and meaningful competitive games.

The height of the tackle and head on head contact has been the subject of a major focus and changes come into effect for the new season on 1<sup>st</sup> July. There is more on this at the end of this review.

### ***Match Official Development***

Our match officials have enjoyed busy seasons at various levels of the game and in different roles. Of note:

- Conor Boyle has seized the opportunity presented to him as part of the National Match Official Team Associate Panel and has been promoted to the National League Match Official Team (NLMOT). Many congratulations are due
- Phil Bowers and Ben McNamara are members of the National League Match Official Team as Assistant Referees
- Iain Mitchell is a member of the National League Match Official Team as a Referee Coach
- Ten Sussex referees remain on the South East Federation Panel

### ***Training and Development***

We had two face-to-face training meetings during the season. At Lewes RFC James Goksaran & Paul Shepperd delivered on Communication as part of their work towards the Advanced Match Official Award (AMOA) and at East Grinstead David Sainsbury delivered a highly effective and interesting session of Refereeing Philosophy.

Phil Bowers & Ben McNamara continue as RFU training educators delivering the England Rugby Referee Award. This has a gap of eight months between day 1 and day 2 to allow participants to do some refereeing and gain experience to bring to the second day. We are concerned about practical constraints when not all candidates have the game knowledge, confidence and competency to

immediately take to the field after the first day. Additionally, not all candidates are invested as referees and there seems to be a fall out between day 1 and day 2. There also remains the issue with a limited number of available courses in appropriate locations although several additional prospective educators, including Iain Mitchell and Paul Shepperd have been recruited and are in training.

Gordon Burtenshaw continues to support new referees with their development by keeping contact and finding appropriate fixtures and often attending the matches himself

Video analysis of referees is a highly valuable tool and we are indebted to Phil Holley for his work as our cameraman. Not all societies have this resource and referees benefiting need to fully engage with the process to receive the fullest benefit.

Phil Bowers has indicated he will not be continuing as our Training Officer and we all owe him huge thanks for a magnificent job done over many years. We have a number of active members who have indicated they are able to be part of a Training Team moving forward, which will bring new energy and differentiation to what we do but it remains the case that we do need a leader of that team if we are to be truly effective and so we do need to identify a suitable person or they need to identify themselves.

### ***Sussex RFU***

The Constituent Body (CB) under the Chairmanship of Gary Henderson, has continued its work within a Board and Executive structure as well as continuing to provide opportunities for clubs to be involved. We are full members of Sussex RFU as well The Rugby Football Referees Union.

We have been working in partnership with Gary and other officers to develop match officiating in clubs, particularly through the Introduction to Refereeing Courses. We are also collaboratively working with clubs to support their cohorts of club referees involved in Age Grade rugby. This, where possible, requires support from our membership to assist their local clubs by accepting a game wide development responsibility beyond our own match officiating activities. We and Sussex RFU hope that our members will embrace this where they can.

### ***Discipline and Match Official Abuse***

Alongside Sussex RFU, RFRU and the RFU we have been concerned at the drop in behaviour standards and a rise in match official abuse. There have been eight formal cases of Match Official Abuse recorded together with several other behavioural issues that have been dealt with on a less formal basis usually involving words of advice being shared with the club concerned. This is a national issue, and it is a game issue and we are prepared to take a strong stance in dealing with incidents that arise within our jurisdiction. Locally we have always been well supported and we know that will continue when we require it.

### ***Appointments***

The administration of the appointments process is delivered via the web-based system, Who's The Ref (WTR) by David Beglan as Appointments Secretary. The WTR system is now an established operation and works extremely effectively but it does require all match officials to update and be bound by their availability charts. The Appointments Secretary is a highly competent operator, but he is not a mind reader; engagement by all match officials is vital as well as being a common courtesy. Referees should not make assumptions that they will not be needed simply because a re-appointment has not been made by, say, a Tuesday. Rather, and as will be seen by the following evidence, they will receive a re-appointment in what is a very fluid system.

WTR dealt with 1185 fixtures of all types, which is a reduction of 214 (15%) from the previous season. This includes tournaments, festivals, exchanges and reappointments. There were 477 appointments to games that took place on a Saturday, a reduction of 83 games for last season and 148 games from 2018-19, the full last season prior to covid.

There were 215 Sunday fixtures, a reduction of 67 from last season but an increase of 5 from the 208 of the last full season in 2018-19. There were 189 fixtures in midweek compared with 210 last season and 216 in 2018-19. Of continuing concern is the number of fixture cancellations made after initial appointment. WTR shows numbers of cancellations to be a total of 213 meaning that 18% of the games scheduled did not subsequently take place. This is an improvement from the previous season although there were fewer games originally scheduled. The reduction in number of games and the continuing high level of cancellations, often late in the week, is a concerning trend although not isolated to Sussex and reflects the comments made at the beginning of this review.

The cancellation of games has had an adverse spin off in that we have found it increasingly difficult to source suitable games for new referees as so many games at lower levels have been called off and some teams are unsuitable for a new referee. Conversely, the number of games cancelled allowed for redeployment of referees to games that would otherwise remain uncovered by a society referee for the fact remains that we have a finite resource; we are not short of referees but we would be if all the games scheduled took place.

The table below summarises the above.

	<b>2022-23</b>	<b>2021-22</b>	<b>2020-21</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>2017-18</b>
Total Fixtures	1185	1399	0	1152	1475	1627
Cancellations	18%	23%	0	35%	18%	26%
Midweek fixtures	189	210	0	225	216	201
Sunday fixtures	215	282	0	127	208	95
Saturday fixtures	477	560	0	384	625	468
Unappointed or club referee	91	82	0	81	86	95

Despite the cancellations, thanks and a heartfelt acknowledgement is due to the clubs, particularly fixture secretaries, who have worked with us to make the process work. Inevitably there are some clubs who are not able to reach the standard of the majority and we look forward to an acknowledgement by all clubs that efficient and effective communication is required to make the system work.

As with any system change there is a “behind the scenes” operation and whilst the “customer” deals with David, very few are aware of the hugely significant work carried out by Phil Holley to technically join everything up and keep us all abreast of the technical capacity of the system. Finally in this respect we thank Mark Brown of Who’s The Ref for his company’s input into this system.

Les Newcombe, As Exchanges Secretary was able to arrange several valuable exchanges at Counties 2 (Level 8 ) with Kent, and Hampshire. These are used for development purposes, taking referees to places they do not know and meeting new people. Four of our referees were appointed to games, with James Robinson and Dave Harris receiving three appointments each, and Richard Jones and James Auty one each. London SW wish to revitalise Level 8 exchanges next season and we hope, therefore, to go back to two or three exchanges (two games each time) with each of our three regular exchanges.

There were 15 new applications to join the Society of which only three became graded referees. This is a reduction from 22 applications producing 10 referees last season. Our new referees are mentored by Gordon Burtenshaw who inducts our new recruits, arranges suitable fixtures and observation. Issues with RFU courses continue to be an obstacle but by far the greater problem for new referees has been the lack of suitable games that we knew would take place and this does, in part, explain the low conversion rate of new members to active, graded referees.

### ***Match Official Developers***

Andy Walford led a team of eight active Sussex Match Official Developer's (MOD's) during the season and many thanks are due to this team for their commitment.

A total of 60 referee reports were completed of which 43 were for Sussex referees. The remaining reports were provided for Federation matches or incoming exchanges. Unfortunately, not all active referees were watched this season owing to a combination of MOD availability and a high level of game cancellations and postponements.

At the start of the season a valuable co-ordination exercise took place hosted by Crawley RFC and thanks to them for accommodating our pre match briefing session and providing lunch

The current team is small and would benefit from new recruits including active on-field officials who may either be injured or simply have availability from time to time. Please make yourselves known to Andy Walford.

### ***Regional 1 and South East Federation***

The bodies exist to continue the development of all match officials.

The Regional 1 team are newly formed to appoint to Regional 1 (Level 5) and develop referees at that level has proceeded with tour being through South East Federation.

The good working relationship we have with colleagues in Kent as co-partners in the South East Federation has continued. Harry Leach has worked tirelessly to administer the finances of the Federation, Iain Mitchell has continued as Secretary, Phil Bowers has overseen the training and development function and Phil Holley brought his game experience to the Federations affairs. The Federation has been chaired by Bill Hobba of Kent.

As a result of the league redevelopments described earlier the Federation returned Counties 2 (previously Level 8 fixtures) to societies. This was because of the more local make-up of the leagues and a flattening of the structure that brought former Level 8 and Level 9 teams together.

### ***Safeguarding***

Richard Jones is our Safeguarding Officer and has been assisted by Gordon Burtenshaw and Iain Mitchell. Safeguarding is a key priority for us, the RFU and RFRU and DBS checks and training is mandatory for all match officials for Age Grade Rugby (AGR). It has been a good year for the safeguarding team because we have increased the numbers of match officials accredited to the point

where we can now cover approx. 95% of the AGR appointments on WTR. This is an increase of 50% on the season before.

We would like to encourage more active match officials to obtain a DBS and complete the on-line 'Welcome to Safeguarding' course (which can be found free via GMS) and we are consulting on ways we can do this, given its importance.

We have open conversations with Sussex RFU and the Clubs to advise on improvements that can be made with the club's infrastructure, to improve Safeguarding and the accommodation of Match Officials before, during and after AGR matches. Updated guidance and training on the best practice for SSRFUR members at clubs on AGR matchdays will be distributed to all active members before the start of the new season.

Anyone with any safeguarding concerns when out and about (even if you are not involved but see something that troubles them) must contact Richard at the earliest opportunity.

### ***Dinner and Awards***

It was our 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and a major dinner was planned and booked for December. Very sadly the level of support for this was poor and, reluctantly, we were forced to cancel this. It remains a difficulty for the officers and committee to identify a format that will receive the support of a significant proportion of the membership and in particular, active members.

Despite the absence of the dinner, we were still able to make award presentations at training events as follows:

Don Bradley Award - Christophe Rivet  
Sunshine Trophy- Oliver Tyson  
JVP Award - Les Newcombe

### ***Sporting Spirit Trophy***

Annually, the Society has made a presentation to the club considered to be the most welcoming to visiting referees, presenting their club in an organised manner on match days whilst extending a sporting welcome to their opponents both on and off the field.

The winner for 2021-22 was East Grinstead RFC and the President presented the trophy to them before a home game in December.

As we announced last year, due to several technical and other difficulties the award of the Sporting Spirit Trophy was suspended for this season and we hope to be able to relaunch a new scheme for the season 2023-24

### ***Sponsorship***

We continue to benefit from the generous major sponsorship of John Gibb Plastering Ltd. As a reminder, John is a Crowborough member and has done some refereeing in Sussex. We are grateful to him for his continuing valuable support.

We have also benefitted from some other support, which despite being given anonymously, is very valuable and gratefully received with thanks to the donors.

This sponsorship enables us to provide kit to give to active match officials. This season we have provided our performance reviewers and referee developers with complete weatherproof suits, and our referees with new shirts and shorts, if they were needed.

### ***Season 2023-24***

The Domestic Law Variation (DLV) being introduced to lower the tackle height in the community game in England will inevitably become and be seen as the major development in the new season. It is being introduced to make the game safer by the simple principle of keeping two or more heads out of the same head space. The players will need to ensure that they play the game in accordance with the DLV with a balanced responsibility between tackler and ball carrier and our role will be to recognise when the don't and sanction appropriately. It has the potential to change the game radically perhaps making it faster, with more offloads and fewer rucks; we shall see. What is not in doubt is our responsibility to inform ourselves of the requirements of the DLV, to approach the change positively by engaging with the training resources available, getting to our local club and ensuring this significant change has the best possible chance of succeeding and making our game safer.

The second thing we need to remember is that the DLV relating to the tackle height is only a very small part of the game and we need to ensure it is "business as usual" in applying the remaining Laws of the Game.

### ***Final thanks and Conclusion***

Harry Leach is standing down as our President after nine years in office. Harry is a literal larger than life character and his robust and wise leadership is deeply valued and appreciated. Harry remains involved as Immediate Past President and continues as treasurer and appointments officer for the Federation.

Phil Bowers is standing down as our Training Officer. Over many years Phil has ensured that the Society has received a range of high-quality training experiences and his work with individual match officials to assist with their development is both impressive and highly valued as he seeks to share his experience, knowledge and deep insight into the game for the betterment of others. Phil will continue as our chairman and with his involvement in Federation matters. We hope also that he will feel able to continue to contribute to training matters on occasion.

Thank you to everyone who has worked equally as hard as those who have been named. Everyone is a volunteer and is due thanks and praise for everything they give for our game and for match officiating.

We acknowledge and thank all those who support us in our hobby. Without them we would simply not be able to take part as we do.

We now move forward into our 91st Season. We have a continuing love of our game and what we do within it and as stewards of the Society we move things forward positively into the new season.

Iain Mitchell,  
General Secretary

28 June 2023