



THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

AT STOCKPORT RUGBY CLUB, WE ARE FORTUNATE TO HAVE MANY VOLUNTEERS WHO HELP THE CLUB BRING AN EXCELLENT RUGBY EXPERIENCE TO EVERYONE. WE SPOKE WITH ONE OF STOCKPORT'S CHESHIRE AND LANCASHIRE SOCIETY REFEREES, **RICHARD THOROGOOD, TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE...**

Why did you decide to be a referee?

I decided to take up the whistle whilst watching Stockport Under 8's playing in the Cheshire Cup. As the boys were going to start to learn to tackle in the next season, I decided that they deserved to be refereed by someone who was willing to invest the time to learn how to do it properly. I now referee senior matches on a Saturday afternoon and this has really helped me learn the skills required to make sure the young players on Sunday mornings get a better standard of refereeing.

What was your first match like?

I remember thinking when I was about to blow the whistle for the start of the match 'what are you doing?' Looking back at it I was so nervous, but could not tell the players it was my first match and the first time I had been on a senior rugby pitch for twenty years. The match was quite dramatic too with a last-minute conversion making the score 28-28. I was so relieved when it was time to blow the final whistle.

How does a referee continue to improve and learn the subtleties of the Rugby laws?

Of course, we learn by refereeing and by reading the laws but we also get some fantastic support from

the Manchester and District Referee's Society. Regularly, volunteer match advisers come out and watch your match on a Saturday afternoon. Then afterwards in the clubhouse we discuss the match and areas to improve on next time. I can also ring them up during the week to discuss any issues that may have occurred in a match that they were not attending. It's great to have that support network at all times. Also having other experienced referees within the club helps, as I can ask them about parts of a match I wish to understand better.

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What was your most difficult match?

I remember during my first season officiating at an Under 14 cup semi-final. A couple of boys got over excited and a huge fight broke out. It was alarming to everyone and a few mums came onto the pitch to try and protect their child. Not an ideal situation. Thankfully, scuffles like this one were



discussed during our training course so I knew what to do in the situation. Although it must be difficult to watch, I'd advise any spectators to let the referees and coaches deal with these things. Fortunately, it has never happened since!

Do you make mistakes?

If you ask a scrum half or hooker, the referee always makes mistakes! And I must admit that yes, I do sometimes make the wrong call. If it is very obvious I apologise and correct it on the pitch. Sometimes, I do not know it was a mistake until reflecting on the match afterwards and mark it down as experience and learn from it. However, there is an important law in rugby which states that during a match the referee is always right and although no one wants to be remembered for relying on this, it is a reflection on the honourable way rugby is played and on how difficult it can be to get everything right.

Do you enjoy refereeing?

Absolutely, it is great fun being involved in competitive sport and being able to help others enjoy themselves by officiating. It is also a great way to stay active. I was once told 'without you (the referee) I would be shopping with the missus. So if you're good or bad, I would rather be on the pitch playing, so thank you sir for turning up.' Being in the middle you get a real sense of the crunching tackles and the commitment of the players; it's exhilarating being so close when there is a really good game of rugby being played.

Do you notice the crowd?

At the level I referee on a Saturday afternoon, we do not get huge crowds, so everyone is close to the pitch. Therefore, if comments are directed my way I can often hear them clearly. Sometimes I wish I could stop the match and explain why I gave a particular decision or not, depending on what I saw. 'Open your eyes ref' is one of the first I remember in my debut season. I hope I do have them open every match. 'Keep up ref' is a phrase I have heard shouted at other referees and I've promised never to have shouted at me during one of my matches! It is important that the referee is fitter than the players which can be difficult when in the middle of an Under 15 junior match!!

Is there a difference refereeing Junior and Senior matches?

As a referee, you must remember that almost all rugby players have never read the laws of the game. They are taught the basics by a coach or a teammate during the match. For the juniors sometimes it is their Dads who have told them four or five laws. A common trait between the levels is that if the captain starts to question the referee's every decision, they are losing. It is at these times when the team needs leadership and the captain should focus on talking to his/her team and not questioning the referee. Fitness is the big difference. Juniors simply keep running and seniors know when we all need those extra few seconds' rest at a scrum. It is not unusual for a junior match to include a few sprints the length of the pitch and the referee must keep up.

Would you recommend refereeing to anyone?

Definitely. It is great fun and a good way to keep yourself fit. I had not played rugby for twenty years before picking up the whistle, so it is never too late to get involved. If anyone is interested they should look at the Cheshire and Lancashire Society website www.madrefs.co.uk or look on the RFU website for a local training course. For those young enough they can even make a career out of it, such are the opportunities open to them. The club's Under 16 team now has five junior referees as they attended the course as part of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. Let's hope one or two of them may go on to officiate in the premiership.

And of course Stockport Rugby Club would welcome more people like Richard, whether dusting your boots off after twenty years to become a society referee or just wanting to help the club with coaching; why not come down and give it a go.

