

Rugby can show soccer the way on 'emotional' dissent

- by [Ian Plenderleith](#) @Plenderleithlan, Oct 21, 2019

As a soccer referee, it's been instructive to watch the game officials during the Rugby World Cup in Japan this past month. I've not only been impressed by their communication and the authority with which they control the game and the players, but almost sick with envy at the way their decisions are accepted and respected.

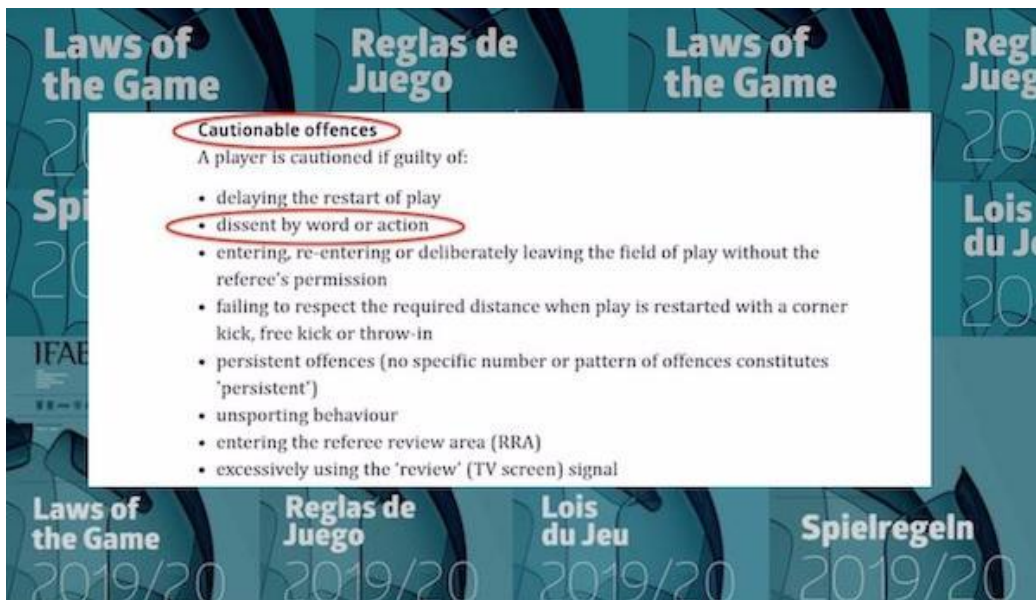


This is because rugby has always been serious about applying its rules on sportsmanship and fair play. In soccer, we pay lip service to those same rules. In particular, there has never been any clear and cogent instruction from FIFA to professional leagues, federations and their officials that the rule on dissent must be properly applied. It exists on the statutes, and is largely ignored weekend in, weekend out, by millions of players and officials around the world.

Just in case you don't know the ruling, which is part of Law 12 on

Fouls and Misconduct, it reads: "A player is cautioned if guilty of dissent by word or action." It also states that the punishment is an indirect free kick when a player "is guilty of dissent, using offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures or other verbal offenses." Even as a ref I have to frequently remind myself of this law, because you never see it enforced. However, like many other disregarded rules, it often comes up in the monthly online exams we're obliged to take and pass over the course of the season (pass-mark: 83%).

As an amateur referee, I'll remain lenient on this law as long as our TV screens show us images of professional players and coaches acting in what is repeatedly passed off as an "emotional" manner. These are the examples that amateur and youth players mimic in the absence of any worthwhile guidance from their own coaches or captains. If a highly paid and over-revered household name can get away without a yellow card for "emotionally" questioning a decision, why should the amateur players not be treated in the same lax manner?



If I punished every incident of "dissent by word or action" with a yellow card under the current disciplinary climate, Sunday's field would be a lonely place after an hour or so of play. Let's return to the rugby rules. What do they actually say? Law 9, under the sub-heading Misconduct, states that "a player must not do anything that is against

the spirit of good sportsmanship." The following paragraph clarifies that "players must respect the authority of the referee. They must not dispute the referee's decisions. They must stop playing immediately when the referee blows the whistle to stop play."

The sanction is a penalty, which in rugby can be given anywhere on the field of play, plus a yellow card and 10 minutes in the sin-bin. I very much like the phrase "must not dispute," and FIFA should add it to soccer's wording (preferably underlined, and in bold italics). Overall, though, World Rugby's wording does not greatly differ from FIFA's, which in the introduction to its laws under the heading "The Philosophy and Spirit of the Laws," states: "The integrity of the Laws, and the referees who apply them, must always be protected and respected. All those in authority, especially coaches and team captains, have a clear responsibility to the game to respect the match officials and their decisions" (Takes short break for a laughing fit.)

The difference of course is that in rugby you very rarely see dissent of any kind. Maybe a slight shake of the head or a raising of the eyebrows as a player walks away. The reason is quite simple -- the rules have always been applied with stringency, right from the very top of the game. It is not because there is no emotion in rugby. It's because the players are trained to keep their emotions in check (also known as 'discipline'). Instead, they focus on the actual game. After the game, following victory or defeat, is the time for emotions. During the game is the time to actually play it.

"The principle of fair play cannot be upheld solely by the referee," state the rugby laws.

"Responsibility for its observance also rests on unions, clubs, other affiliated bodies, coaches and players." In a section headed Principles of the Game, you can read: "It is through discipline, control and mutual respect that the spirit of the game flourishes and, in the context of a game as physically challenging as rugby, these are the qualities which forge the fellowship and sense of fair play so essential to the game's ongoing success and survival."

Unlike in soccer, rugby's captains and coaches are key to aiding the referee. What soccer urgently needs from its governing bodies is a program to train its leaders to be pioneers of sportsmanship, not just tactical and technical experts who yell a lot, and who view the referee as an obstacle to their success. Simultaneously, soccer's senior referees need to be instructed to impose the letter of the law at a major competition. I suggest the next European Championship, because most of the world

will be watching, and it's long overdue. The law on dissent doesn't need to be changed. It just needs some attention, then concerted application.

10 comments about "Rugby can show soccer the way on 'emotional' dissent".

1. **Kent James**, October 21, 2019 at 10:51 p.m.

I couldn't agree more. As a player, I didn't care about dissent because it never bothered me and I didn't see it as a "real" foul that could hurt someone. But what it does is when it is unchecked, it ramps up the emotion which can lead to rash actions that do cause physical damage. So as a referee, I understood the importance of enforcing it. But one referee cannot have a higher standard (by much anyway) than the others, because refereeing has to be consistent. If we were consistent, the players would adjust (that's also true with my pet peeve that is never enforced, delaying the restart). The game would be better for it, but it has to come from the higher ups (and be seen in professional leagues, as Ian suggested).

Or it could just be that "soccer is a gentlemen's game played by hooligans, while rugby is a hooligan's game played by gentlemen", and we can't do anything about it because it's determined by breeding and upbringing....nah, I don't think so.

Reply

2. **Mike Lynch**, October 22, 2019 at 10:23 a.m.

Ian,
Good article and discussion. Though I don't know enough about rugby to comment but it appears soccer could learn lots from Rugby in this aspect.

I also thought I heard a Rugby referee could adjust the spot of the foul when the opponent is not reacting appropriately to a decision. Maybe I heard that wrong, but can you imagine, moving the spot of the foul forward for every dissent made by the opponent?

I believe it's good referees (and coaches and sports in general) share what's working for possible adoption. Just because someone else is doing something is not a good reason on its own but if it is working well in similar situations where it's not working in another sport, then it should be looked at seriously. The business world calls these best practices and they are shared for good reason ... they are often transferable and deliver similar positive outcomes.

Reply

3. **Jim Boyle**, October 22, 2019 at 10:52 a.m.

As a parent of a young rugby player in the US, it's remarkable how early and consistent the idea of respect to the referee is taught in rugby, to the players as well as the parents. There's just no room for arguing in anything besides the most polite manner (and even then, it's only the coaches that do it) and it's enforced not just by the referee and coaches but also by the entire community. All sports in the US could learn something from it, but it would take parents, players and coaches to ratchet down their sense of superiority over the laws and the officials.
