

SUSSEX SOCIETY OF RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION REFEREES

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE SEASON 2023-24

We have navigated our way through our 91st season. What we have done has been successful. However, we are now well clear of Covid and the effects of some members not returning, and an ageing profile of active match officials are now having a real effect. As you will read, we continue to see a fall in the number of appointments, reflecting shrinkage in the adult men's game contrasting with growth in women's and age-grade rugby.

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). Nationally, the shadow of the pandemic continues to loom over the Game as it continues to struggle to rebuild playing and officiating numbers which, broadly speaking are at roughly 85% of pre-pandemic levels in the adult men's game. The introduction of adult player registration for the coming season is likely to give a much clearer picture of adult participation levels across the game.

The height of the tackle and head on head contact has been the subject of a major focus and a Domestic Law Variation (DLV) came into effect at the start of the season. After a poor start with communication from the RFU, an excellent, co-ordinated, education programme was put in place and rolled out. This was a potentially major change, and we took on 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 clubs and ensuring this significant change had the best possible chance of succeeding and making our game safer. Our match officials responded positively and have played a major part in ensuring the change was implemented maturely and sensibly. We have not seen the increase in red and yellow cards predicted by some and our game has not been "ruined" but, rather, is a safer experience for all players. Our match officials should take great credit for their part in this.

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 performed very well in his first season as a full member of the National League Match Official Team (NLMOT) as a referee
- 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 and two Referee Developers remain on the Southeast Federation Panel

Training and Development

Phil Bowers stood down as our training officer at the end of last season and no member felt able to step forward. Consequently, it has been a very difficult season as other officers, particularly the General Secretary and Chairman, sought to plug the gap.

We had three face-to-face training meetings during the season.

We held a pre-season meeting at Brighton College where 11 presenters contributed variously to sessions on the DLV tackle height, safeguarding, game values, match official abuse and working with Match Official Developers.

At Lewes Neil Sweeney, a National League Match Official Team referee presented a really useful and relevant session on strategies for dealing with difficult people and situation. At East Grinstead Beccy Piddlesden, a National League Match Official Team associate referee presented a highly effective session on communication.

Phil Bowers & Ben McNamara have been joined by Iain Mitchell and Paul Shepperd 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 remain 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. The RFU have recently set up a Semi-Independent Review of Refereeing & Match Officials under the Community Game Future initiative and it is understood the review will take account of these game wide concerns. Iain Mitchell has been invited to be part of this review.

Sussex RFU and the Society have shared great concerns about recruitment of referees and the difficulties and constraints of the national courses, as described above. The RFU Introduction to Refereeing course (ITR) is thought too superficial to be of benefit to someone aspiring to referee and these courses are, in any case, often attended by those who want to know about refereeing but not necessarily take up a whistle. We have agreed to locally deliver a longer course devised by London Society, which is longer than the ITR course, is more in depth and better timed. We are grateful to London Society for giving permission to use their course and hope it will attract active referees. The first course is scheduled for Horsham on 29th July.

Gordon Burtenshaw continues to support new referees with their development by keeping contact and finding appropriate fixtures and attending matches in the early stages of development. We are encouraged to note that two members of a recent cohort have been able to reach Level 8 this season.

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.

We are delighted that Ben McNamara has indicated his agreement to become our Training Officer. We know we have several active members who have indicated they are able to be part of a Training Team moving forward, and we hope that with Ben's leadership we will see new energy and differentiation to what we do.

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 as The Rugby Football Referees Union.

As described in the section on training and development, we have been working in partnership with Gary and other officers to develop match officiating in clubs and identify referee recruits. 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.

As a response to match official abuse, match abandonments and a declining behaviour culture we have been working closely with Sussex RFU on a project to address this and more is said in the next section. We are pleased to be working co-operatively with the CB and are encouraged by their support.

Discipline and Match Official Abuse

Alongside Sussex RFU, RFRU and the RFU we have been very concerned at the drop in behaviour standards and a rise in match official abuse and disrespect (MOA). This is a national issue, and it is a game issue; it is also something that has become part of the game in Sussex. This manifests itself in a poor match day experience for our referees which impacts on recruitment and retention. We and Sussex RFU have been working on a strategy to be launched to clubs to seek an improvement. Clubs, players, coaches and Sussex RFU have their responsibilities and we, as match officials, have a responsibility to be consistent and clear on identifying and dealing with poor behaviour by using the escalation procedures available to us including ask, tell, penalise, yellow and red cards followed by accurate reporting. Above all, it must never be ignored. We are looking at simple ways in which we can receive feedback from referees on their matchday experience to build up a picture of teams and personnel who seem to make life difficult. We are considering the re-launch of the Sporting Spirit Trophy to assist in this and more is said below.

Sussex RFU have dealt with 37 senior, 12 age-grade and five school's cases. In addition, four matches were abandoned, two for injury but two because of poor behaviour. 13 of the 37 senior cases were because of disrespect or abuse of a match official - an increase from eight last season. Outcomes of the senior cases are published on the Sussex RFU website [Sussex RFU Discipline Cases 2023-24](#)

Thanks are due to Stewart Goodwin for his work in attending hearings as our observer and communicating with officers and match officials where appropriate. In Sussex RFU we have always been well supported and we know that will continue when required.

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 919 fixtures of all types, which is a reduction of 164 (20%) from the previous season and 378 (27%) from 2021-22. This includes tournaments, festivals, exchanges, and reappointments but not games at Regional 1, 2 and Counties 1. There were 331 appointments to games that took place on a Saturday, a reduction of 147; 169 Sunday appointments and 117 midweek appointments, reductions of 46 and 72 games, respectively.

Of continuing concern is the number of fixture cancellations made after initial appointment. WTR shows numbers of cancellations to be a total of 175 meaning that 19% of the games scheduled did not subsequently take place. This is an improvement from the 213 games in the previous season although

there were fewer games originally scheduled meaning the percentage was a shade higher. Although there is growth in some areas of the game the overall trend in appointments is one of reduction.

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. Until now we have concluded that we are not short of referees, but we would be if all the games scheduled took place. The situation has now changed and despite the large number of cancellations we are short of match officials. The number of games where we have been unable to appoint has risen by 36 to 127, which is a 28% increase and is the highest for the past seven years at least by some margin.

The table below summarises the above.

| | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 | 2019-20 | 2018-19 |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Total Fixtures | 919 | 1185 | 1399 | 0 | 1152 | 1475 |
| Cancellations | 19% | 18% | 23% | 0 | 35% | 18% |
| Midweek fixture appointments | 117 | 189 | 210 | 0 | 225 | 216 |
| Sunday fixture appointments | 169 | 215 | 282 | 0 | 127 | 208 |
| Saturday fixture appointments | 331 | 477 | 560 | 0 | 384 | 625 |
| Unappointed or club referee | 127 | 91 | 82 | 0 | 81 | 86 |

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.

We were able to arrange several valuable exchanges at Counties 2 (Level 8) with Hampshire and a Counties 3 exchange with Kent. These are used for development purposes, taking referees to places they do not know and meeting new people. Four Sussex referees - Joe Garman, James Robinson, Chris Thorne and Cam Thomas - took these opportunities.

There were 29 new applications to join the Society of which six became graded referees. This is an improvement from the 15 and 22 applications in each the past two seasons. The six active referees compare to three and ten in the past two seasons. 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 11 active Sussex Match Official Developers (MOD's) during the season and many thanks are due to this team for their commitment. We welcomed Mick Davies, Stewart Goodwin and Simon Joswiack to the group, the latter two offering much needed help, whilst recovering from injuries.

Jerry Sirley decided to call it a day and we would like to express thanks for his time and commitment over the years. He was a member of this society for 25 years as referee and developer and 50 years worldwide; an extraordinary achievement.

A total of 79 reports were produced by Sussex MOD's in the season, 55 for Sussex Society Referees and 19 for SEF. In addition, five reports were produced for incoming exchange referees.

All active Sussex society referees fulfilling more than one appointment in the season were observed at least once.

Regional 1 and South East Federation

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

The Regional 1 team appoint to Regional 1 (Level 5) and develop referees at that level. Paul Shepperd has been able to receive appointments at this level.

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 and has overcome significant issues with great credit to administer the appointing function, 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 Nick Wickham of Kent.

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).

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 was given to members at the pre-season meeting and distributed to all active members.

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.

Sporting Spirit Trophy

Until 2021-22 the Society made an annual 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. Due to several technical and other difficulties, the award of the Trophy was suspended for the subsequent season and was not reintroduced last season.

Under the section on Discipline and Match Official Abuse you will have read that we are looking at ways to improve the match official experience on match days and this will include a mechanism for collecting information. The Sporting Spirit Trophy is a natural fit for this, and we are considering the re-launch, with amended criteria, to collect relevant data and assist the process of improving the referee experience whilst, at the same time, rewarding clubs who are getting things right and who's game values are good. If we do this, we will need buy in from all our match officials.

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.

Season 2024-25

Looking forward to next season, there are three law changes (not DLVs); eliminating the ability to opt for a scrum at a free kick; greater sanction of the so called 'croc roll'; and changes to the off-side law in open play by removing the clauses relating to the catcher running 5 metres or passing the ball meaning an offside player has to take greater action to put themselves onside. The RFU centrally are preparing a training programme to cover these law changes. The use of the 20 minute red card substitution, currently in operation in the Southern Hemisphere, will not be introduced by Northern Hemisphere unions for the foreseeable future.

Given the opening remarks and the evidence contained in the rest of this review showing that we are short of match officials, recruitment and retention has an even more important place in our needs. We need to lead the game locally to find and train personnel and find a way to unlock the constraint imposed by the current training course arrangements. There is a challenge over resourcing, but non-traditional sources for match officials need to be developed including Young Match Officials as well as the women's game where the upcoming Rugby World Cup could provide recruitment opportunities.

Final thanks and Conclusion

Les Newcombe is standing down as Exchanges Secretary and grateful thanks are due to him for the work he has undertaken. Les has been an active member of the society since arriving in Sussex several years ago. Combined with his work nationally he was also a very active member of Gloucester Society, most recently as their finance officer. We acknowledged Les's contribution a couple of seasons ago with the award of the JVP Award and as he steps down from our committee it is appropriate to record our thanks for a wide range of roles over many years.

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 92nd 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,

