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Irish Rugby Football Union
P. R. Browne
Chief Executive

Ladies & Gentlemen, Chairperson thank you for the opportunity to attend today and offer some insight into the experience of the IRFU regarding abuse of Match Officials.

My name is Dudley Phillips and I am the Head of Referees with the IRFU, a position I have held since 2017. I retired from the Professional game after approx. 10 years of involvement at that level and refereeing over 100 games in 2017.

In total, I have been a Referee since 2001 and have officiated at all levels of the game and while not week in week out, I am still an active referee within Leinster.

I am joined online by my colleague, Anne Marie Hughes, Spirit of Rugby Programme Manager. The Spirit of Rugby programme was launched in September 2017 to promote and protect the values of the game. It is primarily an education and information programme to guide the types of behaviours that IRFU wish to be 'lived' across our clubs. Aimed at players, coaches, volunteers and parents, the main purpose is to educate players on their rights and responsibilities while implementing initiatives for volunteers and administrators so they can positively influence all to engage in the game in a fair and ethical manner. Through a series of workshops, educational material and ongoing communication, it encourages a culture within clubs where the values of the game are embedded in all activities, clearly demonstrating our values through actions.

Unfortunately, abuse of Match Officials is on the rise, and while rugby has a good reputation for respecting our officials, we are not immune and must continue to take the matter extremely seriously.

Sport is one area impacted by what seems to be an increase in abuse in society in general. One only has to look at any of the many social media posts that arise from sport week in week out to see evidence of this. As elected official I am sure that you too are only too aware that there can be a vocal minority with extreme views.

While we have become aware of incidents of abuse at games, abuse of match officials is not something we have faced week in, week out.

Our goal, backed up by the work we do through Anne Maria and Spirit, is to make the experience of rugby enjoyable for all involved. This can include some appropriate "encouragement" towards players and referees.

Most referees actually appreciate appropriate feedback after a game.



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We continue to spend a lot of time and resource in education around culture and the values of the game – the Spirit of Rugby Charter included in Appendix 1 shows that all players, coaches and match officials sign up to a code of conduct which we expect to be upheld.

When there is an example of the charter not being followed there are processes in place across each province to address it and if necessary, to sanction those who have been found to cross the line from what is acceptable.

Sanctioning of spectators is not so easy and is a longer journey we must travel but we will continue to focus on ensuring that those on the terrace understand our culture and respect the matchday experience for all.

We have provided education resources to clubs and schools around the country to remind those attending games that players, referees and coaches are volunteers and are taking part for fun. Examples of this material are included as Appendix 2. Some 300 of these sandwich boards have been distributed.

In cases where abuse has been experienced, we believe it is vital match officials impacted are supported by their province and ultimately the IRFU. Refereeing is a rewarding and enjoyable role in sport but it will come as no surprise to you that it can also be a lonely job at times.

We urge Rugby Clubs to include their referees in activities such as training and in social events, to counter any feelings of isolation which in turn adds to the difficulties experienced on a “Bad Day”.

In the professional side of the game, World Rugby, European Professional Club Rugby and the United Rugby Championship play a big part in monitoring and sanctioning coaches or players when they speak out in an inappropriate way.

Many people have spoken with me regarding the recent case when a coach took to social media to criticise a referee’s performance. Regardless of their opinion on the performance, not one person has agreed with the method chosen to get the message across.

The threat to rugby if such behaviour continued would be that young players, who see and hear some of these messages, assume it is acceptable – when it is not.

Social Media and sports pundits also have a significant part to play – in a recent example, pundits correctly applauded a person for speaking out about a mental health issue but in the very next segment slated a group of match officials. In my opinion these “experts” should be conscious about how the individual is impacted when criticised so heavily. Errors happen and it is ok to highlight them, indeed I am not saying that anyone should ignore them, but there is a line that should not be crossed.



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Regardless of match officials being professional or amateur, in the same way every player or coach is, they are all someone's mother, father, son or daughter and for those that are amateur they have professional careers away from the sport that can be impacted.

The topic of abuse is a constant work on for all sports and we need to keep educating those involved now, and those who will be involved in the future. We must continue this work, or all sports will struggle to find people willing to volunteer and facilitate the respective sports.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 1

SPIRIT OF RUGBY

- RESPECT**
For all those involved in the rugby family, the wider community and self.
Gratitude to coaches, officials, volunteers and other leaders in the game. Discipline while playing the game. Respect for the physicality of the game and commitment to the safety of the player as paramount.
- INTEGRITY**
Actions on and off the pitch that are open and transparent.
We aspire to always have the best interests of the player and those involved in the game, especially youth players, at heart. In rugby we aspire to do the right thing and endeavour not to be bystanders.
- INCLUSIVITY**
Diversity of opinion and culture means working together to be a vibrant, respectful organisation.
Rugby is a sport of choice for all, it transcends barriers and differences of race, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Players that have a positive life-long experience of the game can remain within the Irish Rugby family throughout their lives, fulfilling roles that enable them to be the best version of themselves.
- FUN**
A passion for the game, on and off the pitch, rugby is a source of joy for all.
Everyone has an equal right to learn, play and administer the game and should be respected for the age and stage of development that they are at; especially youth players.
- EXCELLENCE**
Strive to be the best that we can be.
There may be others who play better, make better decisions and perform under pressure better, but we complete each task knowing that we could not have done more for ourselves, our team, club or school; we are comfortable in the knowledge that we are doing our best.

Appendix 2

