An Examination of Match Official's Perceptions of Support and Abuse in Rugby Union and Cricket in England

Thomas Webb, Mike Rayner, Richard Thelwell

Abstract:

Rationale: Sport management literature offers only limited research about the reasons for the cessation of match officials. As a result, practitioners and academics have called for further investigation into the area. In response, this paper explores match official perceptions of support and abuse in rugby union and cricket in England.

Design/methodology/approach: Match officials in rugby union and cricket operating at all levels of their sports were surveyed. In total 1,228 surveys were completed, presenting a real-life representation of current experiences.

Findings: Results revealed that 49 percent of rugby union and 45 percent of cricket match officials experienced abuse at least twice every season, and 51 percent of rugby union and 47 percent of cricket match officials believed that abuse has increased, whilst match officials identified concerns with the training and support provided.

Practical implications: This paper provides insights into the perceptions of support and abuse of match officials in rugby union and cricket. Given the findings, there is a requirement for the management/support structures assisting match officials to be re-evaluated by governing bodies.

1 The cessation of match officials is an under researched subject area, although more
2 recent work has considered their retention, specifically through the use of a scale
3 designed to predict job satisfaction and intentions to continue (Ridinger, Kim, Warner,
4 & Tingle, 2017). Research has focused on match officials in both the USA and
5 Australia in sports such as basketball, Australian rules football, baseball and lacrosse, to
6 better understand strategies which might increase match official recruitment, and
7 encourage referees and umpires to be retained in sport (Kellett & Warner, 2011;
8 Ridinger, 2015; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013). Findings identified the importance of
9 community and social interaction, in addition to issues concerning administration and
10 training as particularly pertinent aspects.

11 Recent research has also focused on English sports, examining the experience
12 and abuse of match officials in sport, much of this has considered the setting of
13 association football referees. Webb, Cleland, and O’Gorman (2017) and Cleland,
14 O’Gorman, and Webb (2017) identified the verbal and physical abuse to which referees
15 are subjected at various levels of the game, and offered several recommendations which
16 aimed to tackle the continuing issue of abuse within association football. Specifically,
17 issues across the two studies considered the support network for referees, and the
18 success of the national Respect Program in tackling the issues related to abuse. Other
19 studies that have considered referee abuse, and experience in football have done so as
20 either a case study, or on a smaller scale (Dell, Gervis & Rhind, 2016).

21 Given the above, the present study sought to examine the abuse, experiences,
22 and support networks of match officials within both rugby union and cricket. This was
23 achieved through the construction of three research questions; (1) What have been the
24 experiences of officiating in rugby union and cricket since qualification? (2) What has

1 been the extent and level of verbal and physical abuse towards match officials? (3) How
2 effective is the support provided to match officials?

3 **Review of Literature**

4 The majority of the literature connected with the term ‘abuse’ in sport
5 concentrates on child protection and abuse allegations (Brackenridge, Bringer, &
6 Bishop, 2005; Jacobs, Smits, & Knoppers, 2016; Papaefstathiou, Rhind, Brackenridge,
7 2013; Rhind, McDermott, Lambert, & Koleva, 2014), emotional abuse (Kavanagh,
8 Brown & Jones, 2017; Stirling, 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2013;
9 Stirling & Kerr, 2014), and sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 1997; Brackenridge, Bishopp,
10 Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Fasting, Brackenride, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003). Aggression
11 and violence in sport have also been considered, and historically aggression has been an
12 accepted part of sport, although recently it has been perceived as more of a wider social
13 problem (Tenenbaum, Singer, Stewart, & Duda, 1997).

14 Aggression has been studied from both a playing participant perspective and in
15 terms of supporter behaviour but is yet to be explored from a match official’s
16 perspective. Donahue, Rip and Vallerand (2009) focused upon the obsessively
17 passionate basketball players, with obsessive passion found to associate with aggressive
18 behaviour, whereas Burton (2005) identifies that boundaries related to aggressive
19 behaviour exist in sport, with different sports and levels of competition allowing for
20 individual judgements, from people such as match officials. Research on aggression has
21 also focused upon supporters. The appropriateness of sport supporters’ physical and
22 verbal aggression found that supporter dysfunction related positively to perceptions of
23 the appropriateness of verbal aggression and physical aggression (Donahue & Wann,
24 2009), and the hostile verbal aggression of sport spectators has also been researched.
25 Findings suggested that highly identified fans reported higher levels of hostile

aggression than fans low in identification and that aggression directed toward the officials tended to be hostile in nature (Wann, Carlson, & Schrader, 1999).

The term aggression itself can be divided into two areas, where aggression ‘... includes such wide-ranging acts ... as physically hitting another individual and verbal abuse’ (Tenenbaum et al., 1997, p. 1). Stirling (2009), in her conceptual framework identifies maltreatment in sport and more specifically, relational maltreatment and non-relational maltreatment as categories into which abuse falls. Both physical abuse and verbal abuse are classified under relational maltreatment, and are termed verbal emotional abuse (entitled verbal abuse here) and contact physical abuse (referred to as physical abuse in this paper). These two areas of abuse occur within the context of a critical relationship, where the relationship between the actors has significant influence over an individual’s sense of safety, in a setting such as a sporting fixture and specifically between a match official and an athlete, and it is these aspects of abuse which are explored in the present study (Stirling, 2009).

Research concerning Australian Rules football umpires has identified that they routinely received abuse, and that this abuse was considered a ‘normal’ part of their role. The umpires interpreted mostly verbally abusive situations involving spectators, parents, and to a lesser degree, players and coaches as part of the game (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Moreover, the challenging situations, such as aggressive confrontations with players and spectators, in which they can find themselves provides a necessity for sports match officials to display high levels of resilience (Livingston & Forbes, 2016).

Confrontational incidents can cause anxiety and stress. Stress is a direct consequence of officiating and has been found to have a profound impact on mental health, the performance of match officials, and dropout intentions, amongst other things (Voight, 2009). Research conducted with Canadian ice hockey match officials

1 considered the source and intensity of their experience of stressful events, with verbal
2 and physical abuse and fear of mistakes found to exist and differ across certification
3 levels (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007).

4 We know that poor spectator behaviour can have negative impacts on the
5 experience of individuals involved in sport, specifically the number of people playing,
6 coaching, and officiating sport, with perceived incorrect decision making by the match
7 official identified as an ‘igniter’ for poor spectator behaviour. (Nicholson & Hoyer,
8 2005). In addition to spectators, Elliott and Drummond (2015) found that there were
9 specific issues during the game with the behaviour of parents of young players in junior
10 Australian football, and the indirect psychological abuse from coaches towards match
11 officials for perceived ‘bad calls’ during play has also been highlighted (Raakman,
12 Dorsch, & Rhind, 2010).

13 Research concerning rugby union match officials has tended to consider the
14 communication between officials (Cunningham, Mellick, & Mascarenhas, 2012;
15 Mascarenhas, Collins, Mortimer, & Morris, 2005) and their movement and activity
16 during a match (Martin, Smith, Tolfrey, & Jones, 2001). The abuse of rugby union
17 match officials has also been considered through a pilot study across three counties in
18 England, discovering that verbal and physical abuse in rugby union has increased
19 (Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016).

20 In relation to cricket match officials, research has focused upon game location
21 and bias in English cricket, and the concept of home advantage and bias in international
22 cricket and English one-day cricket has also received academic attention (Jones, Bray,
23 & Bolton, 2001; Morley & Thomas, 2005; Sacheti, Gregory-Smith, & Paton, 2015). To
24 date, there are no academic studies regarding the concept of abuse, support or match
25 official working environments and further research is required to better understand the

experiences of match officials in other sports, given that violence or abuse in sport towards match officials is, ‘...not an isolated incident, but one that is influenced by societal norms ... because of a lack of regulation’ (Jamieson & Orr, 2009, pp.17-18). All of which makes the setting for abuse towards match officials, and the individuals who perpetrate this abuse important for us to understand.

Research Context

Rugby union and cricket are both sports with much of their historical grounding and development in England, each exhibiting an inherent acceptance of sportsmanship, rules and the authority and decision making of the match official (Dunning & Sheard, 2005). Rugby union was codified in 1871 and the structure has remained relatively constant over time (Collins, 2009). The national governing body, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) oversees the entire game in England including grassroots and elite level rugby, and administers 2,000 rugby clubs. These clubs are organised under 35 Constituent Bodies across England, and the RFU supports this structure with 50 Rugby Development Officers, six Area Managers, and 120 Community Rugby Coaches. Cricket, meanwhile, was codified in England with the foundation of the Marylebone Cricket club (MCC) in 1787, which oversees the laws of cricket across the world (Malcolm, 2001).

Whilst the MCC oversee the rules of cricket, the governance of the game in England and Wales is overseen by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) which was established in 1997 (Bairner & Malcolm, 2010). The ECB has 41 members which include the chairman of all the first-class cricket counties, and the non-first-class counties throughout England and Wales, the Chairman of the MCC, and the Chairman of the Minor Counties Cricket Association. The RFU has specific development officers who oversee refereeing at a national and regional level, and at the elite level the RFU

1 has convened a National Panel of Match Officials which comprises the best 180 match
2 officials in the country who operate primarily in the national leagues at the top of the
3 league structure. Societies exist in rugby union to support match officials and are
4 evident at county level throughout England, although some county societies also operate
5 together. The ECB meanwhile, has formed the Association of Cricket Officials (ACO),
6 a body to oversee the recruitment, training and development of all cricket officials, who
7 operate at national, regional and local county level. In addition, the ECB employs
8 Cricket Liaison Officers (CLO), who amongst their duties, are expected to provide
9 support, and a duty of care to the umpires in first class county cricket. However, it is the
10 settings and origination of abuse which require further understanding in order to
11 contextualise the current landscape in both rugby union and cricket.

12 ***Moral Panic and the Match Official***

13 The reporting of match official incidents in the national and international media,
14 as well as the constant scrutiny of decision making of sports officials on the national
15 and international stage, has meant an unwanted elevation in prominence of these match
16 officials. As sports have developed, evolved and professionalised over time (Dunning &
17 Sheard, 2005), so the role of the match official has become more important. As the
18 pressure on winning and losing in professional sports has become ever more important,
19 the accountability for the performances of match officials is under greater scrutiny than
20 at any other point in history (Webb, 2017).

21 This focus on the match official in elite sport has also brought associated
22 attention to match officials at the lower levels of sport, with outrage over decision
23 making evident at different levels of sport participation. The media focus on elite sport
24 has elevated match officials to the role of ‘folk devil’, a caricatured or stereotypical
25 character created by the anxieties of a (sporting) community, and the creation of a moral

panic around these individuals, initiated and intensified by media reporting (Cohen, 1972; Smart, 2005; Zajdow, 2008).

The notion of moral panic, devised by Stanley Cohen (1972), is that it seeks to explain a particular type of overreaction to a perceived social problem or ongoing situation, with the creation of a moral panic by the media and the general public, often out of context or proportion with the real issue, in this case sports officiating (Goode & Ben-Yehude, 1994; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). Moral panics come in a variety of shapes and sizes, vary in intensity, duration and social impact, and they can be spontaneous, grass-roots events, driven by local actors (Garland, 2008). As the majority of players and match officials in rugby union and cricket operate at the mass participation, or grass-roots level, this is where the majority of the issue exists. It may be affected or impacted by the professional game, but the majority of incidents and issues occur at the mass participation level, principally due to the amount of match officials, players and coaches involved at that level.

There are aspects of Cohen's theoretical construct, particularly the five stages of moral panic outlined below, which apply directly to match officials and the way in which they are treated by players, coaches, spectators and the media. Cohen (1972) identified that there are five stages of moral panic, outlined as follows:

1. Someone is defined as a threat to values or interests
2. The threat is depicted in an easily recognisable form by the media
3. A rapid build-up of public concern
4. A response from authorities or opinion makers
5. Panic recedes or results in social changes

Cohen (1972, p. 9) stated that, "sometimes the object of the [moral] panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough,

but suddenly appears in the limelight”. What is meant by ‘panic’ in this context is defined as an excessive feeling of alarm, usually affecting a body or persons, leading to efforts to secure safety, undoubtedly an issue which abuse towards match officials encapsulates (Garland, 2008). In the case of match officials, the feeling of alarm and compromised safety can be linked to stage one of Cohen’s (1972) moral panic, with players, coaches and spectators identifying match officials as a potential threat to values, interests or goals, such as winning.

This increased focus on the match official has led to comments from the wider sporting public, both participants and commentators, related to the performance of sports officials, and consistent scrutiny on decision making and performance (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb, 2017). However, stage four of the moral panic scale devised by Cohen is where governing bodies of sport need to respond to any issues identified, in this case related to abuse and support, and to ultimately amend policy, leading, ideally, to stage five of the model, where panic recedes or there is some form of social change. Some reaction has been evident from governing bodies, such as the launch of the Respect programme in soccer in 2008, although interventions such as this have been mixed in terms of their success, with ongoing issues related to abuse and evidence of a disenfranchised workforce in soccer (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017).

Method

An online survey was sent to active and non-active match officials across England, representing all levels of the respective games from mass participation to those that officiate in the top divisions domestically such as the Premiership (rugby union), and the County Championship (cricket). The survey was disseminated through a variety of outlets including the RFU and the ECB, and the registered contact email addresses for match officials. The data were collected in this way due to the extensive

geographical area in which the respondents were located, with the wide physical reach of web-based surveys enabling the possibility of creating a representative sample of match officials as a snapshot of a national picture (Toepoel, 2016).

The present study adopted a constructionist stance to report upon match official experiences. Constructivism refers to the process by which reality is created by the observer, through attributing meaning to what is observed and personal active experience of a situation or phenomena. Moreover, it is the role of research to enhance understanding of these interactions (Chell, 2000; Steyaert, 1997). In this case, match officials were actors who are themselves involved in complex interactions and policy processes on a weekly basis. A constructionist approach provides a way to disentangle complex organisational processes, elucidate meaning implicit in the everyday practice and experiences of match officials, and contribute to the deconstruction of policy initiatives (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000).

Survey Design and Measures

Following institutional ethical approval, the online survey was distributed to the target populations in both sports, through the distribution lists of the ECB and RFU (the ECB and RFU had approximately 7,000 and 6,000 match officials on their respective databases). A convenience sample was utilised because it involved a nonprobability sampling method directed exclusively at active and non-active rugby and cricket match officials, and those with an active email address, because of the unique position they held in addressing the research questions specified in the previous section (Schutt, 2009). Active and non-active match officials were included because the experiences of match officials who are non-active could be important, given the focus of this paper and the potential reasons for any cessation in officiating activities.

1 The survey was designed and distributed using the Online Surveys platform, a
2 tool designed exclusively for academic surveys. The survey included instructions for
3 responding to a total of eight demographic or organisational characteristics questions,
4 and a further 18 questions to be answered giving a total of 26 questions. Given previous
5 research concerning the abuse and support of match officials (Ridinger, 2015; Warner,
6 Tingle, & Kellett, 2013; Webb et al., 2017), as well as the settings for abuse and the
7 groups who perpetrate the abuse (Nicholson & Hoyer, 2005), questions asked concerned
8 the experience of abuse, their training and development opportunities, any barriers to
9 their continued participation in their sport, and the nature and extent of those barriers.

10 Of these 18 questions; nine were of a Likert scale construction, five questions
11 required a yes/no response such as, “Have you ever been a victim of verbal abuse as a
12 match official?” and “Have you ever been a victim of physical abuse as a match
13 official?”, three were open questions, and one item was a multiple answer option. This
14 survey design reflects the rigour to research design illustrated through the work of
15 Jackson and Trochim (2002) and Boynton and Greenhalgh (2004) whereby a survey
16 should provide a clear range of different response types and a limited number of open
17 questions to elicit honest and individual responses.

18 Likert scale questions provided a five-point choice for respondents. The scale
19 for the training and development opportunities ranged from, “very poor” (= 1) to “very
20 good” (= 5). While exceptions to this wording were used to clarify items, a five-point
21 Likert scale was provided with “1” representing least and “5” representing most. An
22 example sample question from the barrier to continued participation aspect of the
23 survey was, “Episodes of abuse make you question whether or not to continue
24 refereeing.” The responses ranged from, “Strongly disagree” (= 1), to “Strongly agree”
25 (= 5) with a “neutral” choice was given for each question.

Three open-ended questions were also added to the survey instrument to obtain qualitative comments concerning:

(1) additional training or development requirements;

(2) if applicable whether verbal abuse was reported to the authorities by the match official; and

(3) any further changes or adaptations to their role which would support and develop them more effectively.

Data Analyses

The qualitative survey data generated through the open response questions was inductively analysed utilising thematic analysis to examine the participants' experiences related to abuse, training and support networks within rugby union and cricket.

Thematic analysis can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches and is compatible with essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The importance of reflexivity and interaction with the data led to the authors ensuring that they worked as critical friends, as themes were disseminated for peer review (Smith & McGannon, 2017). The final stages of data analysis involved the authors inductively placing themes into general dimensions. These general dimensions were based on the emerging themes evident from the raw data, and were constructed prior to involvement from the third author to ensure that appropriate reflections had taken place between the first and second authors. This use of open-coding phases, and transparency identified patterns, commonalities and difference allowing the researchers to acknowledge their role as an instrument in the data collection and analysis processes. The process also encompassed cross checking themes and interpretation of data by the researchers acting independently, acknowledging epistemological preferences, and

collaborating for the entire study to neutralise biases, enabling the researchers to sharpen the data, before verifying ‘final’ conclusions (Barbour, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Online surveys lend themselves to the integration of both thematic and numerical data in the data analysis process and the present survey adopted this approach (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). The survey involved the construction of categories, divided into distinct groups, and related to match official experiences, working practices and support networks. The quantitative responses provided the initial framework for the construction of categories, and the subsequent interpretation of the raw data in the thematic phase of the data analysis process (Thomas, 2006).

Results and Discussion

We received a total of 1,228 responses (456 responses from rugby union and 772 from cricket), with age ranges categorised following dialogue with the governing bodies (see Table 1).

Age Ranges	Rugby Union Match Officials Count	Rugby Union Match Officials %	Cricket Match Officials Count	Cricket Match Officials %
Under 18	6	1.3	1	0.1
18-24	34	7.5	7	0.9
25-34	95	20.8	14	1.8
35-44	84	18.4	44	5.7
45-54	136	29.8	157	20.3
55-64	86	18.9	276	35.8
65+	15	3.3	273	35.4

Table 1, rugby union and cricket match official age ranges.

The rugby union responses were predominantly male (99.1%, n=452), as were the cricket responses (98.3%, n=759). The categorisation of match officials depended on the development and promotion pathway employed by the two governing bodies, and a breakdown of these respondents by level of operation, experience and abuse received is outlined in Table 2 and Table 3.

Type	Level of Operation	Experience Required	Count	%	Sex Ratio %		Mean Years Officiating	Victim of Verbal Abuse %		Victim of Physical Abuse %	
					Male	Female		Yes	No	Yes	No
Elite	Level 1 and above	Member of the Panel of National match officials	2	0%	100	0	17 years	100	0	0	100
National Panel	Up to Level 2	Hold the Development Award Be a member of a Group Scheme Taken the Level 1 Touch Judge Course Completed the appropriate fitness assessment	14	3%	100	0	13 years	100	0	0	100
Regional Group	Up to Level 4	Complete the Development Award Nominated by Society or Federation Accepted by Group Committee	13	3%	100	0	9 years	38.4	61.6	0	100
Federation	Up to Level 4	Complete the Society Match Official Award Nominated by Society Accepted by the Federation	55	12%	100	0	15 years	72.7	27.3	0	100
Society	Up to Level 4	Complete the ELRA Stage 1 and 2 Registered with local Society Complete Stage 3 Observed by a Match Official Society	372	82%	99.5	0.5	16 years	53.7	46.3	6.4	93.6

Table 2, rugby union match officials' level of operation, experience and exposure to abuse.

Type	Level of Operation	Experience Required	Count	%	Sex Ratio %		Mean Years Officiating	Victim of Verbal Abuse %		Victim of Physical Abuse %	
					Male	Female		Yes	No	Yes	No
C1	Premier League /Professional	Officiated successfully in ECB Premier Leagues /equivalent (min 6 matches) Educational qualification of / working towards, Level 2	57	7%	100	0	9 years	64.9	35.1	0	100
C2	Minor Counties / County 2nd and XI	Officiated successfully in a 2nd tier league	202	26%	100	0	14 years	58.9	41.1	0	100
C3	County League	Officiated successfully in a 3rd tier league	196	25%	97.5	2.5	17 years	28.5	71.5	0	100
C4	Lower League Panel	Officiated successfully in a 4th tier league	98	13%	100	0	5 years	32.6	67.4	0	100
C5	Recreation	Officiated successfully in a 5th tier league	212	27%	96.3	3.7	2 years	43.3	56.7	10	90
C6	No longer active	N/a	7	1%	100	0	23 years	0	100	0	100

Table 3, cricket match officials' level of operation, experience and exposure to abuse.

1 The results related to verbal abuse were mixed. A consistent theme throughout
2 the data was the negative behaviour of both players and spectators towards match
3 officials, illustrating stage one of Cohen's (1972) five stages of Moral Panic. For
4 example, when match officials in rugby union were asked if they had ever been a victim
5 of what they consider to be abuse, 53.7% stated that they had. It was also evident that
6 this verbal abuse differed depending on the level of operation in rugby union, although a
7 number of match officials were experiencing verbal abuse throughout the development
8 pathway (see Table 2). Match officials in rugby union were asked how often this abuse
9 occurred, with 49% of match officials who responded to the question indicating that
10 they receive this abuse twice a season. Moreover, match officials in rugby union also
11 believed that abuse has increased recently, demonstrating a growing perception of
12 increasing abuse within the match official workforce, with 51.5% of those who
13 answered the question believing that abuse had increased and 21% not sure.

14 Comparatively, 56.5% of match officials in cricket stated that they had received
15 what they considered to be abuse. As with rugby union, the extent of verbal abuse
16 differed depending on the level of operation, with the highest proportion of abuse per
17 match official occurring within the professional game and at minor county level (64.9%
18 and 58.9% respectively, see Table 3). Match officials in cricket were asked how often
19 the abuse occurred, and 45% of respondents identified that the abuse occurred a couple
20 of times a season. They were also asked whether they believed that abuse had increased
21 recently, and 47% who answered the question believed that abuse had increased, with
22 17% not sure.

23 The following sections consider the open responses from match officials.
24 Through examination of the research questions presented earlier, a thematic analysis led

1 to the construction of themes and their subsequent organisation and classification into a
 2 general dimension (see Figure 1).

3
 4 Figure 1, general dimension created following thematic analysis

5 ***Organisational Structure and Governance***

6 ***Behaviour Management***

7 Survey results indicated that match officials receive more verbal abuse than
 8 physical abuse. The support and processes that follow this verbal abuse are discussed in
 9 the forthcoming section, however support for match officials in both sports was varied,
 10 as discovered in previous research (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013).
 11 Within rugby union, one match official (Society level, aged 45-54, 6-10 years
 12 experience) explained that the verbal abuse that he had experienced was from
 13 spectators, something which is not uncommon, and can have negative effects on the
 14 enjoyment of all participants (Nicholson & Hoyer, 2005). However, the match official in
 15 question believed that the abuse was dealt with effectively by the local match official
 16 society, “I have only ever had two incidences, both from spectators. Verbal abuse is

1 always an idiot (parent) and is usually dealt with promptly by the club. I did report one
2 of the incidences to the society and was 100% supported.”

3 Another match official (Society level, aged 35-44, 16-20 years experience)
4 stated that the verbal abuse was reported, but not dealt with effectively, believing that
5 their current society would be more effective in this regard, “yes, I reported the verbal
6 abuse to a previous society. I did not feel that I was particularly well supported. I feel
7 my current society would manage this better.” Moreover, instances of physical conflict
8 and abuse have also been discussed by rugby union match officials. A Society level
9 match official (aged 45-54, 11-15 years experience), described the type and extent of
10 the abuse to which he was subjected from a particular coach, “... physical abuse, on
11 pitch and post-match intimidation attempts. I believe I was saved partly by my stature
12 and would fear for the safety of the more vulnerable.” The description of the events
13 concurs with previous research regarding the negative psychological effects of verbal
14 abuse from coaches (Raakman, Dorsch, & Rhind, 2010; Kerr & Stirling, 2008), with the
15 match official describing that their physical stature prevented an even more serious
16 situation occurring. This presents a problem for the RFU, and for the match official
17 societies in terms of governance, punishment and solutions as well as implications for
18 specific training.

19 These instances of abuse are also believed to be increasing in cricket. One match
20 official believed that it is insolence and dissent from players that is the particular issue,
21 and that these incidents can escalate to more personal and confrontational abuse, “the
22 area that is increasing is the amount of dissent and ‘dumb insolence’ and the general
23 aggressiveness of confrontations which will and does lead to abuse.” (C5 level, aged
24 65+, 16-20 years experience).

1 The questioning of decisions and authority is something that is believed to be
2 increasing. Another cricket match official (C3 level, aged 45-54, 11-15 years
3 experience) supported this interpretation of the current operational environment,
4 although the requirement for conversations between match officials and players is
5 viewed as essential, and therefore changing practice to attempt to alleviate abuse might
6 be more difficult to achieve:

7 “The questioning of the decisions of recreational umpires is
8 becoming more and more vocal ... Unlike some sports, there is a
9 need to keep an open dialogue between players and umpires so it
10 may be difficult but certainly restrict questioning to captains only.”

11 The coverage and scrutiny of match official decisions in the national media has
12
13 led to the creation of a form of moral panic, and there has also been a grass-roots led
14 panic driven by more localised actors, impacting match officials at different levels in
15 both rugby union and cricket (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2008). Evidently, if there are
16 instances of abuse that have increased or are more evident, then the effective
17 management of the disciplinary processes in both sports is essential for match officials
18 to feel supported, and to ensure that any offending players or clubs are dealt with
19 efficiently. The effective response from governing bodies in the form of policy changes
20 or initiatives in order to reduce incidents of abuse would begin to address stages four
21 and five in the moral panic model (Cohen, 1972).

22 *Non-Reporting of Abuse*

23 The issues reported by the match officials related to verbal abuse, are difficult to
24 treat if the disciplinary and reporting mechanisms available are not appropriate. Issues
25 also occur if match officials are not reporting the incidents. In rugby union, match
26 officials were varied in their reporting of incidents, and decided to take matters into
27 their own hands when dealing with abuse on occasion. One match official (Society
28 level, aged 45-54, 6-10 years experience) reported that dealing with the incident at the

1 time was appropriate, “I dealt with the verbal abuse myself at the time, and did not
2 report it to the Society or RFU.” Another rugby union match official (Society level,
3 aged 35-44, 6-10 years experience) revealed that any incidents of abuse are recorded but
4 that these incidents are recorded personally, and they are not passed onto the relevant
5 authorities, “... it is recorded in a little red book and the data used to identify trends and
6 if recognised then the club is spoken to.”

7 The primary issue with match officials chronicling incidents, and then acting if
8 they believed that trends existed, is that the match official societies and the RFU are not
9 necessarily fully aware of the current climate associated with abuse. Consequently, this
10 means that it is difficult for the RFU to address any of these issues effectively, and start
11 to move to stages four and five of Cohen’s model (1972). The fact that match officials
12 are acting independently is exacerbated by the advice that they are being given when
13 there are instances of abuse that require intervention:

14 “... clarity in disciplinary issues, some referees decide to take the
15 laws into their own hands such as if a player throws a punch and
16 connects with another player’s face, straight red card, I have been
17 told off in the past and asked could it be possible to consider
18 yellow or just getting that player subbed, no! A punch is a straight
19 red and all referees should follow that”.

20 (Society level, aged 18-24, 2 years or less experience)

21 There were similar issues evident within cricket. It may be that any increase in
22 abuse experienced by match officials are behaviours they are unaccustomed to seeing
23 historically, and as such they do not understand the most effective course of action.
24 Nevertheless, cricket match officials reported that they viewed instances of verbal abuse
25 as “... water off a duck's back” (C5 level, aged 45-54, 2 years or less experience) and
26 that these instances are often “... sorted on the field with the captain.” (C4 level, aged
27 35-44, 2 years or less experience). This approach is acceptable if the verbal abuse is

1 considered minor, however abuse such as this can escalate and reiterates the point that
2 governing bodies such as the ECB are unaware of the scale of the incidents.

3 Strong support from leagues and governing bodies can encourage match
4 officials to report incidents. Nevertheless, there are incidents that have been reported
5 that could qualify as verbal abuse, which occurred after the match had finished, and
6 these incidents were left as unreported because they were considered as dealt with at the
7 time of the incident, "... it was after a game in the bar with my colleague, and the abuser
8 was asked to leave the bar by both his captain and officials of the home club." (C3 level,
9 aged 65+, 6-10 years experience). This does not necessarily indicate that the player in
10 question was dealt with appropriately. When abuse is accepted as part of the role of the
11 match official, this can affect the support networks available, as governing bodies are
12 not in possession of a true reflection of the current operational environment for match
13 officials (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). This in turn makes any intervention from governing
14 bodies difficult to administer and implement, and therefore a reduction in the moral
15 panic, or the incidents of abuse through policy changes is problematic to address
16 (Garland, 2008).

17 ***Policy and Relationship Management***

18 *Reporting and Action Processes*

19 The reporting of incidents, and the subsequent disciplinary processes and
20 support networks for match officials must be seen to be effective for the process to
21 operate effectively, something which association football has found difficult to ensure
22 (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017). Cricket match officials have reported that this
23 is not always the case, that incidents of abuse have been reported, and subsequently not
24 dealt with efficiently. One match official recounted that they were the victim of verbal
25 abuse, and reported the matter to the league in question. They believed the response of

1 the league and the club was not sufficient, illustrating that a similar instance of abuse
2 occurred later in the season, with the match official believing that many of the players
3 involved in the disciplinary processes (the governance procedures which investigate and
4 adjudicate on reported instances of abuse or foul play) were not accurately recounting
5 the altercations:

6 “I reported the incident but did not get involved with our
7 Disciplinary Officer's pursuit of the matter. No one tells the truth
8 in these cases. As it happens the club was taken to task later in the
9 season for similar behaviour.”

10 (C2 level, aged 65+, 21+ years experience)

11 There are also examples in cricket which illustrate that support networks can be
12 more effective, and it is known that effective support networks are perceived as
13 essential to the retention of match officials (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger et al.,
14 2017). However, evidence that verbal abuse in cricket is occurring at all is a significant
15 issue, with one match official (C2 level, aged 65+, 11-15 years experience) recounting
16 that several players had been reported over a period of time, although they had all been
17 dealt with effectively by the league rather than the ECB, “I have reported several
18 players over the years for verbal abuse - they were dealt with by the league rather than
19 by the ECB and all players reported received match bans of between one and four
20 games.”

21 One match official recounted that the club that was involved did not even
22 engage with the process, and there were no sanctions applied despite this
23 disengagement:

24 “Yes, it was reported, the club in question did not respond to the
25 panel that I stood for at the time, so they let the matter drop. I left
26 that panel and joined the [cricket league] where I feel totally
27 supported.”

28 (C5 level, aged 55-64, 6-10 years experience)

This lack of support was further emphasised by a C5 level match official, “I reported incidents to my league, but nothing happened in terms of a player ban. It made me consider whether it was worth bothering going to the effort of reporting.” (C5 level, aged 25-34, under 2 years experience). The concern for the ECB is the fact that the match official in question was becoming dissuaded from reporting incidents, because they perceived that it is not worth the effort. Similarly, another match official relayed that they reported an incident to the local Association of Cricket Officials Officer (ACO), but that the league did not appear interested and the ACO were not perceived to want to enter any possible conflict with the league:

“I reported it to the [County league] and made the local ACO officer aware. The league handled the matter very poorly and gave me no confidence that they really want to tackle disciplinary issues. The ACO didn't seem to want to ruffle the league's feathers.”
(C3 level, aged 55-64, 2 years or less experience)

To tackle some of the issues related to the reporting of incidents and the perceived support offered to match officials, accountability of governing bodies and support organisations such as Referee's Societies or the ACO becomes crucial. Transparency of the disciplinary processes is also imperative to ensure that players know what sanctions to expect should they violate any code of conduct, and match officials know the procedures that are in place to support them should incidents arise.

Policy Change

Strong organisation and facilitation of governance is essential if match officials are to be adequately supported when dealing with any form of abuse (Webb et al., 2017). Reducing and ultimately eradicating this abuse could in turn increase the recruitment and retention of match officials, and alleviate pressures on stretched sporting infrastructures (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013). Governing bodies and those responsible for the support of match officials require clearly defined policies. These

1 policies should facilitate social interactions between match officials themselves, and
2 address and reduce instances of moral panic and abuse through effective interventions
3 (Cohen, 1972), ultimately assisting the retention of these individuals (Kellett & Warner,
4 2011; Warner et al., 2013).

5 Rugby union match officials have identified that for abuse to diminish, stronger
6 punishments are required. Policy changes recommended by match officials in rugby
7 union, range from stronger punishments and deterrents to better educational provision
8 for players and spectators. One match official believed that an increase in the sanctions
9 attributed to any form of abuse, as well as a public unveiling of persistent offenders,
10 would provide a more positive working environment, “clubs and players that are guilty
11 of abuse both verbally or physically should be publicly identified and their punishments
12 recorded and published for all to see.” (Society level, aged 45-54, 6-10 years
13 experience). Another match official believed that it is the role of the RFU to set the tone
14 for those clubs that are serial offenders, “the RFU needs a better respect program with
15 greater sanctions for weak or non-compliant clubs.” (Society level, aged 45-54, 11-15
16 years experience).

17 The perceived requirement for a program aimed at increasing the respect for
18 match officials is potentially similar to that already in place in association football
19 (Webb et al., 2017). Match officials believed that to reduce abuse in rugby union more
20 efficiently funded structures and improved support networks are required, “we need a
21 properly funded 'PR' led RFU referees' department within the game. To promote
22 refereeing, to back up, support, and actively counter-act and challenge the trend toward
23 criticism.” (Society level, aged 45-54, 6-10 years experience).

24 The identification of individual offenders is one method that could be utilised to
25 improve the situation. Other match officials indicated that the answer to changing the

1 levels of abuse directed towards them was to better educate those involved with the
2 game. It was believed that a lack of understanding of the laws of the game was one of
3 the biggest frustrations for both spectators and match officials alike, “greater education
4 for spectators, poor knowledge of the laws leads to greater frustration.” (Society level,
5 aged 35-44, 3-5 years experience).

6 Issues with spectators are reported in other sports related research (Elliott &
7 Drummond, 2015; Nicholson & Hoyer, 2005), and it is this lack of knowledge that leads
8 to confrontations and abuse towards match officials in rugby union. One match official
9 (Society level, aged 45-54, 6-10 years experience) outlined that the abuse seen was at
10 under 18 level, and that it is the spectators that are the issue, “the only incidents of ref
11 abuse I have ever seen have been at Colts (u18) level, and it has come from over
12 involved parent spectators. More could be made of the spectator code.”

13 Codes of conduct, as well as sanctions for those that are abusive towards match
14 officials, is a concept which has been raised by cricket match officials. On-field, in-
15 game sanctions which are available for cricket match officials have been deemed as
16 unsatisfactory when dealing with any forms of abuse, and match officials wanted
17 increased authority in order to deal with any incidents that occur during play:

18 “... when verbal abuse takes place, umpires are severely restricted
19 ... Matters can be reported, but there are almost no examples
20 (including physical violence involving participants) where the
21 umpire can intervene, in extremes, to require a player to leave the
22 field or suspend their participation in the fixture at the time. I
23 cannot think of any other sport whereby an official does not have
24 this ability.”

25 (C2 level, aged 25-34, 6-10 years experience)

26 The fact that the lack of on-field sanctions has created further trouble for cricket
27 match officials due to restrictions related to player misdemeanours during play, is
28 clearly a concern. Match officials supported the introduction of yellow and red cards for
29 offences on the field of play and believed that this would help to reduce any abuse

1 directed towards them or other players. One match official (C4 level, aged 65+, 16-20
2 years experience) outlined how this should occur, “for persistent dissent, a form of
3 yellow / red card ... removing the player from the field and participating in the game.
4 Also, the use of penalty runs in cases of abuse and or dissent.”

5 Match officials believed that any actions by a player or a team must have
6 consequences, and be a sufficient deterrent to the player or team acting in a similar way
7 in future. Moreover, the requirement for effective sanctions has even been linked to a
8 decline in the ethos that surrounds cricket. Match officials believed that the lack of
9 sanctions for abusive behaviour has led to the perception that, “... captains need to be
10 held responsible for the behaviour of their team members and held accountable if they
11 fail to do so.” (C4 level, aged 65+, 21+ years experience). Another match official stated
12 that there are wider issues related to the spirit in which the game of cricket should be
13 played, with a view of issues inherent in wider society being reflected in sport, “how do
14 we actually get players to adopt the spirit of cricket, rather than just talk about it. What
15 has changed? Is it just in sport....no, in the UK the public have less respect for those
16 placed in authority.” (C3 level, aged 55-64, 21+ years experience).

17 The sentiment that the growing amount of abuse is symptomatic of wider issues
18 in society is something that is plausible, given the acceptance that sport mirrors society
19 in many aspects of behaviour (Eitzen, 2016). However, given the concerns identified
20 here, there is a requirement that the respective governing bodies of the two sports
21 address the working conditions and operational environments of their match officials.

22 ***Training and Career Progression***

23 *Professional Development and Online Support*

24 Rugby match officials identified that there is a need for a nationalised brand and
25 identity. In providing such an identity the RFU would be seen to further support their

1 match officials, and be offering development opportunities as part of the support
2 package. One match official argued that this is essential, “we need a better national
3 brand to provide an identity for referees...more training should be available online for
4 officials.” (Society level, aged 35-44, 16-20 years experience). Rugby union match
5 officials see online training as a method for increasing their development opportunities,
6 assisting them in the promotion process and providing educational content that can help
7 them deal with the abuse. Any such provision must be constructed utilising relevant
8 informed research, adequately administered, and evaluated effectively to ensure impact
9 is maximised.

10 To achieve these ends there should be a dialogue between match officials, their
11 societies, and the RFU. It is extremely difficult to implement and affect change without
12 this discourse, although match officials believed that this communication network is
13 underdeveloped, “more connectivity with RFU staff and societies should be run
14 professionally, not as old boys' clubs.” (Society level, aged 45-54, 3-5 years
15 experience).

16 The training and development for cricket match officials is often delivered by
17 the league in which they officiate, although this training is regarded as variable, and as
18 such match officials are receiving mixed experiences, “the standard of the training
19 appears to be governed by the league in which you umpire, rather than something
20 produced by the ECB.” (C3 level, aged 65+, 6-10 years experience). Another cricket
21 match official commented that “it would be interesting to be offered any [training] by
22 the ECB. Our only support is the League,” (C4 level, aged 65+, 11-15 years
23 experience), whereas a C4 level match official identified that this variable provision was
24 a particular issue, “the support network for the panel I umpire in is poor, but everyone
25 just seems to accept it.” (C4 level, aged 55-64, 6-10 years experience).

Cricket match officials believed that there are methods which can be employed to tackle the issue of support, development, and progression. The organisation of this potential system is something which one official (C5 level, aged 45-54, 3-5 years experience) identified as essential, “it's currently done at a localised level on an ad hoc basis. We contact our committee with any issues. These members are volunteers and can't necessarily devote the time.”

Similar to the issues that have been identified by rugby union match officials regarding the societies and structures, cricket match officials also believed that the amateur approach to their training, in particular, was affecting their development. The value of the leagues, and the training and support offered has been acknowledged, although there are matters that have been identified and relate to the lack of professionalism of the training and a lack of accountability, which ultimately meant that cricket match officials were receiving very mixed services from the leagues:

“The vast majority of people involved in the development of umpiring are well meaning volunteers who do their best with limited support from the professional association. As volunteers they are able to act without too much accountability and often ignore directives from the association.”
(C2 level, aged 55-64, 16-20 years experience)

The issues related to match official support and the accountability of the organisations which are responsible for the delivery or training, assessment, and promotion was questioned by the match officials in both sports. Officials were arguing for a more coherent structure, better support networks and more accountability from the RFU, ECB, and referee's societies and local leagues. Given the concerns related to training and development, it is perhaps unsurprising that match officials are finding it difficult to deal with instances of abuse in both sports, with incidents such as those highlighted in this section contributing to the pressure and stress experienced, and providing further barriers to their retention (Voight, 2009).

1 **Conclusion**

2 The current landscape for match officials in both rugby union and cricket shows
3 a working environment that has negatively evolved. The attention and scrutiny has
4 increased at both the elite level and for match officials involved in mass participation
5 sport. As an associated consequence, this has elevated the pressure on match officials
6 and created moral panic (Cohen, 1972, 2004; Garland, 2008). In order to move towards
7 steps four and five of Cohen's moral panic model, there is an urgent requirement for the
8 ECB and the RFU to intervene and attempt to improve the current operational
9 landscape. Over half of match officials are subjected to verbal abuse, and over one in
10 two match officials experience this abuse at least a couple of times a season, with
11 associated concerns for the ECB and RFU related to the retention of these match
12 officials (Ridinger et al., 2017).

13 The FA have intervened in association football due to the existing abuse
14 problems (Cleland et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017), although this intervention has
15 received mixed feedback. As was the case with association football, match officials in
16 rugby union believe that a stronger disciplinary system is necessary to dissuade players,
17 coaches, and spectators from abusing them, with touchline behaviour identified as a
18 concern. Clearly the current disciplinary measures fail to present a significant deterrent
19 for those willing to abuse match officials. For these sanctions to become more effective,
20 the data within this study suggests match officials believed that the RFU should engage
21 further with the mass participation, grassroots game.

22 Cricket match officials faced similar challenges and believed that the
23 disciplinary process requires consideration if it is to provide them with the support that
24 the increasing levels of verbal abuse demands. Due to the perceived lack of support,
25 cricket match officials were equally vociferous when discussing potential changes

1 which might assist them when abusive situations are encountered, moving to stage four
2 of Cohen's model (1972), and governing body intervention. An aspect of this
3 intervention could be the construction of a mentoring programme, which can be a
4 method of improving support networks around those that face challenging situations
5 (Ross, Bruderle, & Meakim, 2015).

6 The construction of effective mentoring schemes would also provide increased
7 support for existing match officials, and retain older match officials within sport,
8 something advocated in other sports match official research (Kellett & Warner, 2011;
9 Ridinger, 2015; Warner et al., 2013). Such approaches would also provide a platform
10 for these match officials to pass on their experiences. Alongside mentoring, there is also
11 a need to improve the progression pathways for match officials in both sports, and to
12 improve communication regarding these pathways between the governing bodies,
13 administrators and match officials.

14 Our findings suggest that the impetus to alter the current situation related to
15 match official abuse in cricket and rugby union must come from the ECB and RFU. It is
16 clear from the findings presented here that nationalised reviews are required. There is
17 also a need for further research and engagement with all stakeholders involved in both
18 sports to address the understanding and interpretation of regulations, laws and
19 disciplinary procedures from the perspective of the players, coaches and spectators if
20 operational environments are to be improved. We have identified a wider trend of
21 match official abuse in both sports considered here, as well as association football in
22 England (Webb et al., 2017), and if governing bodies do not want further issues leading
23 to declining match official numbers and attrition rates, the concerns of match officials
24 must be addressed as a matter of priority.

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