

Volleyball Ireland Submission to Oireachtas Joint Committee of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport & Media.

Ref: JCM-I-691

Invitation to submit written evidence on the elimination of any and all abuse directed toward referees, officials, and players in sport

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This submission has been authored by Gary Stewart, Chief Executive of Volleyball Association of Ireland, trading as Volleyball Ireland. The submission is in response to an invitation received by the Joint Committee to provide written evidence on the *elimination of any and all abuse directed toward referees, officials, and players in the sport of Volleyball*, as per the invitation to Volleyball Ireland received from Laura Pathe, Clerk to the Joint Committee of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport & Media dated February 4th 2022.
- 1.2. In developing this submission, I have consulted with members of the Volleyball Ireland Board, Competitions & Development Commission, Education & Training Commission and historic Referees Commission, as well as current referees and players actively involved in the sport.
- 1.3. For clarity, this submission focusses on any verbal or physical abuse directed at the above mentioned referees, officials and players, and does not include references to other forms of abuse as defined by TUSLA, such as neglect or sexual abuse. In any case, we have no received formal complaints or actions related to these areas of abuse in at least the last ten years. We adhere to the Children's First Act and Sport Ireland guidance related to Safeguarding & Protecting Children.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The general sense from Referees, Players & Officials involved in Volleyball in Ireland at present, is that there isn't a widespread issue with abuse of match officials or players, and that any incidences are typically isolated.

- 2.2. This is largely down to pre-emptive measures put in place at the end of the 2017/18 season to curb a deterioration of behaviour which had been building in the years prior to the 2017/18 season. These measures included the introduction of Disciplinary Points tables, sanctions and fines for accumulated Disciplinary Points, Education for Coaches & Players and the retrospective upgrading of sanctions if the Committee felt the penalties handed out on the day were too lenient.
- 2.3. The number of disciplinary points sanctioned during the season is growing over the last three years since records began and a number of measures will be introduced to help eliminate this poor behaviour including better education for referees and players going forward.

3. Background context related to the Sport of Volleyball in Ireland

- 3.1** Volleyball is a team sport played with six players on court, and up to 8 players on the bench at any one time. The game is refereed by a 1st Referee and 2nd Referee, with the 1st Referee being located on a stand above net height, and the 2nd Referee operating at ground level, on the opposite side of the court. As well as Referees, there are two score keepers that are considered officials.
- 3.2** Volleyball is considered amongst the most popular sports in the world with high participation in Eastern and Central Europe as well as Latin America, North America and Asia.
- 3.3** There are three main formats: Volleyball, Beach Volleyball and Snow Volleyball. Sitting Volleyball has been designed for people with a physical disability and is a Paralympic sport. Volleyball Ireland also delivers Chair Volleyball for people with profound disabilities as well as older adults.
- 3.4** The sport in Ireland is growing, with 15% participation increases year on year. Currently there are 1500 licensed players and the sport is particularly popular in schools where over 900 teams enter competitions annually.
- 3.5** In Ireland, 70% of members are foreign nationals, coming from almost 60 different countries.
- 3.6** The sport is considered the most 'gender equal' team sport in the world with roughly 50/50 male/female participation. In Ireland, 61% of players are women.

4. A recent overview of the action taken to help eliminate abuse of referees, players and officials, including recent statistical analysis in this area

4.1. Volleyball Ireland started collating and recording disciplinary sanction data in 2018.

Whilst there are no statistical data to show from before the 2018/19 season, the anecdotal evidence from Referees and Committee members involved in those previous years suggests that the level of behaviour by players and spectators was deteriorating, and although isolated, incidents of abuse of Referees & Players were becoming more frequent and could lead to a serious drop off and issue retaining Referees and Officials.

4.2. The Commission were concerned that verbal abuse of officials could become normalised like in some field sports and this would have a negative impact on participation and inclusion. To be pre-emptive and to reduce this verbal and intimidatory abuse, a number of actions were put in place. These included;

4.3. Introduction of a Disciplinary points table, where accumulated points were applied for yellow and red cards, which led to bans and fines for clubs and individual players. This points table would be published with the intention to 'name and shame' reoffending players and teams. The points system works as follows:

4.3.1 Each yellow card is worth 2.5 disciplinary points and would be awarded as a second warning for such things as minor misconduct and over aggression. Red cards are worth 10 pts and would be applied for *Rude Conduct* and *Offensive Conduct* or continuous infringements. It is worth noting that at first, a verbal warning is often communicated to the player through the team captain.

4.3.2 2018/19 Season – 177.5 Disciplinary points.

4.3.3 2019/20 Season – 220 Disciplinary points.

4.3.4 2020/21 Season - Due to Covid restrictions the 2020/21 season was cancelled.

4.3.5 2021/22 Season* – currently at 130 disciplinary pts, half-way through the season.

4.4 Documents such as the *Roles and Responsibilities of Captains, Players and Coach* were developed and sent to all member clubs, which included key guidelines and expectations.

4.5 The Referees Commission would proactively contact Club Secretaries and follow up on reports on abuse towards officials. This would include reminding clubs of their responsibilities.

4.6 The Referees Commission would retrospectively upgrade Yellow cards to Red cards if they felt the action taken on the day by the Referee was too lenient, and likewise upgrade verbal warnings to sanctions.

5.0 General sense of the current state of play

5.1 It is typically considered by the Referee community that because of those measures that were introduced above that any abuse towards match officials is isolated and the exception to the rule. Other factors include:

5.2 The pool of Referees in Ireland is quite small, and therefore any abuse is considered quite personal in nature.

5.3 At present, home clubs appoint Referees, and as such any abuse may lead to that club not being to provide Referees which will lead to fines and other competition sanctions.

5.4 All teams must have two registered Referees when they enter the league, therefore it is in the clubs' interest to retain Referees.

5.5 In Volleyball, the sanctions for abuse are quite strict in that there is a clear impact to the scoreboard if a player receives a penalty sanction. Often this results in 1pt penalties and a loss of service, whereas in other sports a yellow card may not have a direct or material impact on the score, in Volleyball it does so and it's automatic. Although rare, more severe sanctions include the forfeit of sets and matches.

6.0 Our plans for the future to further reduce abuse of officials and referees

6.1 We recognise that we must be proactive as the Governing Body to ensure that the level of abuse directed towards all involved in the game remains low. The following are measures that we are currently putting in place:

6.2 Education programme for players through social media to improve their awareness of the rules of the game.

- 6.3 Continue to improve the knowledge and skills of Referees to ensure that they are competent and confident to apply the rules of the game.
- 6.4 Introduction of Referee Development and mentoring programme where Referees can share experience of receiving abuse and advice for handling these situations both at the time and the impact afterwards.
- 6.5 Launch a social media promotional campaign profiling our Referees, with the aim to promote the personalities that are effectively volunteering their time to support the sport.
- 6.6 More matches streamed live so potential bad behaviour is highlighted with an evidence of same for retrospective action.
- 6.7 This is an important area of Sport and more must be done across the wider sporting network to support referees and players and to eliminate these issues. We commend the Committee for exploring this issue.

Ends.