



Harassment of Sports Officials

Harassment is defined as offensive, abusive, belittling or threatening behaviour directed at a person or persons because of a particular characteristic of that person or persons. The behaviour must be unwelcome and of a nature that a reasonable person would recognise as unwelcome.

ROLE OF THE OFFICIAL

Officials have a key role to play in ensuring the spirit of the game/event is observed by all. They play an integral role in sport and make sure that the game/event is played fairly, in accordance with the rules and in a safe environment.

Officials have no stake in the outcome of the game/event. They range from volunteers, trained and accredited, right through to career/elite officials.

DECLINE IN NUMBER OF OFFICIALS

Australian sport faces a crisis in the declining number of officials being recruited or retained in the system. In January 2002 the Australian Bureau of Statistics released data indicating that the number of officials in Australian sport dropped 26% between 1997 and 2001. Some sports have indicated that they have lost more than 50% of new recruits in one season.

A survey of National Sporting Organisations conducted in March 2002 by the Australian Sports Commission identified abuse and lack of respect as major causes of the declining numbers of people officiating.

WHY ARE OFFICIALS HARASSED?

- New technology allows officials' decisions to be more closely scrutinised than ever before;
- A changed media culture focuses almost entirely on confrontation;
- More money in sport at an elite level and an increasing level of professionalism expected of officials has filtered down to a junior level and raised expectations of officials' competency;
- A widening gap between officials' knowledge of the rules and that of players, spectators and commentators; and
- Disagreement with rule interpretations and perceived lack of competence of the official.

WHERE ARE OFFICIALS HARASSED?

Most harassment takes place in community/ local sport, followed by district and state amateur sports. Least harassment is considered to take place in international amateur sport.

HOW ARE OFFICIALS HARASSED?

Verbal harassment

- Most (about 95%) harassment is verbal;
- Most verbal abuse is directed at officials by athletes and involves yelling, profanity, taunts and insults;
- Coaches and parents deliver slightly less abuse in the form of yelling and profanity;
- Spectators are more likely than the other groups to taunt or insult officials; and
- Administrators and officials are unlikely to abuse other officials.

Physical harassment

- Most physical assault is also directed at officials by athletes and involves hitting and/or kicking, throwing objects and spitting;
- Most harassment is considered moderate in nature.
 - Moderate – 61% (involving arguments or comments directed at an official's position not them personally);
 - Moderate to severe – 30% (involving disruption of play, warning from an official, insults or profanity); and
 - Severe – 12% (involving fines, suspension, removal from the playing area, legal ramifications, actual bodily harm).

SUPPORT FOR OFFICIALS

Eighty-three percent of survey participants believe there is not enough being done in Australia to eliminate or reduce the harassment of officials. They also believe that:

- In 50% of instances there is no support given to officials after they have been harassed;
- Mentoring is provided 30% of the time by a peer or colleague;
- In 68% of instances there is no support/counselling provided for the offender after harassment has occurred;
- Counselling is provided 20% of the time by the sporting body;

- Different forms of harassment are resolved at different rates, dependent upon the procedures evident and adhered to within the relevant sporting organisation. Resolution falls somewhere between rarely and mostly;
- Ninety percent of survey participants believe Australian officials are generally competent across all levels of sport. Coaches are the least likely to say officials are competent;
- Thirty-six percent of survey participants believe spectators have no rights in relation to officials not performing competently; and
- Sixty-four percent of survey participants believe spectators have a right to voice their concerns through appropriate procedures.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Behaviour

- Educating stakeholders about rules and roles of officials;
- Developing values-based association/club Codes of Behaviour;
- Implementing a Code of Conduct for each category of club member; and
- Establish procedures to manage Codes of Conduct, including tougher penalties.

Competence

- Officials at all levels have access to appropriate education programs;
- Education programs are offered using flexible delivery methods;
- Education programs should contain elements related to technical knowledge as well as game management skills;
- Provider/organiser of officials should ensure that adequate resources, both human and financial, are available to ensure that educational programs, ongoing coaching/mentoring and support are available for officials at all levels; and
- Provision of quality feedback to officials on their performances.

YEAR OF THE OFFICIAL

Harassment of officials is a national problem threatening the future of sport. The year 2003 was designated the Year of the Official and was the springboard for a campaign that aims to attract, train and retain officials by recognising the essential role they play in sport and reducing the incidence of abusive behaviour towards them.

For further information see:

<http://www.ausport.gov.au/yearoftheofficial/>

FAIR GO FOR OFFICIALS FORUMS

In 2002, the Australian Sports Commission organised a series of national Fair Go For Officials forums which explored the issues surrounding the abuse of officials in Australian sport. The forums sought to develop fresh and effective strategies to deal with this growing problem. The key points from the Western Australian forum were:

- Abuse of officials is not a new issue - it has been going on for many years;
- Officials are a key part of sport and abuse is jeopardising the future of sport;
- Recent ASC survey results have quantified the issue somewhat, however more research needs to be done;
- Elite athletes play an important part in role modelling appropriate behaviour towards officials;
- Zero tolerance towards abuse needs to be supported by those running judiciaries and tribunals;
- Need to promote the positive aspects of officiating and not just focus on the negative;
- Technology can provide assistance in training officials;
- Officials need further training in behaviour management techniques (e.g. conflict resolution, mediation, communication);
- Strategies such as the Play by the Rules website <http://www.playbytherules.net.au/> can be utilised by everyone in sport for re-training and behaviour modification; and
- There is a legal and workplace safety context to this issue.

A report from the Western Australian forum is available at <http://www.officiatingaus.org/fgforums.wa.htm>

REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) Involvement in Organised Sport and Physical Activity Cat. 6285.0

Teena Jackson (2002) Australian Sports Commission Harassment of Officials Survey Canberra: ASC unpublished report

Glenlyon Sports Development (2003) Administrator Education Program Canberra: ASC

Information

For further information refer to the Department of Sport and Recreation website www.dsr.wa.gov.au or contact the Officiating Consultant on (08) 9387 9700.