

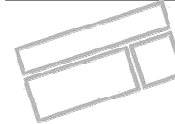


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30th March 2011

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Open Letter to all Junior League Clubs, Coaches, Parents and Spectators

How would you react if your son or daughter was treated at their part-time job the way some young referees are treated on the weekend?

Referees provide for the safe enjoyment of our sport for you and the players. While there are a variety of reasons that referees leave the game, the major contributor is abuse or violence from players and/or spectators. Just last weekend, in only his fourth week of refereeing – trials, no less, not a Grand Final – one young referee felt so badly intimidated by a Saturday footy crowd that he has now been lost to the game. This is an all too common story.

We've lost one more referee, so what? For every referee lost to the District:

- Up to seven games each weekend may be without a full complement of match officials;
- This means about 240 players each weekend have their safety jeopardised by not having suitable match officials;
- A more senior referee may have to cover excess matches. This referee will then not be able to help coach younger match officials;
- The subsequent lack of coaching will stifle the development of the less experienced referees. This will lead to more mistakes, increased crowd frustration, more abuse and, ultimately the loss of more referees;
- Fewer referees will have to officiate in more matches. This leads to increased fatigue and diminished enjoyment for the remaining officials.
- It has been proven that more fatigued officials will make more mistakes. Again, this leads to more spectator frustration, abuse and the loss of even more referees.
- The cycle not only continues, it is compounded.

For the safety of your players – your sons and daughters – and for the future of our sport, clearly this situation is unacceptable. The Referees' Association commits a great deal of time, money and resources to recruit and develop referees so that your children can participate safely in the sport that they love. The continued protection of your sons and daughters relies on retaining these referees. The continued protection of your sons and daughters, therefore, relies on how your players, coaching staff, parents and spectators treat these referees.

We are excited by the growth in playing numbers in our Junior League. As passionate Rugby League fans, referees want our Junior League to continue to grow. This growth in players though must be met with an equivalent growth in match official numbers. It is impossible to achieve this, and thus, to keep your children safe – if we continue to lose young referees due



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to this abuse. There is a very real possibility that, should just a few more referees leave the game, that some games – perhaps all of mini-footy – will not have qualified match officials. Are you prepared to risk the safety of your children by allowing this abuse to continue?

The Tough Love in League policy begins this weekend. This has removed the discretion that a referee had in dealing with on-field violence. Referees have been instructed to implement this policy in its entirety. This means that if a player punches another – regardless of the situation or provocation – then that player will be dismissed from the field. This is something new for parents and spectators (as well as coaches and players) to deal with. A potential lack of understanding of the Tough Love requirements may lead to even more angst by parents directed towards referees. Once this confusion manifests to abuse, the cycle above will be accelerated and multiplied even further.

What can you do to help to stop the cycle and help protect your team and your children?

- Understand that referees, like players and you and I, will make mistakes. These mistakes aren't deliberate any more than a player dropping a ball or missing a tackle.
- Lead by example in showing good sportsmanship and patience.
- Educate players and parents in what is considered acceptable behaviour.
- Communicate the Tough Love policy and insist that those who breach the policy – forcing the referees to make decisions – take responsibility for their actions and not blame the referee.
- Speak to parents or spectators who are abusing referees or becoming unruly to prevent situations escalating.
- Consider: How would you react if your son or daughter were being treated this way?

This Association wants to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for your children to enjoy our sport. We can only do this with your help. Every time a referee is subject to abuse, this has the potential to directly affect the safety of your children. Let's work together to make sure EVERYONE who participates in Rugby League are able to gain the maximum pleasure and remain safe while doing so.

We look forward to working with you to achieve this goal.

Yours in Sport

Jason Robinson

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