



Respect the Ref

Those of you in the know may be aware that for a number of seasons now, the FA, at many levels, have instigated a programme aimed at players, managers and spectators respecting the match officials. Countless pages of copy and many articles have been penned covering the success, or otherwise, of this initiative; opinions vary, has the scheme worked? I would like to give you my take on this.

According to Google, one definition of respect is “a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements.” I very much doubt if any of the players I have refereed have a “deep admiration” for my refereeing ability, (I am just playing on words here), but I would like to think that they have a degree of respect for me undertaking what can be a difficult role in a professional manner.

By way of comparison, I turn to other sports and look at the level of respect shown by the players towards the officials. In cricket, questioning the umpire appears to be a hanging offence and this is one example where some sports give the appropriate powers in their laws to discourage significant displays of dissent. Another example is tennis where John McEnroe’s now infamous “You cannot be serious!” landed him in hot-water. You could argue that football has similar sanctions in terms of the laws of the game stating that red card should be issued for “foul, abusive or insulting behaviour towards a match official”, but, in all honesty, abuse of this nature has become common practice and referees (myself included) have chosen the path of ‘selective deafness’, rather than risk match control with the dismissal of a key player. I am not saying this right, far from it, but the harsh reality is this where we are, with no sign of an improvement in the situation.

Continuing to compare match officials across other sports, I find it interesting that Rugby Union seems to have made a success of this, with the players always addressing the referee as “Sir”, and the laws being implemented to discourage the players from showing dissent. I recently refereed a ‘friendly’ game between a football team and a rugby team, when the rugby players were taken aback by the way the football players spoke to me, which led to post-match discussions in the bar as to why? One very shrewd observer, a rugby aficionado, commented that “In rugby, the players have respect for the match officials from minute 1, in soccer it appears that the match officials have to earn that respect in the opening stages of the game.” Wise words indeed.

Could it be that being disrespectful towards the referee in football is symptomatic of a larger social problem where it matters not if individuals chose to question the rent-man, the foreman, the Head Teacher or the Ref. It appears to be acceptable behaviour to question any figure in authority, proven by recent articles with regard to the state of the prisons in the UK. Until such time as we find a solution to the bigger problem, the referee will be subject to dissent, and, in some cases, physical assault, which is off the scale in terms of unacceptable behaviour.

Where this concerns me most is in the age-group football where the games are invariably controlled by new, younger referees who are learning their craft. Generally, the kids are fine, they may have the odd chunter now and again if a decision goes against them, but by and large, they want to play football and enjoy their game. My concern is the behaviour of certain parents who firmly believe that have bought the next Dele Ali into the world, when in reality their offspring's footballing ability is closer to Mohamed Ali than Dele Ali. The amount of dissent and verbal abuse from these lowest levels of pond-life towards the referee drives me to distraction and is one of the principal reasons why many referees quit after just a few games. I would encourage these idiots to take a good, long look in the mirror and think about (a) what they are achieving by behaving like this and (b) how does your child feel when this occurs? Show some respect!