

## REFEREEING THE RWC 2007 BY TONY SPREADBURY

*Tony Spreadbury began refereeing in 1977 and became an FTR (Full Time Referee) in 2001. He has managed forty one international matches and has officiated at two Rugby World Cups. He has recently retired from international refereeing and will retire from being an FTR at the end of this season.*



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The starting point was, I suppose, the procedure for unions getting their referees into consideration for the RWC. The total numbers involved six months before the tournament were: twelve referees, thirteen touch judges, four selectors and two performance reviewers (the old assessor/adviser). The key areas for selection would be ability, fitness and neutrality. As in any team selection, eight probably picked themselves and there were four 'up for grabs.'

The selectors for this process were Stephen Hilditch of Ireland, Tappe Henning of South Africa and Bob Francis of New Zealand, all three former international referees, Michel Lamouillie of France, Kevin Bowring, the coaching representative on the referee selection committee, and Paddy O'Brien, the IRB Referee Manager; the chairman of this committee was the Welsh Rugby Union's David Pickering. Three months before the tournament, they announced the list of twelve referees. I was one of those selected and this was my second World Cup.

At the same time as this announcement, the appointments for pool matches were published. I was given the opening match and a matrix system was utilised for the remainder of the pool games. After the opener I was allocated to Italy v Romania, South Africa v USA and Fiji v Canada; I was reserve referee for Wales v Australia and Wales v Canada, then video referee for Argentina v South Africa in the semi-final. I was also touch judge for the quarter final between France and New Zealand.

After the pool games the touch judges went home, leaving the twelve referees to referee, to act as video referees and to be touch judges. The refereeing team assembled in Paris on August 30<sup>th</sup> and we stayed near the Gare de Lyon, which was perfect as we used the very fast TVR rail system apart from the travel to Scotland and Wales for the matches there. My initial worries about rail travel were totally unfounded as three-hour journeys to Montpellier and Toulouse were effortless, comfortable, stress-free and on time.

When we met on August 30<sup>th</sup>, we were taken off to Tignes, a famous ski resort, and introduced to some team bonding. Everybody was put in a team and we walked, played soccer, used the spa and generally got to know other referees who we previously had not spent a great deal of time with; rugby was not specifically on any agenda for that weekend and we just got on with meeting colleagues. There was no rush, no formality – feeling part of a team was the objective and it was very successful. When I first refereed at international level, you went off on your own to a match and you had two local touch judges to assist; there was no video referee and you were assessed by the home nation. Now we have five referees with the main official, two touch judges, reserve referees four and five, a video referee, an assessor and sometimes a referee coach. We need a minibus to get to games when everybody is together!

One aspect of the use of officials is how the role of the touch judge might evolve in the future. The Guinness Premiership here has a system that works well, with specialist touch judges who work solely at their thing week-in, week-out. The same is true of the TMOs (Third Match Official), who specialise in their discipline and become extremely proficient at it. Because these people are honing their skills regularly, they will inevitably become better than referees, who might only do it occasionally. So perhaps that is an area that could see changes in the future. It could become a mix-and-match scenario with young officials on the way up and some referees just retiring with lots of experience of the top game to pass on to others.

Once we got back to Paris after the team-bonding, it was down to the grind of refereeing matters. The first meeting was on protocols that would be used in the tournament, especially on how/when the TMO would be used. Then there was a meeting with the coaches and, in some cases, with captains that came along as well. Paddy O'Brien chaired this meeting and the agenda was mainly on what and how we were going to referee. Obviously you can't give hard and fast rules at a pre-tournament meeting, but there were some areas that were to be set in stone: foul play would not be tolerated; pillars (or guards) were to be managed; and scrum engagement would have the same calls at all times and this had to be clarified as the call of 'Crouch, touch, pause, engage' (which was affirmed as the call we would all use) had been occasionally changed to 'Crouch, touch and pause, engage' in some matches and the players needed to know precisely what to expect. There was discussion and debate, but these were three two main areas that the coaches were told about.

Generally, I would say that we refereed as we said we would. Of course you miss some things and spectators often look in disbelief when we do fail to spot something

right in front of the referee's nose – but that, I have to say, is the easiest place to miss something; the further away you get, the easier it becomes visible and obvious. Having said that, the modern player has nowhere to carry out an act of skulduggery that might have gone on in the 'good old days' on the blindside. We now have citing officers and, frequently at the tournament, twenty one cameras! Now we don't want to miss foul play, the players are my responsibility, but it happens. However, the perpetrator of the dirty deed will be brought to justice – and all the players know that.

The scrum engagement had to be a priority for me in the opening game of France v Argentina and I had to ensure that the directives given at the referees/coaches meeting were adhered to. We had two powerful packs and it was relatively straightforward to handle. However, it is never that 'straightforward' when you get a dominant scrum against a weak one – that can become a nightmare to manage.

One big decision at our meeting was that there would be no pre-match meeting with the coaches. In the past we have met coaches on the Thursday before an international match and the agenda has largely centred on them showing us laptop video of the opponents, though this meeting did tend to stop the inevitable barrage of questions and comments that were common about an hour and a half before the game started. I personally liked the Thursday meeting as I always asked the coaches not to tell me about the opposition and to concentrate on telling me what they were going to do, but the RWC decision not to have these meetings did work well. If coaches had any issues with any aspect of a forthcoming game, they had to go to Paddy O'Brien and he'd sort the matter out. The coaches could ring Paddy before a game with their concerns and he would decide whether or not to pass on the message/question; he took the flak and shared what had been said when he decided that sharing/discussion was appropriate. I was sceptical initially, as I do enjoy contact with the coaches, but the system was an unqualified success.

After each game there was a process of feedback. The game was watched by a referee selector, who wrote a report and we discussed it after recovery training the following day. He would have a laptop video of refereeing decisions and that could be studied alongside his written comments. Then there was the Fair Play system that consisted of statistics compiled by the IRB on just about every aspect of the game – numbers of penalties, free kicks, tries, scrums, lineouts, rucks, mauls and blood bins to name just a few. Then you were given information on 'ball in play' time and the total package meant that you had a pretty good idea of how you had reffed the day before! The detail that is available now is remarkable. We can use our laptop to check on any aspect of the game and, if we wish, all examples of any single type of play (e.g. scrums, mauls, penalties); it is all there at the touch of a button. This was technological wizardry to me, but I found it helpful. You tend to develop a feel for what went well in a game, but this is a very beneficial coaching tool because it shows what *did* happen, not what we *thought* happened. Occasionally we did not meet up the day after the game under discussion as we might be moved on to another match, but that meeting always took place as soon as possible.

The opener of France v Argentina was very similar to a Premiership game, albeit at a higher level, with a vast crowd and worldwide television coverage. However, there

were some different styles that emerged, for example in the Fiji v Canada encounter. This was nothing like as tight as the opener and different skills became important in what was a free-flowing Fiji game plan that did not want long forward encounters where inches of territory were fought for.

There was not a lot that was new, in the sense of 'we've never seen it before.' Italy did work out a strategy for coping with opponents who were very proficient at the lineout and they did not compete – so there was never a maul. And once there is no maul, the defence have virtual carte blanche to get the possession in any (legal) way they can. Now that is not totally new and years ago Gary Reese at Nottingham worked out the Law after restarts; he knew that there was no maul if the restart team did not tackle the catcher, so he could come in behind them (usually as they formed what was a non-existent maul formation) to grab the ball. All perfectly legal! I'm a bit old-fashioned and like to see competition for possession, but you have to admire players/teams who work out the Law and use it to their advantage.

The yellow card has a valuable role in game management and I do think it ought to be solely for technical infringements, particularly close to the goal line. We should not, however, wait for a sequence of misdemeanours before waving that card; if a certain single tackle is the first, yet infringes and probably stops a score, it deserves the ten minute sanction. On the other hand, foul play, I feel, can still be dealt with by the referee with either a reprimand or a sending-off. And there has to be a degree of judgement by the referee as a simple example of punching can mean so many things; there is a vast difference between a minor spat between two players (when I will probably ask them to calm down and get on with the game) and a cold-blooded, intentional punch that started twenty yards away by a player who was never involved in what was going on (and that should always get red). These are judgement decisions, but the Law does have a yellow card for foul play so we simply go along with that. After all is said and done, though, the game has never been cleaner.

If there are areas that I, given a magic wand, might tweak, I suppose I would look closely at the tackle area as this is the most contentious part of any game at the top level. Ideally, I'd like to see the tackled player placing the ball at arm's length away from the tackle and there would be no guards/pillars to obstruct. This would free up the game in what is now an over-congested area.

Player reaction is hugely important to me and I still enjoy banter with them. However, we do have to guard against banter turning into shouting or into abuse of the referee. Too many sports have gone down this road and television will capture any unnecessary 'sledding' of the official. What I would say is that I personally like players talking – as long as the tone is acceptable. And those players know that they are under the microscope; there is not just television, but there are also the two touch judges who have microphones to the referee. All in all, it pays the players to keep the talk at a friendly level – and it is best for the game.

In RWC 2003 we enjoyed the 'secrecy button' on our intercom system and we could switch off when a player had to be talked to – that worked well. RWC 2007 had no such luxury – now your voice is public property. We are told that 'less is best' when it

comes to talking, but, as many people will have gathered, I do have a bit of a problem with that! But whatever system we use, the players themselves have selective deafness. Ask a tackler to roll away on the half-way line and he rolls immediately; then ask him to do the same thing when he is defending close to his own line and, lo and behold, he can't hear you. I even had a discussion with one player who said that his head-guard stopped him from hearing, yet he was engaged in a perfectly normal discussion wearing the same head-guard!

Use of the TMO does get some criticism at times, but we have to be very certain that a try has been scored. If I do not see the grounding, I go straight to the touch judge. If there is still any doubt, the TMO will be consulted as we have to get these big decisions right. His is an unenviable job as he can't make mistakes and he may have just a single decision to make – but it will be the most important one of that match. We referees can make a few errors and it should be accepted, but the TMO is watched by what could be millions and he has to be a hundred percent right.

If I have any advice for players at any level or age, it would be to try to get on with the referee. You don't have to be sickly, but be polite and listen to what he says. Once he, for example, calls "ruck," it is a ruck – whatever the players think. And they are not in a debating chamber! When players in any game start whinging, it gets under the referee's skin and, though he may not consciously go against that side, the fifty-fifty decisions may possibly go against the whingers. Be smart – and on that subject, be smart everywhere. If you are the team's main tackler and/or ball winner at the tackle, why wear mitts that single out your hands? I love it when players can be identified by what they wear and I have often answered the question of, "Who was it, ref?" with "The one with the such and such coloured mitts." But players learn and when I once penalised a player with black tape on the fingers, Mr. Dallaglio took the tape straight off.

I still keep in touch with different levels of the game and regularly do a school match. On the Sunday after I returned from the World Cup, it was off to do the Cornish Pirates. It does us referees no harm to officiate at a school game after being in an international – it can be refreshing and blows away the errors that you'd been brooding over after the big one.

My final piece of advice would be to reiterate the importance of getting on with the referee. Play what he wants, even if you think he's wrong, and do this to ensure that the ethos of a great game remains intact.



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