



Berkshire RFU Referees 2021/22 Season AGM – Summary Report from the Chair

So, our first full ‘post-lockdown’ season is winding down, and our AGM provides a good point to reflect on the past 9-10 months of activity...

As my colleagues have already noted, lots has changed, and yet a lot remains the same:

Clubs have worked hard to field teams, of a weekend, not always aided by the RFU – for instance, the new workflow of fixtures being loaded into GMS, then transferred to WTR, before we could appoint to them proved testing for both clubs and our Appointments Team

Similarly, the RFU’s ‘theory-driven’ approach to how they restructured the ERRA, ticked all the boxes in terms of ‘ways of learning’, and did leverage a lot of the remote technology we have all come to rely upon in the past couple of years, but also managed to ignore the fact that demand for refereeing courses is highest at the start of the season and needs a quick turnaround!

Fortunately, we – and other Societies – have worked together to share best practice and course material, allowing Julian to run ‘Take Up the Whistle’ sessions at Maidenhead and Tadley before Christmas.

It appears the RFU have heeded the success and widespread positive feedback on those courses and has now rolled out their own ‘Introduction to Refereeing’ course that looks rather familiar!

That said, I don’t want this to sound like I’m bashing the RFU – in fact, I need to specifically reference the incredibly supportive and positive manner in which Dave Larham (the RFU Club Developer for Berks, Bucks & Oxon) has contributed to our efforts to encourage players, coaches, parents and others to consider taking up the whistle. He has been an absolute star and, for me, embodies a lot of what the Community Game, and rugby’s Core Values are about.

We say it a lot but, for a small county, Berkshire punches well above its weight – and this season has been no different: we have done what we can to get rugby up and running again in the clubs we support; we have contributed, actively, to efforts to develop referees within the Southern Federation, South West Group and beyond; we are also engaged in work with the RFRU to promote refereeing.

One other area, where I wish I could say we did not have to engage with the RFU, is in matters relating to Discipline – unfortunately, despite a positive stand being taken by the Berkshire RFU Disciplinary Panel (with whom we have worked closely for a number of years to progress things), that same attitude is not always shown by other Disciplinary Panels covering non-Berkshire teams that we officiate, when it comes to Match Official Abuse. We managed to get through most of this season without any of our referees being subjected to abuse, but – like buses – you wait long enough and several turn up all at the same time: we had three serious incidents towards the end of the season: one of which was



managed, satisfactorily, within the county, two of which went outside Berkshire and were not.

In one of the out-of-county instances, I have made clear to the County RFU Exec and Disciplinary Chair involved, our concern that MO Abuse should be taken more seriously than it seems to have (and am still awaiting further feedback, supporting their judgement).

On the other case, I became involved in extended discussions with the RFU Head of Discipline, David Barnes, which eventually led to the RFU appealing the sanction originally applied, on the basis that it was too lenient. The appeal, however, was rejected due to a technical failing in the Regs – which has highlighted several issues in the RFU's own regulations & process, and led to a widespread review, as well as recognition that needs to be some long-overdue guidance and (re)education of Disciplinary Panels throughout the country. However, the Appeal Panel did agree that the incident merited a high-end entry point, not the mid-level one applied by the original Disciplinary Panel, vindicating our efforts to get the case appealed, despite the eventual unsatisfactory outcome.

We will, however, not 'let things lie', and are working with our colleagues in neighbouring Referees Societies and County RFUs to ensure that MO Abuse is taken seriously, when and wherever it occurs – more on this will follow, as soon as I am able to share details.

But as well as looking back, I'd like to take this opportunity to look forward: we have welcomed a several new referees to our number, and I look forward to both supporting them as they develop their skills (and fitness!) and watching them – and as many of the rest of you, as I can – on pitches throughout the county next season.

September will also see a revised, flatter league-structure introduced, the aim of which is to deliver more local games and less long trips away from home for teams at L5 and below – this will obviously have consequences for us as referees, especially at L5, where an extra two leagues are being introduced, and again we have - and will continue to - work closely with colleagues across the south of England to ensure that the new leagues operate effectively as we return to rugby after a well-earned summer off.

Yours, as always, in refereeing

Nick Curtin