

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FULL-TIME REFEREE BY ROB DEBNEY.

I started refereeing during my school 'A' levels, when a succession of injuries when playing led me to take up the whistle. My enthusiasm for refereeing grew during my later studies at Loughborough University, but never in my wildest dreams, then or even in the last few years, would I have dreamed of becoming a full-time referee (FTR). To be paid a salary to do your sporting hobby is the dream of any sport-loving schoolboy or girl.

My dream became a reality on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2005 when I was taken on by the RFU as the Performance Department's sixth FTR. But what exactly does it mean to be a full time referee? The RFU's Elite Referee Unit comprises fourteen 'elite' referees (just six of whom are full time), a team of specialist touch judges, referee assessors, time keepers and now specialist Television Match Officials, who officiate primarily in the Guinness Premiership but also in European Matches and, of course, selected international matches.

I'd been combining my refereeing 'job' with my Science/PE teaching for some time. Many people, I am sure, would be amazed at the time demands on the modern elite match official and I can honestly tell you that combining my teaching with my refereeing career was becoming progressively more difficult, to the point that I knew I was only ever going to be a 'main-scale' teacher as long as I was refereeing.

Going full time has brought many benefits, both on and off the field, and I would characterise them into the three aspects, namely *physiological*, *psychological* and *practical*.

### **Physiological.**

Studies have shown that the RFU's elite referees run, on average, 6½ miles in a Premiership game – further than any of the players. In addition, during each Guinness Premiership match the referee will be carrying 2-3 kilos of communication equipment that allows him to communicate in real time with his touch judges, fourth official and time keeper plus, of course, the Television Match Official (TMO) if there is one appointed to that game. Admittedly, running 6½ miles at various intensities isn't all that difficult, except of course that you don't decide the intensity, the players do! You simply have to keep up with the game as there is so much at stake and not doing so is simply not acceptable in today's professional arena. Many of our elite referees are in their late thirties and early forties, possibly twice the age of some of the players! At thirty one, I am one of the younger referees around but am still older than the average premiership player and have, hopefully, another fifteen years at this level.

Being full-time has given me the opportunity to train properly. It is not that I didn't train well before, but when I was teaching I would leave school at 3.30 if I was lucky and head straight to the gym, where I rushed my workout because, on three days a week, I had to be home for 5pm to pick up my daughter. So I'd get to the gym, do a

quick warm-up (ok, sometimes I didn't even do that), hit the treadmill or bike, do my forty five minutes of mixed cardio-vascular work or weights, have a quick stretch and warm down (ok, sometimes I didn't do that either and I wonder why I got tight IT bands, often referred to as 'runner's knee', and sore knees!) then get home to be a father for the evening whilst trying to watch a DVD of my last game and mark school work.

Now I get to go to the gym in my own time, have a good warm up, stretch, do a good hour and a half work out, have another proper stretch, do some gym ball work or proprioception stuff, swim then relax before going home. If I can, I'll do a Yoga or Pilates class after my workout, but essentially I have a programme which allows me to make steady and graduated progression rather than continually 'topping-up' fitness levels that I was forced into last year.

I now have the time to recover properly after each game. I always try to get into an ice bath and stretch, pretty much the same post-match recovery as the players, but this is also important the day or so after a game. On Sundays or Mondays I can now go to the gym and do a nice easy recovery session with pool work and stretching. This was always difficult last year with marking and school preparation to be done. I always felt guilty going to the gym on the Sunday after a Saturday game as I'd been at work all week, was away refereeing all day Saturday and then only had Sunday left to spend with the family. This meant that I'd rarely go, which would then impact on my Monday session and as, the season progressed, I'd get more and more fatigued and by Easter I'd be almost a physical wreck. Add to this the fact that half of my job was PE teaching and I'd referee a school game every week when actually I just wanted to rest before a big game. I might even be demonstrating a basketball 'lay-up' first thing on Monday morning when I just felt like I'd been hit by a bus and was still sore from the previous weekend's game. Recently, as a professional, I had an ankle injury; I had three days of total rest with ice treatment followed by careful rehab and physio work. Result? I was fit again in a week. Previously, I'd have been hobbling around school and might have been out for two to three weeks. Going full-time has been an enormous benefit to me physically.

### **Psychological.**

It's all well and good being fit enough to keep up with play, but if you don't make the right decisions when you get to the breakdown, then what's the point of getting there quickly? I would argue that refereeing is mainly psychologically based anyway, using skills such as 'management' and 'communication', which are, to a degree, learnable skills like any other. I now have the time to review each of my matches carefully with my coach, Brian Campsall, discuss various aspects of each match, talk about the teams and their style of play, or new moves they have and can prepare more specifically for each game. I also get to look at the teams I'm about to referee as part of my preparation for my next game and can prepare accordingly. In my current situation, I have more time after the game to reflect on my performance. Each Monday morning we have a telephone conference where the referees from that weekend's Guinness Premiership matches can discuss the issues from them. Since these conferences are at 10am, I can now contribute, whereas last year's Monday morning at 10am meant a Chemistry lesson!

I also spend time preparing my communication skills since we're 'miked up' for every game, some of which are live on TV. Referees have to be precise in what they say to players and at certain times have to be very careful. I have worked very hard with Duncan Mascarenhas, a sports psychologist, on particular words and phrases that I will use whilst refereeing so that when I'm under the TV microscope, what I say is a prepared routine or second nature. Basically, I have a series of mental prompts in my mind, which trigger a specific short phrase or expression. In a recent TV game, I had to show a yellow card to a player for not rolling away at the tackle; his team was close to its own goal line and had had their final warning. As soon as I blew the whistle, I knew exactly what to say, specifically, "Number twenty one, not rolling away, yellow card."

It's very easy to get into a discussion or the player may try to talk you out of a decision, but you have to be clear, accurate and concise in what you say. This might seem obvious, but with a 16-14 score line, play five metres from the goal line, with four minutes to go and the match live on TV, you simply can't afford to feel the pressure!

You know exactly when the TV cameras are on you, but I try to referee every game in exactly the same way, TV or not. When those cameras are at your game, the touch judges and referee have to be very careful in the in-goal area and they must not get in the way of the cameras in case the referee needs to go to the TMO; if one official was blocking the TV picture, it could spell trouble, so part of your preparation has to consider this. I can now consider all of this during the week rather than late on Thursday or Friday night after school when sitting in front of the TV with the family! Going full time allows me to prepare mentally more thoroughly.

### **Practical.**

It might seem obvious now, but the thing I have gained the most is time - time to train, prepare, recover and travel. Every game is an away game for the referee although, in Guinness Premiership terms, I am centrally located in Leicestershire. Most clubs are within fairly easy reach and, for international travel, I am well situated for a number of airports. The great benefit now is travelling at the time that suits me best, not when I have to because of school commitments.

Last year it was an honour to referee at the IRB Singapore Sevens. I was very fortunate to have a supportive school from the Principal all the way down to the pupils and parents. My boss gave me paid time off, but I had to pay for my supply replacement, which worked out exactly the same as the tournament fee so I could just afford to do it. After teaching on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, I drove directly to Heathrow from school and boarded a thirteen hour flight to Singapore (cattle class) and marked a batch of AS level PE coursework on the way!

I arrived in Singapore at 7pm on Thursday night, did a light training session on Friday and refereed eight international seven-a-side matches over the weekend, the first of which was South Africa v Thailand, a 77-0 romp in 90% humidity and 36°C! On

Monday morning at 9am I caught the flight home, arrived at 11pm on Monday night and was at school at 7.30 on Tuesday morning! Now don't get me wrong, I would

have paid for everything myself to go on that trip if I had to; it was a fantastic experience, but you can only do that for so long. There's only so much time off from any job that you can have, and only so long away from your family; you physically can't go on. In fact, the weekend after I got back I was running touch in France - and that brings me to my next point.

For some time now I have been learning French. A number of years ago, Brian Campsall told me that if I wanted to make it as a referee I needed a second language. I went to France about ten times last year, either refereeing or running touch, and it's not just the eighty minutes on the field that takes time. There is the collection of the hire car, asking for directions, ordering food and drinks, finding the hotel and interacting with the French officials at the game. Speaking French, and now Italian, makes life much easier. You should see the look on the players' faces when I do my front row briefing in French and on the field it does help a great deal.

When I went full time, I asked the RFU to sponsor me through university, which they agreed to do. Now I spend six hours a week at Warwick University, doing a part-time degree in French and Italian. It also makes me a valuable resource for the Elite Refereeing Unit, translating and interpreting as required.

Most importantly perhaps, I get time to spend with my family. I prepare my week around the forthcoming fixture and build into it family time. I suppose that I'm away from home for longer chunks now, but at least when I'm at home, I'm only at home and not juggling home and school. Being full time has given me the time to do those things that I need to do to prepare to referee to the best of my ability and allow me the opportunity to maximise my potential. It also allows me to redress the work-life balance that has been severely lacking in the last few years. Home support is extremely important in this job, just as in any other.

Having just read this back to myself, I guess it appears to be a bit of a sob story, but believe me it's not meant to be. Match officials are an important part of our game and at the very elite level, full time referees are in the minority. The fact that we have a large number of other officials, all holding down full-time jobs of their own, who still perform week in week out at such a high level, is testament to their own professional attitude and the fact that the RFU has an excellent management team running the Elite Referee Unit. The RFU has three of the top ten referees in the world, plus the combined experience of Colin High, Ed Morrison and Brian Campsall – a team many countries, I'm sure, envy.

I enjoyed teaching, but being a full time referee was everything I wanted it to be and more. There's no doubt that I am a better referee now than I was on the 1<sup>st</sup> September. I have had the opportunity to progress by working closely with some of the top names in refereeing on a daily basis. Refereeing the Guinness Premiership is an enormous challenge and an immense privilege. To maintain and increase my status with the chosen few can only be done now that I am a full time referee. Ultimately, it is the players who will benefit the most!