

“That’s what the yellow card is for - too often referees use it when they are not sure if it’s a red card”

- Stuart Barnes commentating on the Northampton v Gloucester game on 18th September 2004 after Olivier Azam had prevented the Northampton full back from taking a quick tap penalty and was not binned.

By
Wayne Barnes.

As night follows day, my namesake will usually cause heated discussions in refereeing circles. More often than not the majority of referees are perplexed by some of his comments; however whilst watching the early season encounter between Northampton and Gloucester at Franklin’s Gardens, a comment by the former Bath and England fly-half had me considering the way I referee a crucial aspect of the game.

The yellow card (at first it was trailed as a white triangle) has been seen across rugby pitches for over half a decade. For all manner of reasons a team can be made to play temporarily with fourteen men and players can find themselves keeping the bench warm along with the substitutes. But the numerous reasons a player can be ‘binned’ for is the exact problem that Stuart Barnes alluded to back in September.

Players can be (and have been this season) sin-binned for a multitude of sins and misdemeanours. There has been punching, kicking, even head butting, and of course the numerous ‘technical’ offences for which the card was originally introduced.

The IRB introduced the yellow card to help manage the increasing problem of professional (or cynical) offences. Teams which repeatedly offended to ensure their try line was not breached, particularly as the clock approached eighty minutes and a five point score was required, needed to be punished. Offenders, who deliberately killed the ball to prevent flowing attacks in an attempt to concede three instead seven points, needed additional penalty; three points was not sufficient.

But have referees been implementing the card correctly?

On 12th October 2004 the Elite Referees (the referees responsible for officiating the Zurich Premiership) were told they were not. At the regular get-together at Twickenham, Brian Campsall (one of the three ex-international referees in charge of the Elite Group – Ed Morrison and Colin High being the others) showed examples of the ‘top’ referees not using the card for the reasons outlined above.

Players were committing cynical offences such as deliberately killing the ball on the try line, tackling a player who had taken a quick tap penalty before retiring ten metres and players on the ground (and thus out of the game) interfering with scrum-halves as they attempted to mount another attack. These offences were not being awarded a yellow card and negative play was not being dealt with appropriately.

The other areas of concern for the referee executives are the situations when referees are using the yellow card inappropriately when acts of foul play have occurred.

At the community rugby level (all the leagues below the Premiership) the acting Head of Officiating, Dave Broadwell, has numerous examples of disciplinary reports suggesting that referees are using the card erroneously with respect to foul play and are taking what can only be described as ‘the easy options.’ Instead of ordering a player from the field permanently, referees use the yellow card instead. To quote one such report where the referee had issued a yellow card “...The Red player ran from ten metres, punched the blue player square in the face, knocking him to the floor. I had no hesitation in issuing a yellow card.”

This cannot have been one of the situations at the forefront of the IRB’s mind when drafting the yellow card law.

So how should the yellow card be used?

The advice which the Elite Referees received in October was sound; players who cynically or deliberately offend should be punished with the sin-bin. It matters not if the offence is the player’s first or tenth offence or if it occurs in the first or last minute of play. Negative play must be dealt with harshly for the sake of entertaining football.

Teams or players who persistently offend, particularly in their own 22 (the red zone), should be warned that if they continue with their course of action a player may be temporarily suspended. If offences do then continue, referees should follow through with their warning and then punish a team with the yellow card sanction. It may be a particular player’s first infringement in that match, but he will be part of the team and collective responsibility is as much a notion on the rugby pitch as it is in the Cabinet.

Referees do not want to issue a plethora of yellow cards but they, like the paying public, want to see a game played in a positive manner and cheats must be deterred; temporarily suspending a player is a way to achieve this.

The foul-play yellow card is a totally different matter and perhaps, as in hockey, a different card should be shown to highlight the difference. What *is* clear is that the above example of the red player is not acceptable and thuggery on the pitch should be removed from our game.

I am not of the view that the yellow card should *never* be used for incidents of foul play. It is an excellent tool for referees in their attempt to manage a game and a tool that can prevent more serious acts of foul play later in the eighty minutes.

All involved in the game have seen incidents when a piece of foul play clearly does not warrant a red card but a stern talking to is also inappropriate. The yellow card gives the referee some latitude; beforehand it was too black and white.

In addition to the ‘mid-ground’, yellow cards can be used as a management aid to help defuse a volatile game. Two props trading blows after the break up of a scrum, but not really connecting, may be one of these situations. Both props could use the ten

minutes to enable the red mist to clear and both would know that a repetition would cost their team dearly. It also shows other players that foul play is not acceptable.

There is also an overlap with the repeat offences mentioned above. One high tackle may be dealt with by way of a ticking off, but another tackle leads us into repeated infringement territory and thus a further ticking off may no longer be appropriate.

To give black and white rules for the use of yellow cards for foul play is near on impossible. The art of refereeing is to know when to issue such a card. But that is the problem the game has. We all ask for consistency from game to game but realistically that is impossible. A punch in a match on Friday night may be dealt differently to a punch on Saturday morning. There are too many variables to consider. What we as referees must do is to ensure that clear acts of thuggery are dealt with ruthlessly.

Summary:

The types of yellow card offences can be divided into three categories:

1. Foul play offences.
2. Cynical or deliberate offences.(Referred to in Law as intentional offending.)
3. Repeated offences.

The first category requires the referee to make a decision within the context of the game. However, a referee should never use the yellow card as an easy option when a red card offence has occurred.

The second category needs to be enforced mercilessly for the sake of positive rugby. Referees should ensure that the teams of players who deliberately offend are punished with more than a penalty kick.

The final category also needs to be refereed firmly or once again negative play will not be dealt with as it should be. A team should be warned about their discipline and then, if they continue, a yellow card should be issued.

The yellow card is an invaluable tool for referees and, when used correctly, can add to a game of rugby football. The aim for all should be to use it accurately and then perhaps commentators will be applauding rather than criticising us.