

# **THE EFFECTS OF REFEREE AND PLAYER FRUSTRATION ON A GAME OF RUGBY UNION**

## **SYNOPSIS**

This paper attempts to identify sources of frustration for both referees and players during a game of Rugby Union (“RU”) and to examine the effect that frustration has on player and referee performance. The research conducted by sport psychologists in the area of anxiety and arousal level fluctuations, indicate that frustration experienced will cause a psychological response (anxiety) which in turn causes a physiological response (arousal). The studies also indicate that a player’s performance will diminish if his/her anxiety and arousal levels are allowed to fluctuate unnecessarily during competition.

Research strongly indicates that instances of frustration during competition will inhibit the “decision making process” a critical factor in refereeing RU.

The paper offers strategies for referees to adopt in game preparation in managing their own anxiety levels and those of players during competition. The coping strategies suggested have been developed from a study that initiated the concept of “Emotion Focused Coping Strategies”.

## **(1.0) INTRODUCTION**

In any paper written or presented on Rugby Union (“RU”) it will serve little or no purpose if it does not have as one of its aims to edify the stature of the game in the wider community. This paper is no different - the underlying rationale that drives the basic premise of this paper is to “promote” areas of the game that will lift its profile, such as: (i) ensuring that the game is openly displaying the skills and abilities of the athletes, (ii) that as many aspects of the game as possible are contestable situations and (iii) that the athletes play the game in a spirit that has come to be synonymous with the game RU. Likewise areas that are a blight on the game need to be obliterated or managed and contained to acceptable levels. These situations include foul play, professional fouls and most importantly games that are drab and boring to watch.

In this light, this paper examines the effects that the “frustration” experienced by referees and players have on a game of RU. Analysis of research conducted in the area of sport psychology around the world and the relevant findings of these studies shows that performance is hampered by feelings of frustration on the part of referees, athletes and coaches in a competition environment. It is interesting to note that a study conducted in the United States indicate that officials consistently report “*frustration, abuse and being unappreciated*”<sup>1</sup> as common concerns in their chosen pursuits.

---

<sup>1</sup> PSYCHOLOGY OF OFFICIATING  
Robert S Weinberg & Peggy A Richardson  
University of North Texas  
1990

This paper has been split into two parts, Part A which examines the frustration a “referee” experiences in a match and the impact that this has on the game, and Part B which looks at the frustration that an “athlete” experiences in a match. Both Parts A & B offer some strategies for the referee to adopt in his/her management of a game so as to improve the game as a spectacle and to increase the enjoyment to play for athletes.

## **(2.0) WHAT IS “FRUSTRATION”**

The term *frustration* has been chosen as it denotes the emotions that arise when either the unexpected or unforeseen occurs, or when a scenario occurs that is perceived as uncontrollable. This paper is not intended to include instances that occur in a competition (or precompetition) that are to be “expected”, as in any competition some level of anxiety will be experienced by athletes and officials. The reason for not including this scenario within the scope of this paper is because there are numerous techniques, which can be used to cope with “expected” situations. Whereas the “unexpected” scenario is a lot harder to be prepared for.

However, unforeseen and unexpected scenarios that arise during competition can lead to less than desirable circumstances, especially when one considers the physical and emotional nature of a game of RU.

Both expected factors in a game and unexpected factors in a game that cause emotional responses are commonly referred to as factors that increase stress (“stressors”), or anxiety. That is, the emotional response experienced is referred to as anxiety. There are numerous forms of anxiety, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

A redefinition of the term frustration is required at this point. Spielberger (1972) best defines the emotion felt under frustrating circumstances as “state anxiety”<sup>2</sup>.

Psychologists that followed Spielberger further defined “state anxiety” to be:

“conscious feelings of apprehension and tension due mainly to the individual's perception of the present or upcoming scenario as threatening.”

From this point it would be more appropriate to replace the term “frustration” with “anxiety”.

The relationship between “anxiety” and “arousal” although not within the scope of this paper (due to it being a large topic on its own), needs to be briefly addressed so as to adequately examine the effect that anxiety has on refereeing or athletic performance. A mistake commonly made is that anxiety and arousal are one and the same, however Ansell<sup>3</sup> asserts that reaching and maintaining the proper emotional state that will allow athletes to perform to their potential, is to regulate two separate

---

<sup>2</sup> SPORT PSYCHOLOGY from theory to practice

Mark A Anshell

1994

<sup>3</sup> SPORT PSYCHOLOGY from theory to practice

Mark A Anshell

1994

emotions that both play primary roles in performance - anxiety and arousal. A simple difference between the two emotions suggested by Ansell is to consider anxiety as being psychological and arousal as being physiological.

Further, Landers and Boutcher (1993) state that “anxiety” is the unpleasant emotional reaction when the autonomic nervous system (ie uncontrolled physiological responses such as heavy breathing, sweating and increase in heart rate) is aroused.

Consequently, anxiety can be considered the emotional impact or cognitive dimension of arousal<sup>4</sup> ie, arousal is essentially a physiological response and anxiety is a cognitive process.

There is for each referee and athlete a level of arousal that will enable maximum potential performance to occur. However measuring and prescribing this level is near impossible due to the innumerate amount of variables involved.

There is a level of arousal that is preferred by an athlete and taking into account that arousal and anxiety are inexplicably linked to each other (discussed above). If an athlete while performing in competition is maintaining a level of arousal that is enabling satisfactory performance and the athlete is effected by circumstances that increase or decrease anxiety levels. Given the link between anxiety and arousal one can only conclude that the circumstances will be detrimental to both the psychological and the physiological and hence athletic performance will deteriorate.

Baumeister (1984) has documented the classic example of the arousal/anxiety relation to performance in his work on the “choking phenomenon”. Baumeister defines the choking phenomenon as extreme state anxiety. Factors that can lead to choking are highly stressful situations, loss of self control, expectations of failure, crowd pressure, the fear of a coach’s standards not being reached and peer pressure.

The neurological or cognitive processes that are affected by high levels of arousal described in the paragraph above are well beyond the scope of this paper, however put simply choking results in the narrowing of attention (concentration) as information processing in the brain and nervous system is slowed down and easily distracted as the brain and nervous system try to cope with both physiological and psychological demands.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that a referee or athlete who is performing in competition with a satisfactory level of arousal (what ever that may be - it will vary between individuals) may if confronted with frustration, (a factor that will lead to anxiety) create a change in arousal levels whereby the athlete will suffer from a decline in performance. As a result it is important to identify factors that will lead to frustration for both the referee and the athlete and to try and minimise the associated decline in performance so as to maintain a high quality game of RU that is appealing to both play and watch.

## **PART A**

---

<sup>4</sup>Gould & Krane (1992)

<sup>5</sup> Boutcher 1992

### **(3.0) REFEREE**

#### **(3.1) Examples of situations that lead to frustration (anxiety) in referees**

The following list identifies a few situations that will lead to anxiety in referees. A point of note is all the scenarios are either unforeseen or uncontrollable.

*i) Scrum collapses* - some games suffer from incident after incident of scrum collapses. This can be a great source of frustration and embarrassment for the referee particularly when he has exhausted his arsenal in dealing with collapsed scrums. Without examining the routines that referees follow with difficult scrums - when the referee is at his wits end his anxiety levels no doubt rise to levels that do not allow optimal performance. This is an example of perceived uncontrollable circumstance.

*ii) Difficult Captains* - an unforeseen circumstance is where captains refuse to play their role in the management of a game and the referee is in conflict with one or both captains. This can lead to anxiety levels increasing in a referee if he becomes agitated or alternatively the referee may simply give up and his arousal levels may simply drop to unacceptably low levels.

*iii) Parameter abuse* - when players fail to heed the warning and parameters that a referee sets for a game, the referee may feel frustrated given that he has fulfilled his role by setting standards and players have refused to play their role in adhering to the standards set by the referee. This can occur by way of repeated infringements at the tackle, repeated infringement by way of professional foul or repeated foul play.

*iv) Boring & Drab games* - possibly the greatest frustration experienced by referees is being in charge of a game that never displays the skill potential of players and is simply boring to watch.

#### **(3.2) Effect on Performance**

The above examples and many others not listed are examples that may lead to frustration in the referee. As stated earlier once the referee experiences frustrating circumstances this can lead to “anxiety” (physiological response) and then to a change in arousal levels (psychological response), which in turn can distract the referee from his task to such an extent that players no longer feel comfortable with him in control of their game. The referees impact on player frustration is addressed in Part B.

The main concern that changing arousal levels has on the referee is inhibiting the decision making process. This is particularly important as in the modern game the referee is required to make his decisions more instantly and precisely to keep the game flowing the “Australian way”.

To further explore the effect that changing arousal levels have on referee performance an understanding of the cognitive process of decision making is required. A typical

decision made on a sporting field is described by Pitz & Sachs (1984) in the following terms:

“unlike other tasks (ie problem solving), there may exist no criterion for determining whether a single choice or judgement is correct, since the response is based in part on personal opinions or preferences.”<sup>6</sup>

This definition of decision making is a reasonable example of a decision made by a referee.

On the sporting field the decision made is dynamic, complex, involving risk and performed in an uncertain environment, consequently research suggests the following five factors are imperative to the process of decision making in sport:

- 1) memory,
- 2) cognitive styles,
- 3) intellectual ability,
- 4) attention and concentration, and
- 5) experience.<sup>7</sup>

Of the five factors listed as playing a part in decision making on the sporting field, four can be directly influenced by changes in the level of arousal - cognitive styles, intellectual ability, attention and memory. Keogh & Sugden (1985) when they describe the decision making process best explain this in the following way:

“in a stage between perceiving the information through the various senses (input) and the implementation of a motor response (output), there exists a cognitive- perceptual process through which the individual analyses and organises the information for the purpose of making the decision.”<sup>8</sup>

The information received (inputs) undergoes a process of identification, analysis and diagnosis against past experience before being passed to the central nervous system where it is turned into an action (output). As mentioned earlier any arousal experienced effects the body physiologically by cluttering up the central nervous system. Consequently if a referee experiences arousal changes at the same time as he is trying to process input to make a decision, his central nervous system is trying to cope with two things at once the result being that a decision comes too late or is in fact processed incorrectly and the decision is wrong.

Clearly any frustration perceived by the referee can lead to poor decision making and affect the game in a detrimental fashion.

---

<sup>6</sup> HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON SPORT PSYCHOLOGY  
Robert N Singer / Milledge Murphey / L Keith Tennas  
1993

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Singer 1980

### (3.3) Strategies for referees to deal with anxiety/frustration

Ansell in his book *Sport Psychology from theory to practice*<sup>9</sup> states that “anxiety and arousal are inherent in competitive sport” and that the responsibility of controlling an athlete’s emotion rests with the individual himself/herself. There are numerous suggestions from the psychology fraternity that suggest methods for dealing with anxiety - Ansell kindly summarises these findings in the following:

*i) focus on what you can control* - anxiety lies in the fear of the unknown, therefore to reduce unnecessary an athlete should not concern himself/herself with he/she can control.

*ii) think practice* - an athletes anxiety is usually caused by “perceived” threatening scenarios. However when an athlete practices there are no perceived threatening scenarios so the athlete can perform his tasks with little or no anxiety. Ansell suggests that in competition an athlete should “think practice” and therefore envisage him/herself performing the tasks in a non-threatening environment and by doing so removing anxiety from the competition environment.

*iii) remember the worst case scenario* - for most athletes the worst case scenario is losing and losing is not to be linked with failure. It is my opinion that this point by Ansell is not appropriate for RU referees as the worst case scenario for a referee can be detrimental to the game of rugby and to athletes careers.

*iv) keep active* - researchers, most notably William Morgan from the University of Wisconsin, have shown that engaging in physical activity reduces anxiety by providing a physical outlet for heightened anxiety. This relaxing effect is one reason for the pregame warm up and it is suggested that the pregame warm should be used by referees for active psychological warm up as well as physical. This can be achieved by using this time to turning ones attention to the task at hand.

*v) cognitive strategies* - there are numerous cognitive strategies for reducing anxiety offered by the sport psychologists, these include:

- mental imagery,
- relaxation techniques,
- positive self talk,
- the use in competition of cues.

This list is by no means exhaustive however gives an indication of the techniques available. It should be noted that all these strategies require practice before any benefit will be gained in competition.

One of the more interesting areas of research into the area of stress (anxiety) management is the development of a “*Multimodal Stress Management Model*”<sup>10</sup> by

---

<sup>9</sup> Sport Psychology from theory to practice, 3rd Ed.  
Mark A Ansell  
1994

<sup>10</sup> Stress and performance in Sport

Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. Put simply the model assesses the amount of threat that an athlete perceives in competition and an assessment of the athletes coping potential to deal with the threat to provide a mechanism for dealing with stressful situations.

The strategies offered by Lazarus and Folkman<sup>11</sup> after the initial assessment include two coping behaviours, (1) emotion-focused coping (“EFC”) and (2) problem-focused coping (“PFC”). It is the “EFC” strategies that we are interested in as they include strategies to combat anxiety produced from situations where there is perceived that there is little one can do to remove the perceived threat. This is the scenario that we are interested in on the field - where the referee feels helpless in his ability to manage a particular situation. The concept behind “EFC” strategies include making the athlete feel better emotionally while tolerating the perceived threat.

An example of an “EFC” is Meichenbaum’s (1975) *Stress Inoculation Training* (“SIT”) program. The “SIT” identifies seven different types of coping skills, including:

- 1) using self talk to influence situations,
- 2) training to observe thoughts and images and to learn to discriminate how the cognitive effects of the thoughts and images effect actual behaviour,
- 3) training in basic problem solving skills,
- 4) using self talk and imagery in practice scenarios,
- 5) modelling, rehearsal, and encouragement of positive self evaluation and attention focusing (concentration) skills,
- 6) use of relation training and behavioural rehearsal in simulated situations,
- 7) gradual exposure to more and more stressful situations.

The last point of gradual exposure is the key to the “SIT” program and results in the name “inoculation” as the athlete becomes more and more relaxed in increasingly more stressful situations.

Many of the techniques listed above require much practice and warrant a paper to be written on each technique individually - it is up to the individual to seek how to rehearse the coping strategies listed in coping with stress (anxiety).

## **PART B**

---

JG Jones / Loughborough University

L Hardy / University of Wales

1990

<sup>11</sup> Folkman s and Lazarus R

Study of emotion and coping

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48 p 150-170

## **(4.0) - ATHLETE (PLAYER)**

### (4.1) Examples of situations that lead to frustration (anxiety) in players

Consistency by officials is one of the greatest causes of stress or anxiety in players during competition. Studies by Snyder E and Purdy D<sup>12</sup> indicate that players feel that consistency is the most important trait that an official can have, the studies also indicate that players feel that consistency in officiating is more important than following the letter of the law. The importance of consistency in the referee is constantly raised by coaches, players and spectators alike in the game of RU.

Other situations that cause anxiety in players during competition include substandard player or team performance or the failure of a game plan to work in competition. Unforeseen circumstances, such as a change in venue, last minute change in official or having a key player (eg. captain) injured or sent from the field are also stress causing situations for players.

There are many circumstances that cause anxiety in players - however the nature of this paper is to examine the areas that a referee can play in reducing anxiety (ie improved consistency) on players to increase the performance of players and hopefully the standard of the game.

At this point it is interesting to note that all the literature on anxiety experienced by players within competition alludes to the fact that the anxiety stems from “perceived” situations. This is no different for players in RU. In identifying consistency as a major cause of anxiety for players the real problem needs to be redefined as “perceived inconsistency”.

Players can perceive inconsistency in numerous ways, first and foremost actual inconsistency by the referee in competition will lead to players perceiving that the referee is being inconsistent. Secondly, players may react to spectator jeering at decisions being made against one side and conclude from the spectator’s dissatisfaction that the referee is inconsistent. Thirdly, players gross lack of knowledge on the laws of the game may confuse them in their understanding of the referees interpretation of what players can and can not do - particularly at the tackle situation.

### (4.2) Effect on Performance

---

<sup>12</sup> Snyder E and Purdy D (1987)  
Social control in Sport  
Sociology of Sport Journal 4, p 397

There needs little discussion on the effect that heightened anxiety in players caused by referee inconsistency has on a game of RU. The effect on performance caused by anxiety and changing arousal levels has been explained above in section (2.0) and the effect on performance is no different for players or referees.

It should be mentioned that the game can come into disrepute if players anxiety levels are allowed to fluctuate to such an extent that players make unnecessary decisions as a result of a handicapped decision making process, or worse still when players become so frustrated, particularly with a referee, that they take laws into their own hands.

As with referees players go through an extremely dynamic decision making process in competition. The Handbook of Research on Sport Psychology (1993) summarises various pieces of research that have been conducted on the decision making process. The book indicates that an athlete in competition gathers information from two sources, (1) external sources, such as visual sources and sound etc, and. (2) internal sources such as muscle tension. The athletes then processes the copious amounts of information that it can gather while in competition and makes a decision. However Singer (1980) asserts that every stimulus that an athlete received, be it external or internal, must pass through a certain threshold for the athlete to pay attention to it. The threshold is measured by levels of arousal, and if the athlete is either above or below this threshold then the athlete will not process any information it receives, the athlete will simply discard the information.

This is very important for referees who may be issuing instruction to a player that is irate for one reason or another and is therefore well above the threshold of effective information retention and processing. Any information that this player receives from a referee in this state will be disregarded.

#### (4.3) Strategies for referees in managing players anxiety levels

Given that fluctuations in players anxiety levels and arousal levels have a significant effect on the game of RU, it must become apart of the referees role to actively manage players so that there is no unnecessary reduction to the performance level of players to below their potential.

On the basis that prevention is better than cure, if the referee can not allow players anxiety levels to fluctuate unnecessarily then there is little problem in managing irate players who perceive that an injustice has occurred. Therefore the referee should note the following psychological qualities of a good official offered by Weinberg & Richardson (1990) in their book "Psychology of Officiating":

- |               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| -Consistency  | -Integrity  |
| -Rapport      | -Judgement  |
| -Decisiveness | -Confidence |
| -Poise        | -Enjoyment  |

If a referee can continue to work on these qualities then the standard of the game that he/she is refereeing will increase.

Section (4.2) indicated that if a player's arousal level is either too high or too low then any information that the player receives from the referee will not be processed through the usual information processing channel but will rather be simply discarded by the player. As a result the referee needs to quickly determine the state of the player/(s) and gauge whether their arousal needs to be lifted, or, more commonly, dropped in order for the player to resume playing at his or her highest possible standard.

As a result the referee needs not only to be able to determine when he is overaroused himself but also when the players are overaroused. He then needs to firstly implement a relaxation exercise on himself (hopefully rehearsed) but also to apply a similar technique on the player/(s) to enable them to relax. Stalling for time is a good technique whereby players be left on their own to relax, whereby their arousal levels will hopefully return to normal levels.

The art of manipulating player's arousal levels mid competition is regarded by Weinberg and Richardson<sup>13</sup> as very hard to learn and considered a trait that some officials seem to have inherently. Weinberg and Richardson indicate that the officials that seem to have the ability to do this also have the following characteristics, good communication, rapport, sympathy and empathy. It could be suggested then that to improve the management of player's arousal levels one should improve the communication skills listed by Weinberg and Richardson.

As a final point any referee should consider what he/she should have in his/her arsenal for managing player's anxiety and arousal levels and thereby increasing the standard of the game.

---

<sup>13</sup> PSYCHOLOGY OF OFFICIATING  
Weinberg & Richardson  
University of Northern Texas  
1990