



OPENING STATEMENT TO JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, CULTURE, ARTS, SPORT AND MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

We welcome the opportunity to represent the GAA and address the joint committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sports and Media to discuss concerns around abuse of officials in our games.

At its heart the GAA is about playing matches and valuing and developing people. That means an organisation that is fundamentally about players, and match officials. The welfare and wellbeing of those groups are a high priority for the GAA, as I'm sure they are for all sporting organisations.

I am joined today by our National Match Officials Manager, Mr Donal Smyth. Donal oversees match officiating in all respects. That includes Referee Recruitment, Referee Training and, crucially, general welfare and supports for our Referees. Donal and I will explain the refereeing environment in the GAA. We will be happy to hear the views of the committee, to learn from our colleagues in the other organisations that are represented here today, and of course to answer questions as they arise

SPECIFIC GAA MEASURES

There are approximately 3,000 active Referees and match officials in the Gaelic Athletic Association spread across football and hurling.

Please remember a few key things about this group. They are essential to the playing of our games. They carry out their duties in a high-pressure and high-profile environment. And they do so on a voluntary basis. All the more reason then, that they deserve our protection, gratitude and respect.

In the GAA we try to manifest this protection and respect in a few different spheres. We will expand upon these as the discussion evolves today, but in summary:

- We equip referees to carry out their duties to the highest standard possible. This centres around extensive training, evaluation and feedback mechanisms for match officials.

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- We respond appropriately to any adverse experiences referees might encounter. This includes providing counselling as required for our national panel on a confidential basis.
- We bolster the authority of match officials and strive to make their job easier by operating and maintaining appropriate playing rules and disciplinary system. That process and its evolution is always undertaken with one eye on the practicalities for referees. And it also provides for their protection in specific circumstances.
- We expend a significant degree of effort on improving the culture that surrounds match officiating. The Give Respect/Get Respect initiative is an awareness campaign that seeks to ensure that Gaelic Games are promoted and played in a positive, fair and enjoyable manner and engages Players, Coaches, Spectators and Referees.
- We have commissioned significant research into many of the pertinent issues being discussed here today, including the mental health challenges that our match officials face and their experiences of verbal and physical abuse during matches.
- We have a Referee Development Plan which details our ambitions regarding welfare provisions for match officials into the future.

WIDER ENVIRONMENT

We are acutely aware of the issues that referees face; we are aware of our responsibilities in this regard; and we are working hard to improve things. But one significant challenge is the fact that not all of the determining factors are within our direct control.

There is a pervading climate among those who watch and report on our games, and more significantly those anonymous commentators on discussion forums and social media to persistently pass judgement. This is often unfair, with little balance, and frequently with very little actual knowledge of the rules of the game. Despite our best efforts this lack of respect can at times transfer itself to the field of play.

CONCLUSION

Match Officials and on-field discipline is a vital part of our, and every other, sporting association. Their contribution cannot be overstated. Put simply, if we do not have referees and officials to monitor our games, then we simply will not have games.

This is a message that sadly does not seem to have hit home for a majority of sports followers, and at times players, irrespective of the code. I welcome the fact that this joint committee has today chosen to focus on what we consider a key issue for sport generally, and I look forward to hearing its views.

Tomás Ó Riain
Donál MacGabhann
1^ú Nollaig 2021