

The Plight of the Referee

By Seamus J. King

RECENTLY I did a radio interview with Paddy Russell, the well-known Tipperary and national football referee, who is in his 47th year in charge of the whistle. Motivated by the famous John Moloney he started taking charge of juvenile games initially, progressed to adult level, made his inter-county debut in 1981 and refereed two All-Ireland senior football finals, in 1990 when Cork defeated Meath, and in 1995, when Dublin defeated Tyrone. Also, Paddy acted as lineman in the 1996 final. At the age of 64 years Paddy continues to referee and actually enjoys doing so.

In the light of recent attacks on referees in G.A.A. games it was encouraging to learn that Paddy still enjoys the job. Recent assaults include one on Wexford referee, Michael Lanigan, in the junior A football game. Also, Roscommon G.A.A. had to investigate an assault on a referee, who required medical attention, in an underage game. It was reported in the Independent on September 8 that 'a referee was repeatedly assaulted in a series of violent attacks after a hurling match in Co Kerry yesterday. Referee Gearoid O'Regan was punched repeatedly and chased from the pitch.'

So, has the plight of the referee worsened? Paddy doesn't think so. He believes there were always incidents in matches down the years, but they were not highlighted as much because there were no mobile phones, which are now used by spectators to record these incidents, and they are put up on social media within minutes. The people who do don't have to give their true identities. In some cases, the recording of such events may be a good thing, if the perpetrator can be disciplined, but in most cases, they are used for entertainment purposes. Paddy will admit that there is more aggression on the sideline, which reflects what is evident in street life also.

I asked if he would like to get the respect given referees in the game of rugby and, of course he would. When I put it to him that there are cases where a player, who plays G.A.A. and rugby, can behave in quite different ways towards the referee in both games, he accepts that such is the case, the culture is very different.

He has an interesting point about why the behaviour can be so different. He mentions the example many underage players get from mentors in G.A.A. games. If you have a mentor who is constantly criticising the referee from the sideline, and even going in at half-time to question his decisions, what kind of lesson does this instil in the mind of the young player? In contrast the underage player in the rugby game has it drilled into him that you don't speak to the referee or question his decision. The only player who has the right to ask a question is the captain, and he has to do it with absolute respect.

Respect is a big word and the G.A.A. has made great effort in recent years to inculcate it on the playing field. Paddy points out that any player in a G.A.A. game has the right to ask the referee about a decision he makes and to get an answer. But the question has to be asked with respect! In many cases there is little respect in the question. Instead the referee has to listen to: 'What the eff was that for, ref?' a question loaded with anger and criticism and containing little respect.

Another problem the referee has to face is the impression a team gets that he is biased against them. 'Ref: why don't you put the jersey on!' is a polite form of this attitude. The team has got it into their collective head that this referee has no intention of giving them a fair deal but is determined to work against them out of some personal vindictiveness. What can be done to prevent this? One recent suggestion from Wexford is that the players shake hands with the referee before the game so that they learn he is human, has hands and a face, and isn't some

ogre appointed to ensure that they don't win.

Another suggestion is that the referee by mic'ed up so that his conversations with players can be heard, While this would have the effect of making the public aware of the reasons for the decisions and being able to understand what rules were infringed, it might also have a salutary effect on how players respond to decisions if they knew their responses would be in the public domain. Personally, I'm a bit sceptical about the handshake observing how little influence the handshake between players before the game can have on some of their behaviour in the heat of battle! I know it's all part of the noble wish the G.A.A. has that it's the place 'Where We All Belong', where respect for all of its members is not a slogan but enshrined in our ethos.' But it will be difficult to translate this wish into reality.

One thought strikes me on this issue is the personal behaviour and personality of the referee on the field.. The referee needs to be authoritative and decisive and while the right decision is most important – bad calls hurt more than favourable calls feel good - quick decision-making is imperative. One of the outstanding refereeing performances in recent years was that of Fergal Horgan in the 2020 All-Ireland. This was an example of authoritative and decisive refereeing. Fergal 'bossed' that game, made every player realise who was in charge and was in total control. At the same time he was respectful of the players but made sure to inform any player who was breaking the rules.

Another matter discussed with Paddy Russell was the suggestion that the game requires two referees today, especially hurling, which is such a fast-moving game. He has an interesting twist on the issue, believing that the referee has enough support in the game in that he can consult with his linesmen and umpires. If there were to be a second referee, he'd have him sitting in the stand! He believes that the view of the game from the stand is brilliant, giving the person an overview of the game that the referee on the field doesn't have.

A further matter the referee has to contend with is how his report is acted upon at board level. The writing of a report and the reasons given for a decision have to be very accurate and precise because the referee has to contend with players using learned barristers to find reasons why a player's suspension or punishment should not be imposed. Paddy is of the opinion that his job is to do a report on the game and transmit it to the relevant authority. He has then done his job. 'But, you must feel aggrieved if a perfectly sanctioned red card, for instance, is thrown out by the board for some technical reason?' He admits that it can hurt but there is little he can do about it. He went on to state that the culture of the G.A.A., at individual, club and county level, is to use any means possible to get a suspension appealed, and that's the way things are! Many referees will talk of their frustration with the G.A.A.'s disciplinary processes when 'punishments are reduced or even dismissed on the most minute or infinitesimal technicality.'



All-Ireland football final 1995 with Paddy Russell standing between Dublin captain, John O'Leary and Tyrone captain, Ciarán Corr.