

DISCIPLINARY MEMORANDUM

MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE

1. The Scottish Rugby Board has issued the following updated advisory guidance in relation to the sanctioning of Match Official Abuse.

Match Official Abuse

2. 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 Match Official Abuse and General Misconduct provisions of Scottish Rugby's [Disciplinary Rules](#).

3. 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.

4. The five categories of Match Official Abuse are as follows:

- 4.1. Disrespecting the authority of a Match Official (often described as "dissent");
- 4.2. Verbal abuse;
- 4.3. Use of threatening actions or words towards a Match Official;
- 4.4. Making physical contact with a Match Official; and
- 4.5. Physical abuse of a Match Official.

5. A disciplinary guide in respect of Match Official Abuse is available from the Scottish Rugby [website](#). This further explains each of the above.

The Need for a Deterrent

6. Offences involving the 'Abuse' of Match Officials are of considerable concern to Scottish Rugby.

7. The recruitment and retention of Match Officials is affected by the number of instances and the nature of the abuse Match Officials receive from players, coaches and others.

8. During season 2023/24 c.15% of the disciplinary cases Scottish Rugby's independent Disciplinary Committee were asked to consider involved the Abuse of Match Officials.

9. This level of Match Official Abuse offending is considered to be unacceptable.

Guidance to Match Officials

10. All instances of on-field and off-field abuse should be dealt with severely by Match Officials.

11. In responding to incident of Match Official Abuse, Match Officials are asked to follow the Guidance provided in the *Match Official Abuse Disciplinary Guide* available from the Scottish Rugby [website](#).

Guidance for Discipline Panel Members and Disciplinary Officials

Sanctioning Entry Point

12. It is important that sanctions imposed for all offences are consistent and determined in accordance with Scottish Rugby's Disciplinary Rules.

13. In determining the appropriate Entry Point for the sanctioning of Match Official Abuse the Scottish Rugby Board recognises each case will require to be taken on its merits. The Board, does, however, consider the following matters as being of relevance in relation to the determination of an appropriate Entry Point (i.e. whether the offence should normally be regarded as being Low End, Mid-Range or Top End on the scale of offending):

13.1 The nature of the language used, including the actual words, the frequency of their use and the degree of venom with which they were imparted;

13.2 In relation to competence criticisms, whether the comment was personally directed (e.g. “that was ***** awful ref” as compared with “you are a ***** awful ref”, with the latter being more offensive);

13.3 Whether the abuse involved personal comment (including in relation to the official’s family life, personal circumstances or moral values);

13.4 Whether the abuse questioned the impartiality of a Match Official, or suggested bias or cheating on their part (thereby impugning the Match Official’s moral values and the wider ethos of refereeing);

13.5 Whether the abuse is made by an individual or is conducted collectively by a group of individuals.

14. It is anticipated that other than in wholly exceptional circumstances:

14.1 the presumption shall be against allegations of ‘Verbal Abuse’ being downgraded to the lesser offence of Disrespecting the Authority of the Match Officials. For examples as to what might be deemed to constitute each type of offending, Discipline Committee members are asked to refer to the *Match Official Abuse Disciplinary Guide*;

14.2 allegations as to a lack of impartiality, of bias or of cheating should as a minimum be regarded as a Mid-Range offence; and

14.3 language that is racist, sectarian, homophobic, discriminatory or attacks an individual’s ethnic origin or religious beliefs should as a minimum be regarded as a Mid-Range offence.

15. In order to provide an additional deterrent, offence contrary to Law 9.28 (other than those properly categorised as being Disrespecting the Authority of the Match Officials) should normally be aggravated as follows:

15.1 Low End - by 1 week;

15.2 Mid-Range - by 2 weeks; and

15.3 Top End - by at least three weeks.

Off- Field Abuse

16. Instances of off-field abuse, dealt with under either the General Misconduct procedures or the specific Match Official Abuse Misconduct provisions of the Disciplinary Rules, should be treated as being of an equivalent gravity to equivalent on-field abuse.

17. In this regard:

17.1 In the best interests of the game, instances of off-field abuse must be dealt with expeditiously. In view of this modified misconduct procedures shall be incorporated into the Disciplinary Rules.

17.2 Where the Match Officials determine that equivalent on-field abuse would have resulted in a Red Card, such off-field abuse must be reported to the Discipline Manager; and

17.3 Disciplinary Committee members should ordinarily sanction such Misconduct abuse cases in an equivalent manner to a Red Card offence i.e. if a player would have received a 6 week playing suspension for an on-field offence, the player or other person found guilty of Misconduct for a similar offence should normally receive a 6 week ban from attending his club’s games and/or other relevant activities.

Effective Date

18. This guidance note shall replace any previous specific additional guidance issued in relation to the sanctioning of Match Official Abuse with effect from 1 August 2024.