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OFFICIALS: ALERT NOT ALOOF

BY SHARON PHILLIPS

Gone, it seems, are the days of the overzealous, authoritarian umpire or referee who ruled to the letter of the law and stood aloof and apart from the sport in which they were involved.

A few are still around, but if you listen to four top sports officials, these days it is all about officials who cultivate an atmosphere of respect and strive to manage games or races, rather than ruling them.

Not that it means we are awash with officials who adopt a 'buddy' approach to their work. Netball Australia Director of Umpiring, Chris Burton, believes a balanced approach is still required of umpires at whatever level they officiate.

'First and foremost you have to remember that umpires are human,' Burton says. 'On court you have 14 people. Work with them as people and they will respond to you as a person.'

'At a junior or "netta"-level match, there is provision for a little interaction. There is a licence for liberalism because you're helping young players learn. At a top level, the speed and power of the game means there's less liberalism. You need to make quick and accurate decisions.'

Burton advocates dealing with individual players when incidents occur. 'It worries me that an umpire would consider going to the captain with an issue about another player on court. If that's the case, they've missed an opportunity. Show the player directly involved the respect you want shown to you.'

It is a slightly different approach than that offered by Rugby Union National Referee Education Manager Kim Lees, who believes that in his sport, the captain is the only person a referee should approach on-field. 'On-field communication should be clear and concise. Referees should

deal primarily with the captain — that's the person responsible for leadership on the field,' Lees says. 'Any dialogue with players should be avoided while the game is on.'

He says the approach taken by a referee can have an important bearing on the relationship that exists with the players and the manner in which the game is played. 'Referees need to be good managers and work at facilitating the game rather than being dictatorial. At the junior level, communication and interaction will be such that it will assist the players in learning the game. As the level of competition becomes higher and players are more experienced, the interaction remains just as important but will be a different style. The motto adopted in rugby at the higher levels is "less is best".'

Vice-president of Tennis Officiating Australia, Tony Lane, sees a similar situation in his sport. 'At an elite level, you assume everyone is well enough aware of the rules and regulations that communication can be kept to a minimum. The environment in tennis is one where interactions are direct and personal. As an umpire, I've been at both ends of the officiating spectrum ... aloof and friendly. When you lean too far towards a friendly element, you encourage an environment where players use your openness to undertake gamesmanship. If you take too officious an approach, your relationship with players can become unmanageable. I was refereeing soccer when I was 12 and umpiring tennis when I was 16. At that age you're often dealing with participants who are older than you and it's much easier to get out of conflict situations by applying the rules in an officious manner. You don't necessarily have the skills to negotiate, if you will. That comes with experience.'

International UCI Cycling Commissaire Bill Clinch agrees that those who are dogmatic about the way they officiate in his sport often lack confidence in their abilities.

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'They're the sort of people who get tied up and can't separate the black and white of the rule book from the application of the rules. Really, it's not about the regulations as they stand but how you, as an official, apply the regulations to different situations. At a junior level it is not only how you apply those rules, but you also

have to be teachers of the rules. At an elite level in cycling, you're dealing with people where sport is their income and your decisions can be very detrimental. You need to make your decisions, be confident in them, but really it comes down to the simple fact that if you want respect, you must show respect.'

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EDITORIAL

My call: improving your performance as an official

Fairness. Integrity. Accountability. These are the key features that the sporting public expects of its officials, as indicated in research conducted during the Year of the Official. How does this impact on the way in which you undertake your responsibilities as an official?

Structured sport could not be conducted without officials. You know that, and most of the coaches and players appreciate it too. But that does not mean that it's enough for you to turn up and do any sort of a job and expect everyone to be grateful. You must be fair to all participants. You must maintain your integrity, sometimes in the face of major criticism and in very trying times. This includes communicating decisions in a fashion appropriate to the circumstances. And you must be accountable for the decisions you make — they must be based on a sound knowledge of the rules of the sport and be applied consistently.

As an accredited official you have a responsibility to your sport and yourself to ensure that you do your job as well as possible. As an accredited official, you will have completed a competency-based training program that means that you are considered qualified to carry out an officiating role in your sport.

However, at the initial accreditation stage your development as an official has really only just begun. In order to remain abreast of advances in your sport and in officiating generally, you should constantly

be seeking opportunities to update your knowledge and skills. There are many ways in which you can do this.

Structured learning via sport-specific courses or through local education establishments is one aspect of professional development, but not all learning has to be undertaken in a classroom environment. There are often conferences or seminars that you can attend, you can subscribe to professional journals, or you can network with other officials in your own and other sports to gather information from your peers.

Equally important is receiving constructive feedback on your performance in the competition environment from a mentor or fellow official. It has been said that there is nothing that we receive with so much reluctance as advice, and yet being able to receive advice about performance is crucial to achieving and maintaining high standards. It will be easier to receive advice on ways in which performance can be improved if the advice is coming from someone you respect, so find a fellow official or mentor that you respect and ask them to provide regular feedback on your performance, if such a system is not already in place in your sport.

Read, watch, listen, practise and absorb, and you will be well on your way to maintaining officiating practice that will assist you to achieve fairness, integrity and accountability.

Brent Espeland

Director

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