



National Rugby League Limited
Fox Studios Development
Lang Road, Moore Park NSW 1363
Postal Address:
GPO Box 3498 Sydney NSW 2001
ABN 23 082 088 962
Internet: www.nrl.com
Telephone: (02) 9339 8500
Facsimile: (02) 9339 8508

Memorandum

To:	ARLRA Referees' Coaches
From:	Michael Stone
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NSW COUNTRY TRIUMPHS!

Not only that, but surely our mission in attracting the best referees from anywhere must be working.

Case #1. Two Group 19 referees, currently with the South Sydney Association, have been appointed to control the S G Ball semi finals this weekend. Jason Higgins and David Munro were former leading officials from Glen Innes before heading for the big smoke to further their footballing careers. They have certainly made an impact and we all wish them well for what promises to be the most important matches of their lives.

Case #2. Former Flegg Cup referee Ashley Klein moved to England six or seven years ago for an entirely different reason – love. He returns to Brisbane on Friday night in triumph after having controlled the Super League Grand Final in fine fashion last year. Stuart Cummings, RFL Refs boss, has every right to be proud of the way that Ash has matured under his guidance. He will handle the pressure of the cauldron easily tomorrow night easily.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF OPTIMUM PERFORMANCE

Trainers aren't necessarily the most popular person in a footy club. However, they are there to perform a task and they must be attuned to the people who they train as well as the population at large. Klinton Hoare will be known to a number of you guys and I think that the following interview is an invaluable insight into what our head trainer in the NRL thinks.

Klinton Hoare is the Athlete Performance Manager of the NRL Match Officials. Running parallel with this position, Klinton consults throughout corporate Australia on enhancing individual and team performance. Prior to that he was Fitness Advisor for Pop Stars Human Nature, numerous Australian professional athletes and he is a former junior rep rugby league player who has over the past decade completed over 100 endurance events.

Klinton has also worked with the 2000 Olympic Gold Medal winning USA Soft Ball team, athletes from Tennis Australia, NSW Institute of Sport, Canterbury Bulldogs, Melbourne Storm and Cronulla Sharks. The following is an interview conducted after one of his speaking engagements at a corporate function.

What is your definition of 'optimum performance'?

Optimal performance is where teams or individuals are able to consistently repeat quality efforts. It is also where individual or members of a team reach their full potential.

Ultimately in team sport, which is what I believe match officiating is, the aim is to develop a group of individuals into a committed, cohesive unit willing to sacrifice individual glory and recognition for the betterment of the team cause. This team unit then needs to be able to follow a carefully directed plan and perform and make decisions under the greatest of pressures. This is the culture that has been growing amongst the NRL Match Officials Team especially over the last 2 – 3 years.

2. What lessons have you learned from working with elite sporting individuals and how do you think this translates to the corporate world?

The hardest lesson about being an elite sports person is doing your best every day. Sustained performance is not just about a one off effort; it requires consistently doing the right things, the little things. It is the little things done daily that lead to the big performances tomorrow.

The phrase we throw around at the NRL is collective consistency, something which Referee boss Robert Finch has each individual member working towards, whether it be in the skills side of the game, the technical side, the preparation side or the physical side of match officiating.

The second lesson is that before a team can move forward it needs to have a look at where it's at right now and make an honest assessment of where they currently stand. Total honesty when assessing your own organization is the key to planning for the future.

The current NRL Match Official environment is the culmination of 3 or more years of building a culture, a 'game plan' and an overall working

environment that would be able to perform under pressure – day in day out.

I can only speak for the time I have been associated with the team but at the end of each year the NRL coaching and support staff all sit down and do an honest assessment of:

- *where we were at*
- *how we were perceived by our competitors; and*
- *how we wanted to be perceived*
- *are we meeting our expectations (notice I said ours not others)*
- *what can we do better*

Thirdly, it is also imperative to surround yourself with good people – the NRL Match Officials are all supportive of one another and there is a sense of belonging within the squad, something that plays a big role in clubs.

3. What are the 5 top tips you'd give the average person wanting to improve their day to day performance which you would tell your Match Officials?

1. *Know what you want - have a clear and concise game plan (for both business and for life).*
2. *Know how to get it.*
3. *Provide yourself with the expertise, knowledge and capacity to deliver.*
4. *Take an honest assessment of exactly where you are now. You have to be able to look yourself in the mirror and get rid of all the bullshit excuses.*
5. *Don't give up, have fun and take time out to relax and recover. You'll burn out if you never take any breaks.*

4. What do you think the NRL Match Officials have done differently to enable them to be the best officials in sport?

With the NRL, there are a number of definitive reasons why I believe we are the best:

- *We are the best team of officials, we focus on teamwork.*
- *Each official knows exactly what they have to do to perform at their peak – preparation / 1 percenters / game plan / clear communication / KI's*
- *The team is fit and they're healthy – able to cope with any eventuality – committed to recovery, low injury rate, consistent performance on training paddock and in gym.*
- *We have our best officials on the park at optimum fitness levels week in week out – how many organizations can claim that?*
- *Open communication*
- *Their friends, perhaps not hanging out of each others pockets but genuinely interested in each others lives. How many organizations can claim that?*

These guys are starting to see themselves and believe in themselves as athletes, a few seasons back they recognized that overall they needed to be perform better as a team, forming an unbreakable cohesive unit. We had to work for each other, sacrifice for each other – do the team things better than anyone else.

These guys are under enormous amounts of unwarranted pressure and scrutiny, the public perception is that they are second class citizens. If the NRL titanic was sinking not one match official would get a start on a life raft. These guys are under the microscope like no other officials in Australian sport, the media have them under the pump from day one of the off season, it's honestly relentless. But one thing that stands out is that under referees boss Robert Finch and his coaching team Mick Stone, Keith Onslow and Bill Harrigan, these guys don't run out scared to make a mistake, scared of trying things and backing themselves and officiating to the media or the clubs, these guys have been esteemed that they are more than capable of doing the job at hand, self belief has come from the belief of the coaches in them.

5. Tell me about the culture of the NRL Match Officials as a team and as an organization?

As you may have experienced with many corporate leadership programs, culture and leadership in theory and then in practice are two different things.

We had our vision and mission statement, our set of key behaviours but achieving “that” weight of numbers where everyone was buying in did require some courage – and a number of hard decisions. Again, at the heart of all of it was HONESTY. Individuals needed to take stock of where they were at but they also needed honest feedback from their peers.

After 12 years in elite sport, to me, giving and/or accepting constructive criticism from your peers is one of the hardest things to do. Eyeballing a friend and telling him/her they are letting the team down because of their actions is difficult. But courage and honesty are required on both sides.

We do this through large and small group player assessments, debriefs as well as one on one discussion with Bill Nelson and Robert Finch. We have also put in place a select leadership team which is compiled of the official's peers who take on the responsibility of leading within the group.

Confronting an official whose attitude is questionable has become easier and for the officials whose actions go outside the team values – outside the set of acceptable behaviours – there needs to be consequences. Once the team buys into this process it really does start to govern itself.

The Robert Finch Era

One of the smartest things I believe Robert Finch does is not having the officials too coach driven, too controlled by the top end of the chain.

In both the day to day environment (hardest thing about elite sport) and crucial passages of play on field there is not enough time for the Robert or any of his coaching team to send messages and have influence on the field. It must be generated from within the official's team. Officials had to want to do and know what to do and are ultimately responsible for their own and the teams' destiny. Collectively we are judged by one official's performance.

6. Final thoughts or additional follow up info (eg, books to read)?

Stay focused and persevere. One of my favourite quotes is from Aristotle:

'Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.'

Aristotle

It can take years to build a world class team and months/years to dramatically improve personal performance. But if you have a clear vision, adopt the right behaviours, surround yourself with the right people and have clear benchmarks to guide you along the way – you might shock yourself with what can be achieved!

In the meantime, if you won't change, don't stop others doing it.

MICHAEL STONE
NRL REFEREES' CO-ORDINATOR
ARLRA PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE CONSULTANT
ARL LAWS COMMITTEE MEMBER
NSWRL PREMIER LEAGUE HEAD COACH
ARL SCHOLARSHIP AWARD WINNERS MENTOR
ARLRA MEMORANDUM EDITOR
NRL CD PUBLICITY OFFICER
RLIF REFEREE SELECTION COMMITTEE MEMBER