



# Scottish Rugby

## Disciplinary Guide in respect of the Abuse of Match Officials

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LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT ACHIEVEMENT ENJOYMENT RESPECT



## Foreword

The abuse of Match Officials can take a number of forms and may come from a number of different sources. The abuse may be verbal, it may be by way of a gesture, or - in rare cases - it can be physical. The abuse may arise from those playing in the match or from those coaches, parents or spectators watching from the touch line. Whilst the abuse generally takes place during the course of a game, it can sometimes occur after the final whistle. However, no matter when, where or how it occurs, the abuse of any Match Official is always unacceptable.

Eradicating *Match Official Abuse* is essential to maintaining the ethos of our game and to the upholding of Scottish Rugby's *Core Values*. All those involved in Scottish rugby – whether this be as a player, coach, match official or otherwise – are expected to adopt a zero tolerance approach to *Match Official Abuse*, and must act decisively whenever and however it occurs.

Match Officials have a range of on-field sanctions available to help them deal with such abuse. They can also report instances of off-field abuse for follow up after the match. The game's disciplinary processes can then ensure that any reported case is properly considered and appropriately dealt with.

This Disciplinary Guide has been designed to assist all those involved with Scottish rugby to better understand what is meant by 'Match Official Abuse', and how they and others should deal with any cases arising.

Whatever your role in the game, we would recommend that you read and be aware of the contents of this, Scottish Rugby's *Disciplinary Guide in respect of Match Official Abuse*.

# CATEGORIES OF 'MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE' AND APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

Whilst *Match Official Abuse* can take a number of forms, all categories of **on-field abuse** are catered for by Law 9.28 of World Rugby's *Laws of the Game*. Instances of **off-field abuse** will be dealt with under the Misconduct provisions of Scottish Rugby's *Disciplinary Rules*.

World Rugby's sanctioning process (and Scottish Rugby's *Disciplinary Rules*) recognise five distinct categories of *Match Official Abuse*. Each of these offences carries with it its own range of potential disciplinary sanctions. It is not always easy to determine into which category of offending an individual case of abuse may fall. Match Officials are therefore encouraged to explain the circumstances of any incident simply and clearly in their Red Card or Match Official Abuse Form (MOAF) report. Based on this report, and any other available evidence, the Discipline Manager will then be in a position to determine the most appropriate charge to be brought in relation to the specific offence alleged.

## 1. Disrespecting the Authority of the Match Official

This is the lowest recognised level of abuse (and the most common) and is often referred to as '**dissent**' (rather than 'Match Official Abuse'). It may involve the questioning of a decision of the Match Official <sup>(1)</sup>, but could involve such things as making sarcastic gestures in response to a decision, or other non-verbal actions such as applauding, throwing the ball away or refusing to return to the Referee when asked to do so. In extreme cases, it could cover players who persistently appeal for certain decisions and who continue to do so following a warning.

Dissent may, but need not necessarily, include the use of foul or abusive language. The use of foul or abusive language of itself does not necessarily elevate the seriousness of offending from 'dissent' to 'abuse'. Its use does, however, add to the seriousness of the offence and may affect the determination of the most appropriate on-field response.

**Action:** *Where a Match Official is met with a challenge to their authority doing nothing will rarely, if ever, be an appropriate response.* There are a wide range of available on-field options according to the seriousness of the challenge. These may include:

- awarding a penalty against the offending player's team and issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- reversing the penalty decision where the offending player's team was initially awarded a penalty, along with issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- moving the offending player's team back 10m where the decision being challenged was the awarding of a penalty, along with issuing a verbal or formal warning;
- issuing a Yellow Card to the offending player where the challenge is deemed sufficiently serious; or
- issuing a Red Card – this would usually be the appropriate response where the offending player persists in challenging the Match Official's decision following a warning and/or where the challenge is accompanied by swearing.

*Note 1: It is a recognised that the captain of a team may approach the referee at an appropriate moment to seek clarification of a particular decision. This does not entitle the captain to challenge the decision. Referees should generally not tolerate approaches from players other than the team captain.*

## 2. Verbal Abuse

This occurs where the offender uses foul or offensive language in comments aimed directly at a Match Official. It also includes any attack upon the integrity of the Match Officials (regardless of whether or not this is accompanied by foul or offensive language).

Any disparaging comment directed at a Match Official with reference to their religion, colour, sexual orientation, gender, national or ethnic origin should automatically be treated as abuse.

**Action: Conduct properly categorised as ‘Abuse’ should always result in the issuing of a Red Card.**

It is acknowledged that the dividing line between ‘dissent’ and ‘abuse’ can be a narrow one. For example, if a player responded to a decision by the Match Official by shouting, “*That’s a fucking joke*”, that might be considered to constitute ‘Disrespecting the Authority of the Referee’ (i.e. dissent) but if the player’s response was to shout directly at the Match Official, “*You’re a fucking joke*” that would amount to ‘Abuse’.

### 3. Using Threatening Actions or Words towards Match Officials

This occurs where a specific threat is made to a Match Official either verbally or by way of a physical gesture but there is no physical contact between the offender and the Match Official.

**Action: The appropriate response to such an offence will always be the issuing of a Red Card.**

### 4. Making Physical Contact with a Match Official

This is often referred to as ‘*making incidental contact with a Match Official*’. It occurs where there is physical contact with the referee which is more than merely purely accidental. The offence can be committed spontaneously, such as where the offender pushes a Match Official out of the way to enable them to make a tackle, or recklessly where the player puts themselves in a situation where physical contact is unavoidable even though it was not intentional.

**Action: The appropriate response to such an offence will always be the issuing of a Red Card.**

It is common in cases of physical contact for the Match Official to initially blame themselves for their positioning (rather than blaming the actions of the player). If the Match Official subject to the physical contact has the opportunity to review an incident after the match, and determines that an offence did take place, they may still submit a *Match Official Abuse Form* (MOAF) <sup>(2)</sup>, irrespective of whether they issued any form of sanction on-field at the time.

*Note 2: Match Official Abuse Forms should normally be submitted within 7 days of the incident.*

### 5. Physical Abuse of a Match Official

This is the most serious form of match official abuse (and thankfully the rarest). It occurs where the offender intentionally makes deliberate physical contact with the Match Official. As such it goes beyond and is more serious than the offence of ‘Making Physical Contact with a Match Official’.

**Action: The appropriate response to such an offence will always be the issuing of a Red Card.**

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

(1) The five offences specifically recognised within the World Rugby Sanctions Table (and as described above) can only be committed by **players** subject to the on-field jurisdiction of the referee<sup>(3)</sup>. Where such offences result in the issuing of a Red Card, the formal disciplinary process will be triggered by the submission of that **Red Card report** to Scottish Rugby.

(2) Where words are spoken or acts are committed by coaches, parents, spectators or others which, had they been spoken or committed by a player during a match, would have been categorised as falling within one of the five categories outlined above, and the Match Official considers that those words / acts would have resulted in a Red Card had they occurred on the field of play (i.e. the offence meets the “**Red Card Test**”), the referee should complete and submit a **Match Official Abuse Form (MOAF)**.

This MOAF report will be considered by Scottish Rugby’s Discipline Manager, who will then initiate formal disciplinary proceedings in accordance with the provisions of Scottish Rugby’s **Disciplinary Rules**.

(3) Although it may be immediately obvious to the Match Official that one of the offences categorised as ‘Abuse’ has occurred, it may not be immediately obvious into which category the offence falls. In most cases, the Match Official will not be in a position to call on any assistance in determining precisely which offence has occurred. In such circumstances, the Match Official must calmly and dispassionately determine what they believe to have happened, which they will record in detail in their subsequent report, and then act accordingly.

Having considering the facts as set out in the Match Official’s report (together with any other supporting evidence which may be available), the Discipline Manager will determine the appropriate charge(s) which the offender should face. The Disciplinary Committee which subsequently examines the case also has the power to amend the charge where it deems appropriate.

(4) Match Officials should not lose sight of the fact that abusive comments made by players which are not directed at them or which do not amount to an attack on their own integrity may still constitute ‘Foul Play’ (under Law 9.12). This would cover cases where the abuse is directed at an opponent or a team mate. In responding to such abuse, the Match Official should have regard to the context in which the comments were made and be conscious of the need to uphold the values and ethos of the game. **Any abuse which relates to any of the protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010<sup>(4)</sup> MUST be dealt with by the issue of a red card.**

(5) If a Match Official is made aware of any allegation of discriminatory language being used in a match, irrespective of whether they themselves heard the comment, **it must be reported to Scottish Rugby’s Discipline Manager** after the match (via [discipline@sru.org.uk](mailto:discipline@sru.org.uk)). The Discipline Manager will investigate the matter further and, where appropriate, may decide to bring Misconduct charges against the relevant person and/or their club.

*Note 3: Note that players who have been replaced tactically or due to an injury remain subject to the jurisdiction of the Referee for the duration of the match.*

*Note 4: Age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.*

## COMPLETING A RED CARD OR MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE REPORT

The report completed by the Match Official to trigger the disciplinary process (Red Card report or MOAF) is a critical document on which the effective operation of the disciplinary process relies. Well written, accurate reports containing the right amount of detail help the Discipline Committee to determine whether an offence has been committed and, if so, what the appropriate sanction should be. In many cases, a well written report can lead to the case being dealt with without the need for a Hearing.

A number of Referee Societies have appointed members who are able to assist Match Officials with the writing of any report. Where available, these individuals should be consulted before submitting the abuse report.

The section of the report in which the Match Official is asked to describe the incident requires the greatest care. The primary object of this section of the report is to provide a detailed, accurate and factual account of what took place. It is important that the actual words used are recorded. The report will be shared with the offender and the Discipline Committee. It should provide all those involved with a clear picture of the events leading up to, during, and immediately after the incident complained about.

Match Officials give of their time voluntarily and completing reports detailing Match Official Abuse is one of the least attractive aspects of the role. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from getting it right first time. A report which is inaccurate is unlikely to be accepted by the offender. This may result in the offender pleading not guilty to the disciplinary charge and requiring the Match Official to attend a Hearing where they will be challenged on the content of their report. Even where the charge is admitted, the offender may still require the referee's attendance so that the alleged inaccuracies can be put to them.

Where the report contains insufficient detail to enable the Discipline Committee to perform its role, the Discipline Manager may have to refer the report back to the Match Official with a request for further information. This information will be required before notification of the Hearing can be sent to the offender and their club. Inadequate reports are therefore likely to result in delays to conducting the Hearing.

### Checklist for Reporting

The report of the incident should address all of the issues below which apply:

- The name and role of the alleged offender, together with their club or school.
- What decision or action of the Match Official prompted the alleged abuse?
- Where on the field did it occur?
- How far away from the offending was the Match Official when the offending words were spoken (or physical act committed)?
- To the best of the Match Official's recollection, what were the precise words spoken?
- Did the offender make eye contact with the Match Official when the offending remarks were being made?
- Is/was the Match Official in a position to discount the possibility that the offending words were directed at someone other than them (such as a team mate or opponent)?
- What impact did the offence have on the remainder of the match e.g. what was the response of the other players to the offender's words or actions?
- After the Match Official notified the offender of their decision, how did the offender respond?
- Did the Match Official have any subsequent contact with the offender?
- Was there an appointed Assistant Referee or Referee Assessor/Performance Reviewer who may be able to provide supporting evidence?

In cases where physical abuse is alleged:

- What part of the offender's body was used to initiate (or attempt to initiate) physical contact e.g. clenched fist, hand, arm, elbow, knee, foot?
- Was the Match Official in a position to defend themselves and/or take evasive action?
- Did actual physical contact occur?
- If so, with which part of the Match Official's body was contact made?
- How would the Match Official describe the level of force used?
- Did the Match Official sustain any injury?
- Is the Match Official aware of any video footage of the incident?

## AGE GRADE CASES

Where cases of alleged Match Official Abuse occur in Age Grade matches, the same principles described above will apply but it should be noted that some of the subsequent discipline processes (including around the holding of disciplinary Hearings, the role of the player's school/club in the process and in relation to any sanction imposed) may be modified to reflect the age of the alleged offender.

Where the Match Official subjected of alleged Match Official Abuse is aged 17 or under, safeguarding issues may also arise and the case may be referred to Scottish Rugby's Child Wellbeing and Protection Team in addition to the Discipline Manager.

## FURTHER ADVICE

Where a Match Official requires further advice on the completion of a *Red Card Report* or *Match Official Abuse Form* (MOAF) then in the first instance contact should be made with the appointed officer within their Referee Society. Alternatively, advice may be sought from Scottish Rugby's Discipline Manager.

For advice on any aspect of Scottish Rugby's disciplinary process, please contact Scottish Rugby's discipline team at [discipline@sru.org.uk](mailto:discipline@sru.org.uk).



## APPENDIX 1: DISRESPECT, VERBAL ABUSE OR THREATENING WORDS?

The distinction between the various categories of verbal 'Abuse' can sometimes be a fine one. For this reason, Match Officials must be allowed some margin of error in their reporting of offences. Errors in classifying the type of offending can be corrected during the disciplinary process.

In an attempt to assist Match Officials in drawing a distinction between disrespect/dissent on the one hand and verbal abuse (or threatening words or behaviour) on the other, some hypothetical examples are set out below along with suggestions as to how they should be categorised.

The following examples might properly be categorised as **disrespecting the authority of the Match Official**:

1. *"Are you having a laugh?"*
2. *"Are you fucking serious?"*
3. *"That's fucking bullshit ref."*
4. *"Are you fucking joking?"*
5. *"Fucking wonderful, fucking marvellous."*
6. *"That's fucking pathetic."*

There are a range of on-field options available to the match Referee according to the seriousness of the challenge. With the possible exception of item (1), the circumstances of all of the examples above may justify an on field Red Card for *'Disrespecting the Authority of a Match Official'*.

The following examples might properly be categorised as **verbal abuse of the referee** warranting a Red Card for 'Abuse':

1. *"You're a fucking joke."*
2. *"You're fucking pathetic."*
3. *"You're a cheat."*
4. *"Come on lads, we're playing against 16 here."*

The following examples might properly be categorised as using **threatening words or behaviour** and should always result in a Red Card:

1. *"I'll see you in the car park later."*
2. *"If I see you in the clubhouse afterwards, I'm going to smash your head in."*
3. *"I wouldn't come back here again if I were you."*

Other factors (beyond the mere words used) may require to be taken into account in the categorisation of offences (such the manner in which the words were expressed). Scottish Rugby Disciplinary Committees have the ability to amend the charge, where they consider it to be appropriate, after hearing evidence from the Parties or should there be an error in the presentation of the case.

## APPENDIX 2: APPROPRIATE CLASSIFICATION OF THE OFFENCE

Charge	Definition of Charge	Examples
<b>Disrespecting the Authority of a Match Official.</b>	Sometimes referred to as 'dissent' rather than Match Official Abuse. It often (but not always) involves questioning a decision of the Match Official.	<p>"Are you fucking serious?"</p> <p>"That's fucking bullshit ref."</p> <p>"Are you having a laugh?"</p> <p>"Are you fucking joking?"</p> <p>"That's fucking pathetic."</p> <p>Non-verbal examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Throwing the ball away.</li> <li>- Refusing to follow the direction of the Match Official.</li> <li>- Refusal to give a name when asked.</li> </ul>
<b>Verbal Abuse of a Match Official.</b>	<p>This usually occurs where the offender uses foul or offensive language in comments aimed directly at the Match Official.</p> <p>Any comments that question the integrity of the Match Official should always be considered as Abuse.</p>	<p>"You're a fucking joke."</p> <p>"You're fucking pathetic."</p> <p>"You're fucking useless."</p> <p>"You're a cheat."</p> <p>"How much are they paying you?"</p> <p>"We're playing against 16 here."</p>
<b>Threatening Actions or Words towards a Match Official.</b>	This occurs where a specific threat is made to the Match Official either verbally or by physical gesture but there is no physical contact between the offender and the referee.	<p>"I'll see you in the car park later."</p> <p>"I'm going to punch your lights out."</p> <p>"I'm going to smash up your car."</p> <p>"I wouldn't come into the club house if I were you."</p>
<b>Physical Contact with a Match Official.</b>	This is often referred to as 'making incidental contact with a Match Official'. It occurs where there is contact with the Match Official which is more than merely accidental.	<p>A player moving the referee out of the way at a breakdown or to make a tackle.</p> <p><i>NB It is common in such cases that a referee may initially apologise for their positioning, however, this does not prevent a charge being issued on review.</i></p>
<b>Physical Abuse of a Match Official.</b>	The offender intentionally makes physical contact with the Match Official i.e. physical contact that could not be categorised as merely careless or reckless.	<p>A player charging into a referee.</p> <p>A player pushing the referee with force.</p> <p>Any punch, strike or kick.</p>

## APPENDIX 3: EXTRACT FROM SANCTIONS TABLE

1. The Discipline Committee is required to follow the process outlined within the Scottish Rugby Disciplinary Rules.
2. The Disciplinary Rules include specific guidance in relation to the length of sanction to be imposed for **Red Card offences**. In respect of 'Abuse' cases, this is outlined below:

### 9.28 A player must not disrespect the authority of a Match Official.

Low-end: 2 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 4 weeks/matches	Top-end: 6+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches
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### 9.28 A player must not verbally abuse a Match Official. Verbal abuse includes, but is not limited to, abuse based on: religion, colour, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation.

Low-end: 6 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 12 weeks/matches	Top-end: 18+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches
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### 9.28 A player must not make physical contact with Match Officials.

Low-end: 6 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 12 weeks/matches	Top-end: 18+ weeks/matches	Max: 52 weeks/matches
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### 9.28 A player must not use threatening actions or words towards Match Officials.

Low-end: 12 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 24 weeks/matches	Top-end: 48+ weeks/matches	Max: 260 weeks/matches
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### 9.28 A player must not physically abuse Match Officials.

Low-end: 24 weeks/matches	Mid-range: 48 weeks/matches	Top-end: 96+ weeks/matches	Max: Life
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3. In sanctioning non-Red Card cases (which generally, but not always, will arise as a result of a *Match Official Abuse Form*) the Discipline Committee will usually base its sanction on the nearest analogous offence within the Sanctions Table and use the sanctioning process for Red Cards (i.e. assessing an appropriate entry point, considering any mitigating and any aggravating factors, etc.).

4. Scottish Rugby considers that there is a need for a deterrent to combat the Abuse of Match Officials. Discipline Committees are expected to consider this need for a deterrent to be an off-field aggravating factor in all cases.