

# Pearce focuses on big time to herald rise of rugby's young men in black

At the age of 22, one of the young stars of refereeing is turning heads, writes Mark Souster

It used to be said that you realised you were getting old when the policemen on the streets looked young. Much the same can now be applied to rugby union referees. Wayne Barnes was the pathfinder, turning professional at 25, and in his slipstream is a generation of referees barely out of their teens, with ambition and ability to burn.

Luke Pearce is leading the charge. Others are in pursuit but, at the age of 22, Pearce is the youngest ever to be promoted to the RFU's national panel, which enables him to referee up to Championship level, the rung below the Guinness Premiership. He made it at only 18, having begun as a schoolboy, and has since taken charge of more than 30 matches.

Pearce is an accomplished, erudite, remarkably mature and measured young man, who is full of confidence and who caught the eye of the power brokers at the RFU at an early stage. He sprang to prominence this season when he awarded three penalty tries to Moseley, the last in stoppage time to give them a 28-25 victory away to Coventry, their arch rivals. It caused a storm of protest. Home fans incensed by his decisions verbally abused him. Beer was allegedly thrown.

Like Barnes after the 2007 World Cup quarter-final — the Englishman was vilified in New Zealand for failing to spot a forward pass that led to France's decisive try — Pearce took it in his stride and pledged to learn from any unintentional mistakes.

He agrees that you have to be a certain type of character to want to be a referee, let alone make that decision as a teenager. It was perhaps inevitable, however, given that Andrew, his father, was a referee and is still a Premiership touch judge. Pearce was born in Pontypool but grew up in Exeter when the family relocated.

By the age of 15 Pearce was in charge of his first match, Crediton second XV against Newton Abbott

third XV. Players, some of them 20 years his senior, called him "Sir". "Most of my childhood was either at a rugby ground watching Dad or being with other referees," he said. "I grew up with rugby and fancied having a go. It was something different."

In those early days eyebrows were raised when he introduced himself at grounds. Occasionally they still are. "Players can be surprised to see you when you first rock up, but from the moment you blow the whistle you could be anybody," he said. "It doesn't matter who is refereeing as long as they make a decent job of it. Age can work in your favour."

Those formative years were important as he made sure that he spent time in the clubhouse after matches talking to veteran props who were willing to share their secrets. He has never experienced abuse from players or been subjected to the type of grief suffered by some footballing counterparts. "That is what remains special about rugby," he said. "It still retains the ethics and respect for officials."

His spare time away from his full-time job as a broker with ProSport Insurance Services, his father's company, which specialises in niche products for professional sportsmen, is spent analysing DVDs of his performances, often with Steve Leyshon, the national panel development manager. The next match has to be prepared for, focusing on how different sides play, where they might try to push

things to the limit and beyond, which players to watch out for. Information is passed between referees. It is part of the learning process. Then he has to keep fit, with nightly visits to the gym.

"We have identified Luke as a guy

who will go to the next level and we hope that he will go beyond that," Leyshon said. So what in his opinion makes a good referee? "Good knowledge and empathy," Pearce said. "You also have to be streetwise. Fifty per cent is man-management."

Pearce confesses that it can be a lonely occupation, and that officials, like coppers, tend to stick together.

He accepts that referees may be blamed by a losing coach. "That is the nature of the beast," Pearce said. "You have to be a strong character. You can't be overconfident — you might be reffing a guy who has 50 caps."

Having refereed the Russian championship finals last month, Pearce wants to sample the big time but appreciates that he has to prove himself under the RFU's rigorous assessment process. "My aim is to be in the frame when they are ready to select," he said.

His ambition is one day to referee an international at Twickenham or the Millennium Stadium. At his rate of progress, that should not be too far off.

**'Players are surprised to see you when you first rock up at the matches'**



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