“Breaking the Bread and Building Blocks” -

Examining the Game through the Eyes of Coaches and Referees

“Coach and Referee- Your job gives you authority- Your Behaviour earns you respect.”

Quote attributed to Jack Gibson, Premiership Winning Coach, Rugby League

“Rugby Union is a sport which involves physical contact. Any sport involving physical contact has inherent dangers. It is very important that players play the game in accordance with the Laws of the Game and be mindful of the safety of themselves and others. It is the responsibility of those who coach or teach the game to ensure that players are prepared in a manner which ensures compliance with the Laws of the Game and in accordance with safe practices.”

IRB

B Timms, 2002
Rugby is a players’ and spectators’ game. The role of the Coach and Referee is a significant factor in ensuring this aim is realised. They are visible stakeholders and their collective contribution as pivotal partners is fundamental to our game growing and achieving a high status profile in the competitive arena of World Sport.

The major premise of this study was to examine the perspective that Referees and Coaches have in regard to the management of the game and to identify areas of commonality that could be developed for the greater good of the game. It also seeks to examine trends or themes that suggest divergent thinking in regard to how each partner operates and the degree of interaction (positive or otherwise) prevalent in the game at this present point in time. There was also provision for people to present views on how our game could be improved as a spectacle and a package in what is increasingly becoming a commercially orientated and driven market place in global sport - take note International Rugby Board, if nothing else it makes for interesting reading.

Having only been a player or coaching participant until this year I recognise that my view of the game was naturally slanted and I did not fully appreciate the job description or demands that go with being the “man in the middle” until I experienced it first hand. This proved to be the catalyst and personal motivation in the construction of the sample survey.

Survey Composition:

Four Step Task:
1. Construction of Dual Questionnaires-brainstorming questions & format
2. Collecting the Data
3. Sorting the Data into a Summary
4. Analysing the Data

Survey Period: July 19- August 30 (7 weeks)
Referees: 17 questions (13 multiple choice, 1 ranking, 3 written responses)
Coaches: 17 questions (12 multiple choice, 2 ranking, 3 written responses)

The theme was developed from a two tier parallel perspective and questions were initially constructed to address the perspective that coaches and referees may have on the state of the game and their relationship and role. Certain questions were similarly stated with the word coach or referee substituted accordingly. (Or words to that effect) Most of the presented questions stem from areas that provoke comment in pre or post match discussion.

I wanted to identify:

➢ Why the respective parties choose to do what they do
➢ What they regard as key qualities to fulfill their role
➢ How they view each other and the degree of interaction involved
➢ An inspection of laws, critical areas of the game and recommendations
➢ The degree of experience and commitment to the game
Any prejudices or subjectivity that may get in the way of healthy relations between the parties

I originally intended to make the questionnaire open-ended so respondents wouldn’t be unnecessarily influenced by my perspective and direction and could comment freely. In hindsight I was being overly optimistic in making the assumption that respondents would be happy to devote a sizeable amount of time to writing their thoughts on various issues without guidelines or parameters. The time factor, level of computer literacy, and also apathy towards the questionnaire format might prove to be a deterrent.

I sought the advice of Warren Robilliard (Australian Rugby Union Coach Education Manager) who suggested the need to make it more user-friendly by incorporating questions primarily using a multiple-choice framework. Thus it evolved; it was challenging to pose a suitable selection to choose from under each question criteria. It is an interesting and ambitious exercise to construct a survey without a lot of background experience in formatting of questions. To gauge general opinion I presented a number of random questions to rugby enthusiasts to seek their opinion or interpretation and I also trialled the questionnaire with several coaches and referees to determine the validity and overall ease of responding. I was then able to make some subtle changes and issue it for general consumption. Most surveys can be completed in a 15-minute time frame.

**Sample Coverage:** 33 Responses each for Referees and Coaches- Total 66

In order to get a nation wide response I made contact via e-mail and the telephone with various State contacts from the Australian Rugby Shield seeking their assistance in circulating both the Coach and Referee Questionnaire (NSW Country, Victoria, Western Australia, Northern Territory) I also sought assistance from the Australian Rugby Union, the Queensland Rugby Union and the Queensland Referees Association and sent the surveys to regional Queensland. I also promoted the questionnaire on the Internet using a number of rugby related links in pursuit of a global perspective.

Collated responses have come from Referees and Coaches in New South Wales, Western Australia, Victoria, Metropolitan Brisbane, Regional Queensland, and two international responses from the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Percentage rankings have been rounded to the nearest whole number and grouped accordingly. I have endeavoured, where possible to group collective comment responses as they may pertain to a key theme.

**Components of the Report:**

The composition of this document is made up of Master Copies of the Questionnaires; A Summary Statement of collated Information and a Report outlining my observations based on the findings. There is also a note acknowledging all those who have made a contribution.
**Trends and Features of Responses:**

The major thrust of my report will focus around interesting features and trends that I have identified and outlined in the summary statement. I will not be commenting in detail on each question but readers do have a reference point if they wish to view the collated responses. No doubt there will be something of interest for all parties.

This report in no way attempts to state a right or wrong way of operation for how coaches and referees should approach their role. It simply states what respondents had to say about their experiences at a certain point in time.

A pertinent general statement that pertains to the core study is to recognise that responses are very much dictated by the respondents’ level of experience and expertise in their role and whom they are primarily focusing on in their role as a coach and referee. The elite referee or coach is going to have a different perspective, agenda and mind set to a fledgling offisider that is responsible for coaching or refereeing junior school boy rugby. This was borne out in the responses when I compared someone coaching or refereeing in senior ranks with someone involved in a recreational capacity. Priorities change depending on the domain you participate and operate in. A number of respondents were involved in various levels of the game and commented that their focus varied depending on the situation and their primary role. The statistics do not necessarily reflect this important point in the format that I have produced.

Age and Years involved in a Coaching and Refereeing capacity reflect a genuine long term commitment with 67% of Coaches being involved for more than 7 years and 61 % indicated for Referees. Such roles still appear to be a male preserve with only one female response. It should also be noted that there is a significant allegiance to schoolboy rugby by both parties. Coaches who had a referee qualification registered 48% and referees with a coaching qualification recorded 52% suggesting a positive awareness of the dual roles.

The motives for coaching and refereeing were spread across the stems. Enjoyment, love of the game, player development, fitness coupled with success and the associated challenges suggest a long-term affinity for the game. You can also factor in that certain personality types may be influenced to take up a role that reflects or suits their disposition.

The most important qualities of a coach and referee were determined by a first and second past the post model where Rugby knowledge and People skills were the mutually agreed predominant stand out elements. Coaches saw People skills as slightly more important whereas Referees regard rugby knowledge as the foremost quality. Surprisingly the “Desire to Achieve” was not a motivational force for Coaches and “Tolerance” was not viewed highly by the referee fraternity.

A significant percentage of coaches saw Player Development as the their most important role and this was also suggested by the referees. This highlights the importance and need for coaches to be involved in coaching education on an ongoing basis to keep pace with the development of the game. It is interesting to note that referees viewed Player Safety as their most important role, is this indication of the growing concerns associated with litigation?
Has there been a deliberate move away from the traditional role of ensuring the game is controlled through the enforcement of the rules, which would see player safety paramount anyway?

A number of referees commented on the dilemma they encounter in managing the game to suit the players and the rules and the fact that this compromises their execution of duties. There is also the element of subjectivity and the human factor involved in interpreting the laws, which causes confusion due to inconsistency from game to game and this also extends to the coaching viewpoint with regard to interpretation.

Referees overwhelmingly perceive coaches as viewing their whistle blowing status as a necessary evil. (60%) It could be suggested that this is a negative connotation whereas Coaches believe Referees view them as people who are focused on player development and dedicated servants of the game (84% combined) suggesting a positive spin as far as the coaches are concerned.

Both Referees (93%) and Coaches (73%) share a collective belief in the value of discussing various elements of a game in post match mode. Controversial and technical issues account for 64% of discussion in terms of the referee’s stance. Coaches saw technical issues, team performance and a general post mortem of the game accounting for 76% of the focus for discussion. This is a healthy forum and a good example of interaction and debate that should be mutually beneficial rather than having exclusive value. There is no formal mode or system in place for post match analysis and this operates traditionally on a goodwill scale.

Both Referees and Coaches were strong supporters of pre match meetings. Referees would primarily focus on Game Management and Interpretation of the Tackle Rule (72%) The question of scrum engagement and obligations at the tackle and breakdown tend to be spelt out as well as establishing a “face” with regard to the captain when it comes to on field discussions. The Coaching Fraternity had a different motive. They have an interest in specific scenarios that have been played out previously and want to gauge how the referee will rule on such issues. (44%) Determining the type of personality and manner a referee may project and briefing the team accordingly was weighted at 20% and regarded as part of the pre-match preparation from a coaching viewpoint.

It is encouraging to see Coaches involving Referees in the education of players. (85%) Sixty One per cent of Referees had some form of invitation to work with teams. This empowers player knowledge regarding laws and coaches utilise this to their advantage in clarifying key technical issues and employing and testing out strategies from a tactical point of view and having a referee perspective on what they can and can’t do. It also promotes a better working relationship between the parties as everyone is working together rather than being in opposite camps. At the elite level such as Super 12 many coaches invite referees to work on areas of the game where there is a perceived need. This is definitely an area worth exploring in a broader sense from a coaching viewpoint in regard to tactical advances.

Laws, Rules and Roles that both parties would like to see changed were many and varied. Significantly the “Other” column was more prominent than my suggested stems. Forty Four per cent of Referees did see a need to review the point scoring system and the Advantage Law. Conversely Coaches only recorded 24% in respect of this.
There is a lot of conjecture over the whole issue of the tackle and this was highlighted and a common thread through commentary response in a number of questions. There is a lot of emphasis on having more “live game time” from both parties and a condemnation of negative or spoiling play. With reference to point scoring it was clear that to score a try deserved a greater numerical value and that points achieved from kicking should be down graded.

Referees’ and Coaches clearly identified the Tackle as the hardest law to enforce based on the dynamics of the situation and the fact that there is so much to look for. Although the law may be clear in its intent- (the following are essential elements)

1. When a player tackles an opponent and they both go to ground, the tackler must immediately release the tackled player
2. The tackler must immediately get up or move away from the tackled player and from the ball at once.
3. The tackler must get up before playing the ball
4. The tackled player must make the ball available immediately
5. The tackled player must immediately pass or release the ball. That player must also get up or move away from it at once
6. After a tackle, all other players must be on their feet when they play the ball
7. After a tackle or near to a tackle, other players who play the ball must do so from behind the ball and from behind the tackled player or the tackler closest to those players goal line.

Elements extracted from current Law Book

The tackler and tackled player plus supporting players from both sides tend to make this high intensity contact situation open to debate regarding ruling. Coaches will claim there is too much subjectivity in making a ruling yet the referee has to act and make split second decisions and has to consider 19 possible scenarios with regard to the actual Law. Perhaps the Lawmakers could look at simplifying this Law to make it easier to rule considering the fact that it is challenging for the players, coaches and referees. Not surprisingly, this was an area that coaches want Referees to scrutinize in the game situation. Offside play and infringements around the ruck area was also deemed important for referees to pay particular attention to highlighting the need to penalise teams that play negatively. A number of comments related to player safety suggested that this message is filtering through and that foul play has no place in our game. Set pieces such as the scrum and lineout registered twenty-eight per cent from the referees as difficult to enforce and twenty percent of Coaches also saw this as hard to police.

An interesting question and response was the one pertaining to Law Knowledge of the respective parties. Both parties projected a positive report of each other Referees rated Coaches 55% as having a satisfactory understanding of the Laws and 21 % as being good. (76% in total) Twenty Four per cent believed they were either unsatisfactory or poor. The coaching fraternity was fairly complimentary of the Referees with 84% viewing referees as being satisfactory or good in their control of the game. An additional question that could be asked in respect of Coaches would be “Do you have a current law Book and refer to it on a regular basis?”
I asked the question of Coaches directly in regard to how a Referee could contribute to a good match both as a spectacle and from a playing viewpoint. Using the scale of first and second past the post 3 key areas were identified-

1. Consistency in decision making
2. Healthy interaction with the players
3. Good knowledge of the game and its principles

Common sense elements, the point of interest I wish to comment on are the importance of consistency from a coaching perspective. Coaches much prefer rulings that extend to both sides in terms of interpretation and remain consistent during the course of the game even when you may have a different view of the decision making from your vantagepoint. Players enjoy a referee who has control but treats them in a respectful manner rather than from an authoritarian stance. Obviously it is vital to have a good understanding of the game and its principles and players also can sense this in the manner, positioning and dialogue, which a referee conveys during the course of the game. Coaches don’t want to see excessive and vigilant use of the whistle.

I was also interested in how a Referee can determine the variables that will suggest a side is well coached. Originally I had opted for a question that examined good and bad indicators but I wanted to put a positive slant on this and so reworded it accordingly. Team Discipline was a stand out feature as was playing structure and amplified by ability to maintain possession for extended periods of time. The referee is stating that he wants to manage the game without undue interruption and wants to see the game flow. Game knowledge and organisational efficiency of performing teams was also a factor and this contributes to extended passages of play.

Both parties show an extensive commitment to updating their qualifications and abilities on an ongoing basis (88% for coaches and 97% for referees) They are involved in wide ranging activities from informal to formal programmes designed to cater for personal development. There is a lot of interaction/discussion/observation with fellow members and this creates an incidental-mentoring situation that operates on a goodwill basis. There is also the opportunity for specialist support along more formalised lines as required by the accreditation criteria. A noticeable feature was also the significant number involved in educating their peers and offering expertise. It is encouraging to see Coaches and Referees inviting various sources of expertise and accepting opportunities for further growth and not perceiving themselves to be sitting in Ivory Towers assuming they are the font of all knowledge and being insular or threatened in their status. The use of video and technological support is becoming more evident as coaches and referees prepare in their respective roles and is used as a self analysis or assessment tool.

The question related to recommendations to improve the game drew a huge response in terms of how the game should be managed and played and appreciated in terms of spectator appeal. A number of views echoed had a contrary stance to what someone else might advocate which in itself promotes healthy debate and animated discussion within the rugby community ranks. I have chosen a few areas to comment on that I found personally interesting. A lot of emphasis was placed on promoting positive play and rewarding teams who set out to play the game in a pro-active manner.
Again areas such as the breakdown/tackle/foul play and advantage received a lot of scrutiny regarding how rules should be enforced with the definite intent of favouring teams who were taking the initiative. There are calls for more “live time” to provide greater audience value. Point scoring was a reference point for promoting the value of a try and reducing goal-kicking options and kicking in general play. There was the usual call for a hybrid version of Union and League with less numbers on the field and experimentation with interchange. Aligning interpretation of the laws between the Northern and Southern Hemisphere was echoed. Aside from simplifying the laws there is also a school of thought that would like to see a period of stability in regard to not tampering with the laws and seeking no change to the Law Book. Compare the volume of Laws related to the game with other team sports to see the degree of complexity and content that everyone is required to understand. There was a plea for more emphasis on grass roots rugby and committing to investment in terms of dollars and expertise in developing areas of the world. There is a perception that professionalism at the top level in terms of revenue does not appear to filter down in developing junior and schoolboy ranks. To secure our future and the advancement of the game we can’t afford to live in the “here and now.” We need to continue generating more emphasis on coaching and referee education and targeting key areas such as schoolboy rugby and the transition between under age and open playing ranks. To achieve a quality product rating you have to empower people to be quality participants and we need to have motivated and competent people in place to bring this through at grass roots level.

The final question in the survey focused on aspects that could be developed to promote a better working relationship with the other party. Referees felt that coaches need to be educated in regard to the challenges associated with blowing the whistle in a game situation (51%) and this was echoed by the coaches who saw the need to have a greater appreciation and understanding of the current laws. (38%) It is also worth noting that coaches saw a need to display greater tolerance and acceptance of decisions. (34%) These two indicators illustrate that coaches are becoming more conscious of the demands required in controlling the game. It also provides an opportunity and invitation for communication and meaningful dialogue between the two parties on an ongoing basis to clarify and revise thinking on mutual issues related to the game.

In conclusion, although this survey does not attempt to solve or resolve issues or roles pertaining to Coaches and Referees it does provide a sample window of how each party thinks, how they perceive each other and how they view the game. It is clearly evident both parties want to promote a game that has appeal for all stakeholders and with this in mind there are certain themes that can be pursued for the betterment of the game. The mutual exclusivity they tended to operate in is becoming a relic of the past and although stereotypical notions will always exist the mindset is changing and both parties recognise the need for a degree of commonality. While having different agendas in terms of primary roles there can be a meaningful co-existence based on a shared passion for the game and a willingness to share information for the mutual benefit of both parties, thus the breaking of bread and providing building blocks for the future. There is a healthy respect for what both parties do and their motive for doing it. With continual contact and better education the barriers of communication are declining because both parties can see genuine merit in having a closer relationship. Coaches can see the value in referees working with them to master techniques and law interpretations and players and coaches can appreciate the degree of difficulty involved in making decisions on the run.
Referees have the opportunity to view first hand on the training paddock what teams are trying to achieve in terms of tactical strategy and this adds a heightened awareness to the match situation. As an observational aside it is interesting to note the increasing number of referees who do their fitness training in conjunction with teams. There is definite value in coaches and captains being invited to a pre season summit to hear the approach that referees will be taking in controlling fixtures for respective competitions. Such a focus ensures the coaching and playing fraternity is conscious of what needs to be stressed to teams in regard to aspects such as game knowledge/law education, safety, discipline. Traditionally coaches and referees have operated in an informal capacity and I don’t know if it is necessary to formalise or introduce systems of contact but I do believe that there is undoubted value in propagating networks that invite ongoing contact so that both parties are more informed and better educated about each others roles. I believe this is a fundamental component for advancing our game in the future.

“An educated man should know everything about something and something about everything.”