

## STANDARDS BY TONY RUSS.

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Like most academy managers I spend a lot of time watching schools matches and they range from Saturday afternoon traditional friendlies to mid-week Daily Mail matches and tournaments such as St Josephs or the Super Sixteen event organised by Gullivers. I reckon to watch well over fifty games a season and so I feel I have sufficient evidence on which to base what follows.

The first thing to say is that the game in this country owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the schools and schoolmasters who generally do a magnificent job in the promotion and development of the game. However, there are signs that things are not completely healthy and that the danger signs need to be observed and dealt with. I have no doubt that the professional game has been good for the sport in terms of raising standards. However, as in football, negative aspects of the professional game are creeping into school rugby. How I detest school teams walking slowly onto the pitch in single file, thinking how cool and intimidating they are. When was the last time you watched a school game which didn't feature a preliminary huddle and squeeze? Why do some teams no longer seem to understand the need to win and lose with equal grace?

Whilst the rugby becomes ever more competitive and increasingly like the Premiership in terms of style of play, what has really struck me is the simply appalling deterioration in the behaviour of some players on the field and some teachers on the touchline over the past few years. I don't wish to give the impression that my comments apply to all schools or even most schools. I know the majority of teachers to be highly professional people who set permanently good examples, but worryingly there is a downwards trend and the point of this article is to highlight what I consider to be a problem for our sport.

These matches are often fiercely contested and are often watched by crowds of parents who all take the proceedings very seriously. However, what I find incredible is the 'industrial' language used by the players and its toleration by both referees and members of staff. I understand that this sort of language, regrettably, forms part of rugby culture and if one stands behind the posts listening to a captain's pep talk, one is left to reflect on the substance of the message that might remain after deletion of all the expletives. This is one thing and not for general consumption, but it is quite different when players actually shout obscenities as they run about the field - behaviour that would not be tolerated by a referee in any other sport, but which seems to go unpunished by our refereeing fraternity.

In my view, the use of so-called industrial language is unacceptable and should be punished with an immediate yellow card. I don't understand why referees accept it. There

needs to be an agreed code of conduct for youth football, which puts a premium on acceptable behaviour and language. Teachers should, of course, be no more accepting of such language on the field than they would be in the classroom. It is not long ago that a schoolboy would be sent from the field and disciplined by his headmaster for the use of bad language on the field. Now it's accepted as part of the game by all concerned and the game is much the worse for it.

The second area which concerns me even more is the behaviour of some teachers on the touchline, who set the worst possible example to their players by questioning all refereeing decisions against their teams and by routinely and openly undermining the referee's authority on the field by a barrage of constant criticism. It certainly used to be the case that the referee's authority was absolute and neither players nor teachers would dream of criticising a referee's performance during a match. This is clearly no longer the case and the game is in clear danger of degenerating into a football situation, which a schoolteacher friend of mine once referred to as, "the kicking, shouting, swearing game." I have noticed that even teachers whom I respect and admire spend much of their time worrying about the referee and his perceived errors and communicating these thoughts to players – in turn, further undermining the role of the referee.

I recently watched a game involving a Welsh side at a recent tournament, during which the coaches of the Welsh team set the most appalling example in terms of their touchline behaviour. It was no surprise to me that this team was widely recognised as the most dirty in the tournament and that the players displayed a lack of discipline that led to several outbreaks of violence, yellow cards and, most significantly, lost matches!

'Rugby is a game for hooligans played by gentlemen.' If we lose the gentlemen bit then we lose the sport itself and it is the masters in charge of the schools' game who must protect the great tradition of our sport, which is best summarised by the oft quoted expression that the referee is always right even when he's wrong.