

INFLUENCES ON MATCH OFFICIALS

I recently read a paper entitled "Is society complimenting what we ask of our sports people?" written by former Olympic swim coach, Bill Nelson. It was a very thought provoking piece which could just as readily be applied to refereeing. Bill works closely with the NRL squad on matters including leadership, teamwork, motivation etc. I am fortunate enough to speak with Bill on a regular basis and he invariably gives me something to think about. For instance, the other day he was asking how the Premier Squad was progressing. I said "fine". He said "how many hours a week do you have them face to face?". I thought about it and calculated that three training nights together amounted to about 5 hours, more than any coach has had before me. His response to that really staggered me. He said "that means that everyone else has 163 hours a week in which to influence your squad members." Now that really shook me up!

As coaches, our influence on our referees is quite large. However, that influence will vary from individual to individual depending upon the personality of the individual involved, the effectiveness of our own communication, coaching methodologies, training standards, peer group pressure etc. We cannot guarantee success to anyone. But our job as coaches is to provide an environment whereby success becomes inevitable. We do that, inter alia, by providing efficient programmes, philosophies and standards for the referees to follow. However, there will still be other influences that can add to or hinder the success of the referee.

As a coach, we must continually look at the areas that will have an influence on the understanding, acceptance and ultimately the success of our training programme. Bill says in his paper that the rate at which a (referee) develops can and will be influenced by a number of areas including:

Living Habits, Daily schedule, sleep cycles, optimum diet, social life, personal hygiene, recovery time, leisure activities.

Environmental Influences, Family life, Friends and Colleagues, Relationship with the team, Job satisfaction, Time management skills, Commuting distances, Family support.

Training Programme, Long term, Seasonal, Training facilities, Training equipment, Medical support, Officiating programme, Quality of coaching.

The list is certainly not exhaustive. But is it not our responsibility to try and co-ordinate the above in a planned and structured manner so as to let the individual develop as a person as well as a match official? Whilst refereeing is a major part of their lives it is not the only thing. We need to put all of this into perspective when designing and implementing individual training demands.

The environment in which the referee operates will have a major effect on the development of the referee. Bill Nelson's 5 key elements of this development are:

1. The quality of the training plans both short and long term
2. The amount of training and officiating.
3. The structure of training load increases (inc class room education)
4. The quality of infrastructure that accompanies the programme
5. The knowledge and commitment of the people associated with the training programme.

The environment of the training programme gives us the opportunity to influence the individual but also the team concept should support our philosophies, standards and directions. However, as we all know, the official has to operate in the world at large that exists outside the controlled environment of the officiating programme.

Bill Nelson says "the influence of a coach is strong and hopefully backed up by a long standing and rewarding relationship between coach and athlete. Remember though familiarity breeds contempt and in that world that exists outside of theprogram and its influence there will be opportunities presented in many situations to these athletes that will certainly be in direct contrast to our teaching and direction. At the end of the day hopefully the athlete will be in a position to make a decision based on what is best for them and not one based on the influence of the situation or the people involved."

For our leadership and teachings to be successful we must first create the environment where the referee is willing to accept our experience. At Norford Park where the premier Squad trains, we have a sign which we plagiarized from one which hung in a famous swim coach's office. Ours reads "**We don't create great referees – we create an environment where great referees become inevitable**". With this fact in mind we must educate the referee to be open to certain concepts and rules for this education.

Bill Nelson writes

“The basis of success in any teaching situation is to avail the student of your knowledge your experience and your teachings. But the end result of this association must be that the student becomes independent of the teacher. The satisfaction for the teacher in this is to watch the maturation of the student and enjoy the situation of the independent student operate in the world’s environment using the lessons of life they have been taught by their teachers. Not because they have to but because these teachings have now become the blue print for the development of another person’s philosophy of life. This is the reward for the teacher.”

So it is for the referee’s coach. The referee must become independent of the coach. The strength of a coach is not to create a referee in his own likeness, but to assist the referee to promote his strengths and recognize and work on any perceived weaknesses. These will involve skills used on the football field but may also involve life skills. The referee will need to “operate in the world’s environment” using those skills and lessons which you as a coach have given him.

“To be effective teachers we coaches must have the trust of the athletes in our care. In normal life the child is familiar with the people who are educating them. In sport it is a little different because from a very early age an athlete’s education and development is coming from someone they barely know, from their point of view, our decision making, our judgments, our philosophies and standards are totally new territory.”

As we all know only too well, referees are extremely sensitive to issues of trust. If they work hard, adhere to the rules, listen intently and produce results, then the rewards will come. Anything that threatens that process such as conflict with the coach will result in a lack of trust. We all know of the constant conflict between the referee’s desire to trust and the fear of getting a rough deal.

The demands of modern society are heading in a direction that is opposite to the direction which we, as coaches, require our referees to be heading. Because of this, the job of a coach is becoming harder. When I took over the NSWRL Premier Squad, I met with resistance that seems to accord with current societal standards. For society seems to be looking at the future with the following in mind.

Work – less time, more money, less accountability.
Work – has to be fun regardless of the task at hand.
Less emphasis on long term commitment.
More emphasis on short term results.

How do we make our lives easier?

Rather than follow rules, how do we get away with things?

Individuals have rights, therefore we must have a reduction in discipline.

We have addressed these issues in molding the NSWRL Premier Squad. Instead of concerning themselves with appointments, (short term results), they are concerned primarily with education (long term commitment). Their lives have become much harder, moving from one night a week to three longer ones. There is more accountability brought about by a more structured and intense evaluation process which identifies deficiencies and strengths alike. Peer pressure and a simple fining system encourages discipline and an ethos which dictates that one must follow the rules or perish. Does all of this improve them as referees and people? That is for others to decide.

Bill writes

“In recent times world records have become fewer and farther between or those that have been broken have a cloud of drug tainted suspicion. With all of the sports science support, advancement in sporting technology, coach education programs, financial support for both athletes and coaches we still cannot come up to the standards of the past as far as an athletic performance is concerned.

Sporting success and the word sportsmanship were founded on some of the following principles:

- *Long term development (It takes 10 years to become an overnight success)*
- *There are no short cuts to success*
- *Taking responsibility for your own actions*
- *Respect for the people around you.*
- *Dedication and commitment*
- *Personal sacrifices and individual character based focus to achieve a desired result.*
- ***Do not achieve an outcome by denigrating the performance of another competitor.***
- *The journey of success is not always a smooth one.*

- ***Working as part of a team so that all attain individual success.***
- ***It's not always imperative to do the things we like to do, it is important to do the things we have to do in order to achieve what we want.***

Which is right and which is wrong is a decision that each individual will eventually have to make for them. From a coaching point of view however, this is what we are up against in the development of athletic talent.”

There are certain steps that should be taken by us to reinforce our principles.

1. Regular communication with each official.
2. Understand each individual's circle of influence and know how they operate within it.
3. Have your program well planned and organised
4. Program philosophy constantly reinforced and communicated by all members of staff or those who work with you.
5. Have your team in close.
6. Teach them the necessary skills to make well thought out and rational decisions.

All of the above are reasonable and understandable steps. The second is perhaps the most difficult for some people to come to grips with. The more we know about our match officials the better the prospect of us understanding them and creating a well planned and personal program for them. There is no doubt that influences other than football have a very real effect on the manner in which our match officials perform on the field.

There is no right way or wrong way to develop match officials. There are probably as many different ways to develop match officials, as there are match officials. The ability to coach effectively is determined by many complex issues but the basis is a well planned and implemented program, suitably qualified coaches, the standard of official involved, the ability of the coach to effectively communicate the program standards and philosophies, and the commitment of those within the program, match officials and coaching staff alike.

Not only is it our responsibility to provide an environment that continually supports our philosophies and standards but we must take the time to educate the individual with the necessary skills that allow

them, when the time arrives, to make the correct decisions based on their own individual wants, needs and desires. More importantly they will have the correct education and background to make the right decision.

Peer group pressure is a major part of modern day decision making. Rightly or wrongly a majority of these decisions are based on what Bill Nelson calls “personality” based criteria as opposed to “character” based traits.

He writes

“In days past most decisions made by a person were made on the basis of their “character”, the philosophies, the background, the standards, the morale fibre of a past society and more importantly the character of their family and the teachings of their parents. In most cases decisions and actions were verbalised and acted upon without the influences of too many others outside of the family unit and very much paralleled what was deemed as appropriate behaviour by society.

Today it seems we operate in a vastly different arena. It is my belief that the majority of decisions by our youth are made on the basis of what I call personality-based situations. That is, the decision and/or behaviour is based on the particular personalities of the group or situation with which the individual is involved. Hence their personality based actions and decision making is reliant on the present requirements, not based on the character or background of the individual.

*Many times this type of behaviour leads a person to not being able to develop their own beliefs, their own identity and more importantly, their own philosophies and hence, an individual personality. These people can exist in many different circles. However if this person is under any pressure or in a situation where no one is there to prop them up the situations can become very difficult for them to cope with and in the majority of cases they either cannot handle the situation or fail in that particular pursuit. Those that can and will survive in these situations are the ones that are in control of their own destiny. They are the people that understand that **their** problems are **their** problems; no-one else’s. It is an acceptance of responsibility. Those that can survive in society past present and future are the individuals that have determined what direction and actions **their** life should take.”*

Acceptance of responsibility is the starting point for creation of character. There are a number of areas that lead towards the development of character. The elements of honesty, integrity, self-discipline and resolve are but a few. Members of my Premier Squad will tell you that discipline and honesty were the first two lessons that they learnt the hard way

starting from last November. Financial penalties mounted up until they learnt that I had a bit of resolve in me too. Sometimes there needs to be a sting in the tail to uncover the honesty that is there, but sometimes well hidden.

Honesty starts with the ability to look at yourself and the real picture. This is not an easy trait. Self-examination is multi faceted. It is a task that requires you to be able to place fair judgment upon yourself but at the same time maintain the ability to be flexible in your approach and demands whilst not compromising your core beliefs.

In years gone by, fault was assigned and you were held accountable for your actions. In most cases, people accepted this responsibility. Today things seem to have changed. Everyone is a victim. It is someone else's fault. We strive for understanding rather than confronting the issues. This is certainly politically correct and comforting but what happens when you step into the real world? The real world demands discipline and without it you are bound for failure.

Remember your Level 1 course when we talked about “personal characteristics” of a successful referee? To recap, they were **Integrity, Courage, Self-confidence, Decisiveness, Consistency, Even tempered, Humility, Understanding human nature, Control and Urgency**. We also said that the list was not exhaustive. We talked about identifying those character traits. Bill believes that as coaches, it is not our job to tell match officials what is right or wrong but to lead by example with our own character based standards. This allows the official to observe that our teachings are a way of life and not simply “do as I say”. Our communication both directly and indirectly must continually reinforce the character traits that we are trying to develop.

Bill says *“We along with the parents, friends, colleagues simply by association become **“The circle of Influence”** for these people. As we look upon this group as a positive circle of influence it is also reasonable to assume there are other circles of influence that philosophically oppose everything we believe to be correct. Hence this becomes the negative circle of influence to the individual and to the ideals we are trying to instil in them.”*

As coaches, we can and do have a very strong influence on our match officials. Once they step outside the refereeing environment though, can our teachings and philosophies survive the scrutiny and direction of modern society?

Bill observes *“Of all the skills of personal development that we can help them with probably the most important is the skill or the discipline of self-*

discipline. Because the job of any teacher is not to make the student dependant upon the teacher but to make them totally independent so they may survive outside of the insular controlled surrounds that the teacher's environment allows.

If we want the best for these (match officials) we must give them and show them the best, we must at all times "walk the talk" not just "talk the talk".

For as time marches on the amount of communication on this development of character I believe is getting less and less. As with any situations there is always an acceptance to the rule but for mine the positive [circle of influence](#) to teach the young people of society about character development is becoming greatly reduced."

For a perfect example of a negative circle of influence, simply look to recent comments by a leading administrator in the game. If we as coaches, don't take on the added responsibility of educating our match officials in some of the areas which we have outlined, it won't get done to the standard that we need for the development of our match officials. I have often said that we as match officials must always [hold the high moral ground](#). Again, refer to that administrator's comments for an example of the contrary position.

Bill concludes:-

"As Mikhail Gorbachev once said, " Those who educate themselves are the ones that have longevity of success in their chosen field". If you put this in the context of what we are outlining, not only is it important for us to teach the athletes these skills it is also critical to encourage and educate the athlete to become hungry for knowledge, sports, academic and life related. If they become thirsty for knowledge they take control of their own destiny and growth and they take ownership of the responsibility that life brings. This is an outcome that all teachers regardless of what field of endeavour should strive for. Independent, motivated, self disciplined students."

Based on the paper "Is society complimenting what we ask of our Sports People" written by Bill Nelson.