MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE – A GUIDE FOR REFEREES

INTRODUCTION

What we loosely refer to as 'Match Official Abuse' can take a number of different forms and may come from several different sources. It may be verbal, by gesture and, in rare cases, physical. It may come from players involved in the match or from coaches, parents or spectators. It may occur during the course of a game but sometimes only occurs after a game has finished.

Eradicating Match Official Abuse is essential to maintaining the Game's ethos and core values. Match Officials must therefore adopt a zero tolerance to Match Official Abuse and act decisively whenever and however it occurs. In addition to on field sanctions available to referees allowing them to deal with abuse as and when it occurs, the RFU disciplinary process should ensure that reported cases which are found to be proved are met with sanctions based on the formulaic approach approved by World Rugby.

As a necessary first step, it is important that referees are able to recognise abuse when it occurs and be aware of the appropriate response.

CATEGORIES OF 'MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE' AND APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

The RFU disciplinary process recognises **five distinct categories of match official abuse** each with their own range of available disciplinary sanctions.

Referees have to respond promptly and decisively to abuse and it may not always be easy to determine into which category the abuse falls. The referee will be trusted to do what they believe to be the right thing to do in the circumstances presented to them. Those responsible for administering the disciplinary process will then consider all the evidence and determine the appropriate charge that the alleged offender(s) should face.

All categories of on field match official abuse are catered for by Law 9.28 of the World Rugby Laws of the Game.

1. Disrespecting the authority of the Match Official

This is the lowest recognised level of abuse and is often referred to as 'dissent' rather than Match Official Abuse. It involves questioning a decision of the Match Official.[1] This could include verbal disrespect, such as making a sarcastic gesture in response to a decision, or non-verbal actions such as applauding, throwing a ball away or refusing to return to the Referee. In extreme cases, it could cover players who persistently appeal for certain decisions and continue to do so following a warning. It may, but need not necessarily, include the use of foul or abusive language. The use of foul or abusive language adds to the seriousness of the offence and will

[1] It is a recognised convention of the game that the captain of a team can approach the referee at an appropriate moment to seek clarification for a particular decision. This does not entitle the captain to challenge the decision. Referees should not tolerate approaches from players other than the team captains.

affect the determination of the appropriate on field response. The use of foul or abusive language itself does not necessarily elevate the seriousness from 'dissent' to abuse.

Where a Match Official is met with a challenge to their authority doing nothing will rarely, if ever, be a suitable response.

There are a range of available on field options according to the seriousness of the challenge:

- awarding a penalty against the offending player's team and issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- reversing a penalty decision where the offending player's team had initially been awarded a penalty, along with issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- moving the offending player's team back 10m where the decision which is challenged had been the award of a penalty, along with issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- issuing a yellow card to the offending player where the challenge is deemed sufficiently seriousness;
- issuing a red card – this would usually be the appropriate response where the offending player persists in challenging the Match Official's decision following a warning or where the challenge is accompanied by swearing.

2. Verbal abuse

This occurs where the offender uses foul or offensive language in comments **aimed directly at a Match Official.** It also includes any attack upon the integrity of the Match Official regardless of whether or not this is accompanied by foul or offensive language. Any disparaging comment directed at a Match Official with reference to their religion, colour, sexual orientation or national or ethnic origin should automatically be treated as abuse.

Conduct properly categorised as abuse should always result in a red card.

It is acknowledged that the dividing line between dissent and abuse can be a narrow one. For example, if a player responded to a decision by the Match Official by shouting, *"That's a fucking joke",* that would constitute disrespecting the authority of the referee but if the player's response was to shout directly at the Match Official, *"You're a fucking joke"* that would amount to abuse.[2]

3. Using threatening actions or words towards Match Officials

This occurs where a specific threat is made to a Match Official either verbally or by physical gesture but there is no physical contact between the offender and the Match Official.

The appropriate response to such an offence will always be to issue a red card.

[2] In a recent case dealt with by an RFU Disciplinary Panel a water carrier was alleged by the referee to have said to him after he had refused to stop the game to allow an injured player to be treated and the opposition had gone on to score, *"You're fucking us."* The offender admitted disrespecting the authority of the referee but claimed that the actual words used were, *"You've fucking killed us there."* The panel expressed the view that what the referee alleged amounted to match official abuse as the comment inferred that the referee was showing bias whilst what the offender admitted having said amounted to disrespecting the authority of the referee albeit in circumstances that justified a red card.

4. Making physical contact with a Match Official

This is often referred to as 'making incidental contact with a Match Official'. It occurs where there is non-intentional contact with the referee which is more than merely accidental. Put another way, it covers physical contact falling short of what might be considered to be an assault. The offence can be committed spontaneously, such as where the offender pushes a Match Official out of the way to enable them to make a tackle, or recklessly where the player puts themselves in a situation where physical contact is unavoidable even though it was not intentional.

The appropriate response to such an offence will always be to issue a red card.

It is common in cases of physical contact that a Match Official may initially blame themselves for their positioning rather than blaming the actions of the player. If the Match Official, who is subject to physical contact, has the opportunity to review an incident and determines that an offence has taken place then they can still submit a MOA report, irrespective of whether they issued any form of sanction on-field.

N.B. In accordance with Regulations 19.4.1-19.4.6, any MOA report must be submitted as soon as practicable and by no later than 9am on the second day following the Match.

5. Physical abuse of a Match Official

This is the most serious form of match official abuse and thankfully the rarest. It occurs where the offender intentionally makes physical contact with the Match Official – i.e. physical contact that could not be categorised as merely reckless or purely accidental.

Again, the appropriate response to such an offence will always be to issue a red card.

FURTHER NOTES

i. The offences specifically recognised by Law 9.28 and RFU Regulation 19 [Discipline] as described above can only be committed by **players** who are subject to the on field jurisdiction of the referee. Where such offences result in the issue of a red card, the formal disciplinary process will be triggered by the submission of the **Red Card Report**. Where words are spoken or acts committed by coaches, parents or spectators which, if spoken or committed by a player would have been categorised as falling within one of the five categories outlined above, the referee should complete and submit a **Match Official Abuse (MOA) Report**[3]. The report will be considered by the Discipline Secretary of the Constituent Body to which the offender's club is attached[4] who will initiate formal disciplinary proceedings. As Law 9.28 does not apply to such cases, it is likely that any disciplinary charge will be brought pursuant to RFU Rule 5.12 alleging 'conduct prejudicial to the interests of the game'. RFU Regulation 19.2.2 makes clear that, for disciplinary purposes, all clubs are deemed to be responsible for the behaviour of their players, officials, members, spectators and employees.

[3] Note that players who have been replaced tactically or due to an injury remain subject to the jurisdiction of the referee for the duration of the match.

[4] Or, in a case to which RFU Regulation 19.2.20 applies, the RFU Head of Discipline.

ii. Errors can be corrected. Although it may be immediately obvious to the Match Official that one of the offences categorised as abuse has occurred it may not be immediately obvious into which category the offence falls. In most cases, the Match Official will not be in a position to call on any assistance in determining precisely what has occurred. In such circumstances, the Match Official must calmly and dispassionately determine what they believe to have occurred, which they will record in detail in the subsequent report, and act accordingly. When considering the facts as set out in the report and any supporting evidence provided, the CB Discipline Secretary will determine the appropriate charge(s) that the offender should face. Where the alleged offence is not committed by a player subject to the on-field jurisdiction of the Match Official, the appropriate offence(s) will be reflected in the terms in which the Rule 5.12 charge is framed.

iii. Match Officials should not lose sight of the fact that abusive comments made by players which are not directed at them or amount to an attack on their integrity may also constitutes 'foul play' – Law 9.12. This would cover cases where the abuse is directed at an opponent or a team mate. In responding to such abuse, the Match Official should have regard to the context in which the comments were made and be conscious of the need to uphold game values. Any abuse which relates to any of the protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010[5] MUST be dealt with by the issue of a red card and dealt with by the RFU discipline team.

IF A MATCH OFFICIAL IS MADE AWARE OF ANY ALLEGATION OF DISCRIMINATORY LANGUAGE BEING USED IN A MATCH, IRRESPECTIVE OF WHETHER THE MATCH OFFICIAL THEMSELVES HEARD THE COMMENT, IT MUST BE REPORTED TO THE CB DISCIPLINE SECRETARY AFTER THE MATCH WHO WILL SEEK ADVICE FROM THE RFU HEAD OF DISCIPLINE IN RESPECT OF CHARGES.

COMPLETING A RED CARD OR MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE REPORT

The report completed by the Match Official to trigger the disciplinary process where Match Official Abuse is alleged is a critical document on which the effective operation of the process relies. Well written, accurate reports containing the right amount of detail should enable a Disciplinary Panel to determine the appropriate sanction for the offence committed and should, in most cases, ensure that the panel can deal with the case without requiring the Match Official to attend the hearing.

Many Referee Societies have appointed members who are able to assist with the writing of any report and if available, these individuals should be consulted before submitting any report.

It is the section of the report headed *Detailed report of incident* which requires the greatest care. The primary object of this section of the report is to provide a detailed and accurate factual account of what took place. It should provide the offender and the panel with a clear picture of the events leading up to, during, and immediately after the incident complained of.

Match Officials give their time voluntarily and the completing reports detailing Match Official Abuse is one of the least attractive aspects of their role. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from getting it right first time. A report which is inaccurate is unlikely to be accepted by the offender. , This may result in the offender pleading not guilty to the disciplinary charge and requiring the Match Official to

[5] Age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

attend the hearing where they will be challenged on the content of the report. Even where the charge is admitted, the offender may require the referee's attendance so that the alleged inaccuracies can be put to them.

Where the report contains insufficient detail to enable the panel to perform its role, the CB Discipline Secretary may refer the report back to the Match Official with a request for further information. This information will be required before notification of the hearing can be sent to the offender and their club. Inadequate reports are therefore likely to result in delays to conducting the hearing.

Checklist

The report should address all of the issues below which apply to the incident(s) the subject of the report:

- What decision or action of the Match Official prompted the alleged abuse?
- Where on the field did this occur?
- How far away from the offending were you when the offending words were spoken (or physical act committed)?
- To the best of your recollection, what were the precise words spoken?
- Did the offender make eye contact with you when the offending remarks were made?
- Are you in a position to discount the possibility that the offending words were directed at someone other than yourself such as a team mate or opponent?
- What impact did the offence have on the remainder of the match – e.g. what was the response of the other players to the offender's words or actions?
- After you notified the offender of your decision how did they respond?
- Did you have any subsequent contact with the offender?
- Was there an appointed Assistant Referee or Referee Assessor/Performance Reviewer who may be able to provide supporting evidence?

In cases where physical abuse is alleged

  - What part of the offender's body was used to initiate (or attempt to initiate) physical contact – e.g. clenched fist, hand, arm, elbow, knee, foot?

- Were you in a position where you were able to defend yourself and/or take evasive action?
- Did actual physical contact occur?
- If so, with which part of your body was contact made?
- How would you describe the level of force used?
- Did you sustain any injury?

AGE GRADE CASES

Where cases of alleged Match Official Abuse occur in Age Grade matches, the same principles described above will apply but some of the subsequent discipline processes will differ.

Where the Match Official who has been the subject of alleged Match Official Abuse is aged 17 or under **safeguarding** issues may arise and any case will be referred to both the Discipline and Safeguarding teams at the RFU.

Any adult spectator or Coach who is subject to a MOA complaint will be dealt with by the CB adult discipline secretary and any sanction will be based on the adult sanction table.

FURTHER ADVICE

Where a Match Official requires further advice on the completion of a Red Card Report or Match Official Abuse Report then in the first instance contact should be made with the appointed officer with the Referee Society. Alternatively, advice can be sought from the CB discipline secretary or direct from the RFU.

For advice on any aspect of the disciplinary process, the CB Discipline Secretary who will administer any disciplinary proceedings will be best placed to provide that advice.

Advice is also available direct from the RFU discipline team by contacting disciplineRFU@rfu.com

APPENDIX A

IS IT DISRESPECT OR IS IT VERBAL ABUSE?

Decided disciplinary cases reported on the RFU website here [Englandrugby.com] may provide some guidance in determining whether words directed at the Match Official should be categorised as disrespecting the authority of the Match Official or verbal abuse of a Match Official. They do not, however, constitute binding precedents as no two cases are the same.

Match Officials must be allowed some margin of error as identified errors can be corrected by the disciplinary process. In an attempt to assist Match Officials in drawing the sometimes blurred distinction between disrespect/dissent on the one hand and verbal abuse [or threatening words or behaviour] on the other, some hypothetical examples are set out below along with suggestions as to how they should be categorised.

The following examples would properly be categorised as disrespecting the authority of the Match Official:

1. "Are you fucking serious?"
2. "That's fucking bullshit ref."
3. "Are you having a laugh?"
4. 'Are you fucking joking?"
5. "Fucking wonderful, fucking marvellous."
6. "That's fucking pathetic."

With the possible exception of (3) the circumstances of all of the above are such as would justify an on field red card.

The following examples would properly be categorised as verbal abuse of the referee warranting a red card:

1. "You're a fucking joke."
2. "You're fucking pathetic."
3. "Are you a retard?"
4. "You're a cheat."
5. "Come on lads, we're playing against 16 here."

The following examples would properly be categorised as using threatening words or behaviour:

"If I see you in the clubhouse afterwards, I'm going to smash your head in."
"I wouldn't come back here again if I were you"

A Panel does have the ability to amend the charge, should they feel it appropriate after hearing evidence from the Parties or should there be an error in the presentation of the case.

APPENDIX B – Appropriate classification of offence

Charge	Definition of Charge	Example
Disrespecting The Authority Of The Match Official	Often referred to as 'dissent' rather than Match Official Abuse. It involves questioning a decision of the Match Official.	"Are you fucking serious?" "That's fucking bullshit ref." "Are you having a laugh?" 'Are you fucking joking?" "That's fucking pathetic." Non-verbal examples include; -Throwing the ball away - Refusing to follow the direction of the Match Official - Refusal to give a name when asked
Verbal Abuse of A Match Official	This occurs where the offender uses foul or offensive language in comments **aimed directly at the Match Official.** **Any comments that question the integrity of the Match Official should be considered as Abuse.**	"You're a fucking joke." "You're fucking pathetic." "You're fucking useless" "Are you a retard?" "You're a cheat." "Come on lads, we're playing against 16 here."
Physical Contact With A Match Official	This is often referred to as 'making incidental contact with a Match Official'. It occurs where there contact with the Match Official which is more than merely accidental.	A player moving the referee out of the way at a breakdown or to make a tackle. NB It is common that a referee may initially apologise for their positioning, however, this does not prevent a charge being issued on review.
Physical Abuse Of A Match Official	The offender intentional makes physical contact with the Match Official – i.e., physical contact that could not be categorised as merely reckless, careless or purely accidental.	A player charging into a ref. A player pushing the referee with force Any punch, strike, kick
Threatening Actions or Words Towards A Match Official	This occurs where a specific threat is made to the Match Official either verbally or by physical gesture but there is no physical contact between the offender and the referee.	"I'm going to punch your lights out" " I'm going to smash your car up" " I wouldn't come into the club house if I was you"

APPENDIX C – SANCTION TABLE

Any RFU or CB disciplinary panel is obliged to follow the World Rugby approved sanction table for offences that receive a Red Card[6]. These sanctions for the adult game are set out below:

9.28 A player must not disrespect the authority of a Match Official

Low-end: 2 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 4 weeks/matches	Top-end: 6+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches

9.28 A player must not verbally abuse a Match Official. Verbal abuse includes, but is not limited to, abuse based on: religion, colour, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation.

Low-end: 6 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 12 weeks/matches	Top-end: 18+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches

9.28 A player must not make physical contact with Match Officials.

Low-end: 6 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 12 weeks/matches	Top-end: 18+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches

9.28 A player must not use threatening actions or words towards Match Officials.

Low-end: 12 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 24 weeks/matches	Top-end: 48+ weeks/matches	Max: 260 weeks/matches

9.28 A player must not physically abuse Match Officials.

Low-end: 24 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 48 weeks/matches	Top-end: 96+ weeks/matches	Max: Life

The Sanction table for the Adult game can be found in RFU Regulation 19, Appendix 2, while the sanction table for the Age Grade game can be found in RFU Regulation 19, Appendix 6.

If the person involved is a **YMO (Young Match Official) or U18 Match Official**, the sanction table has a new provision of a minimum mid-range entry point for any offence under Law 9.28 in which they are involved.

[6] Certain CB's have informed all their clubs that MOA offences can be aggravated by a set number of weeks. These weeks are added to the World Rugby sanction.

When a charge is issued by the RFU/ CB for a breach of Rule 5.12, an act not in the interests of the Game, the Disciplinary Panel has the ability to impose any sanction which may include a warning or reprimand, a fine or suspension from Playing/Coaching/Spectating or any combination of these. Whilst the sanction must be proportionate to the offending, a panel can also mandate an individual or a club complete an alternative sanction, in addition to a match sanction.

Recent examples of alternate sanctions that have been directed by Panels include; Game Values presentations to other teams within the Club, attendance at Referee courses and letters of apology.

All RFU judgments are published in full on the RFU website.
All CB MOA case summaries are also published on the RFU website

APPENDIX 4 – USEFUL LINKS

The **Red Card forms** can be found on this page.https://forms.office.com/r/2FSWCJyidghttps://www.englandrugby.com/participation/refereeing/referee-resources

The **Match Official Abuse forms** can be found:

- Level 1 Women and Level 1-4 Men here. This form will go directly to the RFU Discipline Team.
- All other levels here. This form should be returned to CB Discipline Secretary and Referee Society Discipline Officer.

The **Match Abandonment Form** can be found here, as well as some guidance.https://forms.office.com/r/2FSWCJyidghttps://www.englandrugby.com/participation/refereeing/referee-resources

Contact details for the RFU Discipline Team can be found here.

The **RFU Speak Up Policy** can be found here. You can report any abuse through our **Speak Up Inbox** SpeakUp@rfu.com

APPENDIX 5 – FAQ's

This section is to assist the both the Match Official and any Disciplinary panel in deciding the appropriate action.

Submission of a MOA Report

Q. Can a Referee Coach submit a MOA report on behalf of the Referee?
A. Only the Match Official who was subject to any abuse can submit a report.

Q. Who can submit an MOA report
A. Any Match Official can submit a MOA report. It would then be for the relevant Disciplinary Secretary to determine if charges should be issued.

Q. How long after a match can a Match Official submit a MOA report?
A. Regulations 19.4.1-19.4.6 stipulates that a report must be submitted shall as soon as practicable and by no later than 9am on the second day following the Match

What should be considered as MOA?

Q. Can comments in the club house be considered as MOA?
A. If any abuse is aimed at a Match Official in relation to their performance in the role then the Match Official can submit a MOA report. This could relate to comments said to a Match Official in the Club house.

Q. Can comments on social media be reported as MOA?
A. If the comments relate to the performance of a Match Official and are made by someone under the jurisdiction of the RFU then charges can be issued for any public comments, including those online.

Q. If a Match Official issues a Yellow Card for an offence, can they subsequently submit a MOA report for the same offence?
A. If there is an incident that should be given a Red Card then this should be issued at the time of the incident. The only exception to this is when a Match Official has been subject to Physical Contact and has been able to form a different opinion having reviewed new information that was not available to them at the time of the incident.

The discipline and sanctioning process

Q. Do the Disciplinary Panel have to follow the World Rugby approved sanction table?
A. If a Red Card is issued then the panel are bound by the sanction table. If an MOA report is issued then the panel will treat the case as a breach of RFU Rule 5.12 and have the ability to consider any sanction. Most panels will still use the WR sanction table as a guide but have the ability to consider alternate sanctions and suspend an element of the sanction.

Q. What can the Disciplinary Panel do if the person responsible for any MOA is not under the jurisdiction of the RFU?
A. The Disciplinary panel will investigate if they do have jurisdiction and if it is found that they do not then they can give consideration to issuing charges against the relevant club for failure to control the individual concerned.

Q. Why do Discipline Panels give mitigation to someone who is found guilty of MOA?
A. The RFU regulations detail what should be considered by any Panel when determining Entry Point for sanction and then any Mitigation and Aggravation. Regardless of the type of offence a Panel should consider all the relevant factors.

Q. Can a Match Official or Referee Society appeal the decision of a Discipline Panel?
A. Only the person subject to the charge and the RFU Head of Discipline have the right of appeal.

Q. How do I ask the RFU Head of Discipline to review the decision of the Discipline Panel?
A. The RFU has 14 days from the date of the written judgment to lodge any appeal so the Head of Discipline should be notified well in advance of that deadline. It must also be noted that an Appeal is not normally a re-hearing of a case, it is a review of the first instance decision.

Q. Is MOA towards a Young Match Official (YMO) a discipline or safeguarding offence?
A. Any MOA will be treated as a disciplinary offence, however, in certain circumstances the Safeguarding team will be made aware of an incident.

Q. Will MOA decisions be published?
A. The RFU publish all judgments in full and it is expected that from the start of the 2022/23 season all MOA cases from every level will be listed on the EnglandRugby website.

Further FAQ's

Q. Can a Coach or Club Officer approach the Referee at half time or after a match?
A. Regulation 11.5 states that no person can approach a Match Official at half time or within 30 minutes of the match without the permission of that Match Official.

FURTHER ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE

The CB Disciplinary Secretary and the RFU Discipline Department are on hand to provide any advice and assistance that Clubs requires in dealing with any member's on or off-field misconduct.

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