



England  
Rugby

## **RFU national panel of Assistant Referees**

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Best working practice  
and code of conduct



# Congratulations on being a member of the RFU's National Panel of Assistant Referees and thank you for your commitment to our sport.

**This document aims to provide the necessary information to carry out your role to the best of your ability and to maintain the highest standards at every game.**

The responsibility you shoulder increases season by season. Working with the referee on match days as a team of three is a significant undertaking in the professional era and players, coaches and spectators will expect your performance to be of the best at all times and in all situations.

As a dedicated Assistant Referee, you will be focused on the demands of the role, knowing that your decisions can have a dramatic impact and easily affect the outcome of a game.

Our objective is to maximise the potential of our Panel of Assistant Referees so that we are, and are regarded as, professional and proficient. The specialised role that we have chosen to perform is essential to the game.

Developing and maintaining our levels of game knowledge, fitness and performance is paramount if we are to keep pace with our changing game. An Assistant Referee is an athlete who is fit and viewed with respect, from the season's first game to the last.

## **Days before the match**

When you are appointed by the RFU it is the responsibility of the home team to confirm the venue and kick-off time, during the early part of the week preceding the match. If travelling any distance, it will help if you are warned of any potential delays, such as road or rail works, other sporting events, local festivities, pop concerts.

As the leader of the team of three, the onus is on the referee to contact you, advising that the game has been confirmed and

arranging a time and place to meet prior to kick-off. Experience has shown that leaving voicemail messages does not ensure that the message is received and can lead to officials not arriving as required on match days. The referees should endeavor to speak directly to their assistants.

## **Pre match prior to kick off**

It is essential that the referee fully briefs you regarding expected obligations. Hopefully, this guide will outline the minimum standards that the referee should expect. Individual referees may well ask for additional assistance in certain areas and this should be clearly explained during the pre-match briefing. If you have any queries regarding your duties you should seek clarification from the referee during the pre-match briefing.

You must arrive by the time agreed and be prepared to inspect the pitch with the referee to ensure that there are no obstructions close to either touchline or to the touch-in- goal and dead ball lines. You must identify the 4th official, the match doctor, and both teams' trainers/ physiotherapists. You will be present when the referee speaks to them on matters concerning how replacements are to be made. You must also be aware of how many replacements are allowed for the match and where they will be sitting until required. No replacement will be allowed onto the field of play without having been first cleared by you or your fellow Assistant Referee.

All three officials' kit must be clean and neat and, where supplied by a sponsor, must be worn unless it clashes with either team; appropriate dress as per most up to date protocol.

You and your fellow Assistant Referee will carry a flag with which to signal decisions and a working watch to assist with time keeping duties as requested by the referee. Where one of you is nominated as the reserve referee, you must also be equipped with a whistle, score card, yellow and red cards and pencil or pen.

All three match officials will wear the official communications radio equipment supplied by the RFU. The referee will be in charge of the equipment and should ensure that the batteries are fully charged. The team of three must test that the equipment is working efficiently before going out onto the pitch.

The referee will introduce you to the team captains when they meet to toss the coin, and will explain your role within the officiating team during the match. Boots, studs and the general dress of both teams will be inspected before the game. This role is generally delegated to you and you will inform the referee of any problems with kit that you have inspected.

You will also brief the ball boys as to their responsibilities, emphasising that:

- a) They must not touch or chase a ball that may be used at a quick throw in.
- b) They must not throw or give a spare ball to any player.
- c) They will, however, place a ball by the Assistant Referee on the line of touch.
- d) At all other times they must remain well away from the touch lines and touch-in-goal lines for safety reasons.

You must have a thorough knowledge of Law 6 [Match Officials], Law 19 [Touch &

Lineout] and Law 10 [Foul Play] and be prepared to raise your flag or intervene should there be infringements of any aspects of these Laws which require this course of action. You MUST have knowledge of competition regulations relating to the competition you are officiating regarding such matters as clash of colours, numbers of replacements or substitutions, drawn games in cup competitions you are officiating in.

### Timing and Communication Systems

Watches must be synchronised before play starts and the elapsed time of up to 40 minutes in each half will be measured for the referee's guidance and assistance, in case they have a problem with their own watch. It is usual for the referee to ask that AR 1 runs a stop start time (in case they have to take over) and that AR 2 keeps a running time.

Communication systems must be checked prior to kick off, from ARs to referee and return and from officials to observers/coaches.

### During the match

It is the responsibility of the AR on the side of the technical area to liaise and work with the 4th Official to ensure that replacements, substitutes or returning "bleeding" players do not enter the match until the referee has signalled that they may do so. They must also ensure that any replaced or substituted players leave the playing area before play resumes. It is helpful to the referee to know the team and number/s of players being replaced. For any other stoppage that requires attention on the pitch, the AR will remain on the touch line level with the point at which play should resume.



As a dedicated Assistant Referee, you will be focused on the demands of the role

You will ensure that club coaches, replacements/substitutes etc. are in the designated technical areas and that any photographers, television cameras, water carriers, ball boys etc. are kept well back from the touch and touch-in-goal lines and do not restrict your movement or lines of sight. You must also ensure that no-one goes onto the field of play unless it has been indicated that they may do so by the referee or, in the case of medical personnel, it has been agreed prior to kick off. Where difficulties are encountered you will ask the referee for assistance during a convenient stoppage of play.

### Signalling/Communicating

The referee and you as his assistants are a **TEAM** and must work together until the full 80 minutes of playing time and any extra time required in Cup matches, has elapsed.

Your first priority is to indicate **TOUCH**.

Your second priority is the identification and communication to the referee of all incidents of **MISCONDUCT and FOUL PLAY**.

After these come **OTHER DUTIES** to assist the referee in managing the match. These may include signalling offside, knocks on, forward passes etc., where these offences are clear and obvious, and where the referee is not in a good position to make a judgement. Execution of these other duties should never take priority over **TOUCH or MISCONDUCT and FOUL PLAY**.

All signals should be given without flamboyance, by flag or via the communications equipment.



They can be categorised as:

- (i) Decision signals, always given by a flag signal, at or above the shoulder (i.e. Touch, Goal, Offences under Law 10 in accordance with Law 6 B or,
- (ii) Indicative/Confirmatory signals (e.g. Offside lines, Knocks-On, Forward Passes, Illegalities where the referee has indicated at the pre-match briefing that assistance would be appreciated). These should be given via the communications equipment.

You should also advise the referee of trends (generally matters which occur on more than one occasion and have no immediate effect on the game) but only at stoppages

### Concentration

Concentration must be maintained throughout the whole match in order to provide the referee with maximum assistance. Ignore outside distractions such as club coaches, spectators, television cameras, matches on adjoining pitches etc. Concentration is vitally important and cannot be overstressed. Your role and responsibilities are completely different from those of the referee, who will spend most of the match correctly watching the area of the play around the ball. You, especially when trailing, will spend a great deal of the match watching players some distance behind the play and out of the view of the referee and of the other Assistant Referee. This action can feel uncomfortable because extensive phases of play will not be seen or enjoyed. This can be especially frustrating for an experienced referee when running touch but must be carried out diligently to be effective in the overall responsibilities of the team of three in managing the match.

### Leading and Trailing

At all times during play the team of three will triangulate on the play around ball (leading and trailing ARs). At kicks in open play and when play moves away after scrums, lineouts, rucks and mauls, the AR on the touch line towards which the ball is played will follow the ball upfield and become the leading Assistant Referee. The further (trailing) Assistant Referee will not follow the play, but hold back to mark the place of the kick and to watch for late tackles or obstruction after play has moved away, dwelling in this position as long as there is a likelihood of any misconduct by players still close to opponents.

in play and always communicated in a clear and concise way. You should also give any additional information at stoppages that the referee needs to be aware of, such as minor incidents which you have successfully dealt with (eg: Red 4 and Blue 5 holding each other on the floor). You **MUST** give team colour and number if possible of any clear and obvious infringement (eg: Black 3 collapsing maul or White 6 side entry).

To communicate a scrum infringement, you should give colour of the offending team (gold, gold, gold), then follow this with the reason (eg “Tighthead binding on arm” or “Loosehead boring in.”) This information should prompt the referee to penalise gold.

A verbal reminder of the obligations on all players to play within the spirit of the Laws at this stage is often sufficient to prevent subsequent frustration and flare-ups. Whilst dwelling, observation of these players must be maintained and the temptation to watch the area of play near the ball further up field resisted.

To identify whether you should continue to dwell or to go, it is a useful mental exercise to repeat to yourself, “Do I still need to stay, do I still need to stay....?” Once satisfied that the need to dwell has ceased you should move speedily upfield to supplement the referee’s management of the new phase of play. Good speed is important here because you will be of little use to the referee whilst in this no man’s land between the two consecutive phases of play.

At any ensuing ruck or maul if you are nearer to the play (the near side Assistant Referee) you will take a position on the other side of the phase of the play from the referee (always remembering that the first priority is touch). If the referee is near the back feet of the attacking team at a ruck or maul, you will normally be positioned on the offside line of the defending team (the team which is apparently not winning the ball), as they are generally the team more likely to offend.

If the referee moves to the defending side you should move to cover the area he can no longer see. On arrival from any previous phase of play the far side Assistant Referee will observe their colleagues’ positions and take up a position with a third view of play. This will normally be on the offside line of the defending team.

### Positioning at the Kick-Off

At the kick-off, the Assistant Referee on the touchline not expecting to receive the ball will be positioned near the 22m line of the receiving team in order to judge if the ball has crossed the goal line without touching or being touched by a player. If the ball does so and is then grounded by a defending player, or if the receiving team does not play the ball and it goes dead by going into touch-in-goal or on or over the dead ball line, you will point your flag to the centre of the half way line. If the ball touches a receiving player on its way into in-goal and is there made dead or goes dead, you will communicate this to the referee.

The Assistant Referee on the touch line expecting to receive the ball will take up a position on the receiving side’s 22 or at some other point between the 10m and 22m line depending on conditions and the ability of the kickers. The referee may inform you at the pre-match briefing which of these options is preferable.

### Touch

At all times, and particularly near the goal line or in-goal, you must attempt to be near the action, following or in front of the ball carrier in order to judge if any part of the body has touched the touch line, or the ground beyond it. Do not get too close or you may miss something important. Step back, or out to widen your angle of vision. When the ball goes into touch, as defined in Law 19, at any time during the match, your first action must be to raise the flag to signal touch, even if you are positioned some distance from the point of touch. Then move quickly to the line-of-touch as defined in Law 19 (1). In so doing note the position of any quick throw-in should action be

required under Law 19 (2). The non-flag arm will not be raised until one of the following has occurred;

- i) A lineout has formed. (Two players from each side).
- ii) The ball that went into touch has been changed.
- iii) The ball, after being made dead, has been touched by a player other than the one throwing it in.
- iv) The ball has been kicked directly to touch by the non-offending side after the awarding of a penalty kick.

### Penalty Kicks and Free-Kicks

At all penalties and free kicks, the far side Assistant Referee will move quickly to a position 10 metres from the mark towards the goal line of the offending team. The near side Assistant Referee will initially remain level with the mark if there is a likelihood of any misconduct by players still close to opponents, especially on the ground and on the far side from the referee. Once satisfied, move quickly to 10 metres away from the mark so that the referee and players can easily judge the 10 metre space. If it is apparent that the kicking team are going to tap the kick and run the ball they will indicate the line by holding out one hand until all defending players are ten metres back. A verbal reminder to the defending players of the required distance is acceptable. If the kick is taken quickly, be aware of the positions of the players of the defending team so that he can readily identify which are 10 metres away when the kick is taken, which are retreating and which are not retreating. If players are closing down the 10 metre space the referee will need to be informed at the next appropriate opportunity.

However, if it is apparent that the kicking team is intending to kick for touch the 10 metre space is not as important. Unless a defending player is blatantly trying to slow the kick, you should not dwell too long at the 10 metre mark but move quickly to the anticipated line of touch. In the above circumstances the first Assistant Referee to arrive at the offside line will set the 10 metre distance. You will then align on their mark.

In anticipating where touch is likely to be, it is better to go slightly too far. By doing this and looking back, the line of the kick and the place of touch can be seen more easily and all the following players are in view. This is even more important where there is a possibility that the ball could cross the touchline near to the corner post. When the attacking team is kicking a penalty or free kick to touch from closer than 25 to 30 metres from the goal line, the near side Assistant Referee should be positioned a metre beyond the corner post. NB. It may be of assistance, before the kick is taken, to transfer the flag to the hand which will subsequently be raised above the head, – this tends to act as a reminder as to which side will throw in at any ensuing lineout.

The far side Assistant Referee will remain on the 10 metre mark, indicating with their hand as above, in case the referee advances the kick a further 10 metres.

### Scrum

When a scrum is called position yourself 5m to the left of the mark which is the offside line for those not part of the scrum. When the scrum is about to be set the AR on the side opposite the referee should move to the centre line of the scrum before the engagement process is undertaken, or to a position slightly off-centre giving a clear

**As a match official you must take the match every bit as seriously as the players, coaches and the referee**

view of the tunnel and the binding of the front rows. The players should be aware of this positioning.

You should look at the tighthead binding. Next look at the feet, are both props in a position to push straight? The front rows should be balanced and in a forward pushing contest which begins when the ball enters the tunnel. All players, including the No8, should be bound before the referee calls "Set."

Actions which cause the scrum to destabilise or collapse or force players upwards, are illegal and should be communicated to the referee by identifying the offending team by colour - (blue, blue, blue), followed after the whistle by a clear and concise explanation (eg: boring in; pulling down). You can also assist on the feed, if requested in the referee's brief or as an advisory in downtime if not.

After the ball has been put in you should observe the backs of both defensive and attacking sides who must remain 5m back until the ball is out. If the scrum moves

forwards or backwards the three quarters must maintain the 5m gap otherwise they are offside.

### **Play in in-goal**

As play approaches the goal line, especially when it is near to the touch line, you will consider the referee's position, relative to play, and position yourself diametrically opposite the referee. If the referee is arriving behind the play, you will run ahead of play and possibly close to the touch-in-goal line. If the referee arrives ahead of play, you will follow play towards the goal line. These actions will maximise overall view of possible touch decisions near to the goal line and of decisions on the grounding of, or failure to ground, the ball in in-goal. When close to the corner post you must avoid being abreast of potential try scorers as this reduces your chances of seeing players' feet touching the touchline.

You will remain in touch when a try has been scored until the referee indicates his decision. If the ball, or the player carrying the ball, touches or crosses the dead ball line



or goes into touch-in-goal, you will indicate first that the ball is dead. Then you will move to the place where play should re-start, (5m from the goal line or the 22m line) to provide visual assistance for the referee, who may ask one of two questions when they have not seen the grounding of the ball. A) Any reason I cannot award a try? or B) Try yes or no?

If the referee moves away from the goal line after a try has been awarded, you will delay running to the posts and dwell near any players who are still close to opponents to prevent any misconduct. When it is safe to move you will run to the posts. Good practice is to give the referee a mark to make sure the conversion is taken from the correct place.

### Kicks at goal

When the referee awards a try or indicates that a player will be kicking for goal after a penalty has been awarded, you will run immediately to a position behind the goal posts. Before taking position prior to the kick, it may be advantageous to quickly exchange information passed to either Assistant Referee by the referee, or regarding areas of mutual concern.

The Assistant Referee nearer to the kicker's side of the pitch will be close to the post. The other Assistant Referee will be further back and in line with the further post and the ball. Both will remain stationary with their hands at their sides unless it is

necessary to shield the eyes from the sun. The decision as to the outcome of the kick is primarily with the Assistant Referee nearer to the ball as it crosses the goal line. The Assistant Referee nearer to the kicker will decide if the ball clears the crossbar. The Assistant Referee primarily responsible will give a clear look and verbal confirmation to their colleague before a successful kick is signalled simultaneously by both officials. You must never interfere with the ball in play or move whilst the ball is in flight in case you obstruct a player. If the attempted kick fails, you must remain still with your flag by your side until it is obvious that the return to the touch line will not obstruct players. After the kick you will run quickly to the nearer touch line to be ready for the re-start.

### Misconduct and foul play

At the pre-match briefing the referee will instruct you regarding offences covered by Law 10. You have the power to report such incidents under Law 6 B and **MUST ALWAYS SIGNAL** misconduct or foul play so defined. This must be signalled even if you consider that the referee has seen the incident, or if you are unsure which player was responsible.

When reporting foul play you should use current protocol, which will be covered in the referee's pre match briefing.

This should also happen if a player or players from both sides have committed foul play. Having stopped the game the referee will ensure that opposing players are apart before calling you on to the field of play to receive your report.

The referee will lead the discussion, saying what he have seen, and then ask if

you have seen anything else. He may ask for a recommendation as to the sanction. If the referee was unsuspected he will say so and invite you to tell him what you saw. The referee may, after receiving your report suggest what he believe is the appropriate sanction. If you disagree you may go over the incident again emphasising salient points.

It is advisable to open the communication system when reporting, so that the other Assistant Referee can hear what has been said. It is important, bearing in mind that the conversations between the referee and the AR may well be captured on the match DVD, that the language used is appropriate and suitably restrained. The facts should be delivered confidently, clearly and as briefly as possible stating the colour and number of the offending player(s) and details of the foul play incident. Inflammatory or ambiguous language or expletives should never be used. Whilst giving your report you will not mirror the actions of the player involved in the reported incident by moving your arms, legs or head, but restrict yourself to a verbal description.

Do not use emotive words such as "stamping, raking, gouging, head butting" etc. The referee will expect phrases such as "illegal use of feet, fingers in the eyes/mouth, made contact on the head with his own head" etc. The referee may seek clarification of some details of the report and, depending on the circumstances, may ask for a recommendation as to a sanction.

The referee will consider the information from the report within the overall context of the match and will tell you what action he is going to take but does not have to state the reasons for the decision. The referee is the

best person to consider all relevant aspects of the match and you should not become de-motivated if he takes a different action from one which you would have taken. You should have also noted where the penalty, or the re-start, should take place. Accuracy here is important.

In the event of a brawl if you are on the near side you will assist the referee in identifying the instigators. In doing so, do

not be drawn into the situation, especially when it is near you, but take as wide a view as possible. If you are on the far side don't watch for instigators but for players arriving from a distance to join the brawl. When a brawl occurs or when both ARs signal simultaneously for an offence under Law 10, the referee may ask both to meet him in the middle of the field to discuss the circumstances. Due to the retaliation when a brawl occurs it is likely that at least one

player from each team will receive a sanction and the referee will have to consider whether to reverse the penalty for the original offence which caused the incident.

The referee will complete the front of the Disciplinary report and countersign the Assistant Referee's report with the words, "I confirm that the above report is an accurate account of the facts related by this Assistant Referee which led to me sending

off this player." The referee will confirm the reason for the sending off with the 4th Official after the game. All forms for red and yellow cards should be returned within 24 hours. All red cards should be also reported by phone as soon as practical after the game to Panel Managers and Discipline Department in writing within 24 hours.



## INJURIES DURING PLAY – CONCUSSION

### (you may have become referee)

It is NOT the referee's responsibility to deal with injuries to players during the game. It is the duty of each team to provide suitable medically qualified persons to attend injured players. However, the referee has the power to stop an injured player from continuing and should be aware of this important role in the prevention and management of concussion. Through the correct and consistent application of the Laws of the Game, match officials are able to influence players' and coaches' behaviour towards concussion.

If you suspect concussion you should ask for the player to be assessed and/or removed from play right away. Continuing to play increases their risk of more severe, longer lasting concussion symptoms, as well as increasing their risk of other injury. Even if a player is cleared to play by a team doctor and you are concerned that they continue to show signs or symptoms of concussion you should remind the doctor of their responsibilities to the player and you are within your rights, under Law 3.9, to remove the player from the game.

Law 3.9 states: "If the referee decides – with or without the advice of a doctor or other medically qualified person – that a player is so injured that the player should stop playing, the referee may order that player to leave the playing area. The referee may also order an injured player to leave the field in order to be medical examined."

## OTHER DUTIES – ADVISORY INTERVENTIONS BY RADIO

### Scrum, Ruck and Maul

At scrums, rucks and mauls the first priority of the near side Assistant Referee is misconduct and foul play. Position yourself appropriately to identify such incidents. Your second priority is offside. At rucks and mauls the Assistant Referee nearer to the play (the near side Assistant Referee) will take a position on the other side of the phase of the play from the Referee. If the referee is near the back feet of the attacking team at a ruck or maul you will normally be positioned on the offside line of the defending team, as they are generally the team more likely to offend. If the referee moves to the defending side you should move to cover the area no longer seen by him. On arrival from any previous phase of play the far side Assistant Referee will observe the positions of the referee and the other Assistant Referee and take up a position with a third view of play. This will normally be on the offside line of the defending team (the team which is apparently not winning the ball).

When rucks and mauls are near the touch line the near side Assistant Referee will also watch for players joining the ruck or maul from an offside position on the blind side. They may communicate vocally with players close by to prevent offences occurring. Offside by players participating, joining or not participating in the ruck or maul **MAY** be communicated to the referee via the radio. These interventions should be infrequent and always clear and obvious. Before making such interventions you should have regard to the referee's pre-match briefing and consider whether such matters are material.

## Lineout

Once the ball has been thrown in to a lineout, the far side Assistant Referee, who will be positioned on the defending offside line 10m back from the line of touch, will remain on that line until the lineout is over. Then move to their next position.

## Open Play

In open play you **MAY** advise knock-ons and forward passes via the radio, but should do so only when it is clear and obvious and when the referee is not well placed to see. You should not be advising on forward passes when a try is being scored unless the referee is out of position or unsighted or a comment on the pass is requested.

## Advantage

The referee having played advantage that may not have been taken, will identify the location of the infringement from you before informing the players of the appropriate sanction. You will identify the location to the referee by radio communication or by pointing to it with your non-flag hand.

## Acknowledgement

Referees have a responsibility to respond to inputs given by you, although they have no obligation to act on them. You should not react negatively if the referee does not accept your advisory information as he may see incidents differently, or be applying contextual judgement or materiality. However, all inputs of Foul Play **MUST** be responded to. This will result in a more effective operation of the team of three and benefit the match.

## Supporting the referee - trends

You will play an important role in the overall management of the match by supporting the referee. You will identify changing patterns

of play, phases of repeated or persistent infringements and report these and any other relevant observations to the referee, always bearing in mind his pre-match briefing. Relevant information should be given as soon as is practically possible. It is of no benefit to the referee to be given information at half time or full time of incidents which occurred sometime previously.

## Half Time

At half time you and the referee will leave the field of play together. Then with the referee you will review the first half and receive any additional instructions. Should the referee request clarification regarding any aspects of the first half, remarks should be brief, apposite and clear. It is advisable to close down all radio equipment at the half time whistle and during the interval. Remember to switch on again before kick-off.

## Final Whistle

When full time is called you and the referee will meet and leave the playing area together as a team of three. It is advisable to close down all radio equipment at full time.

## Post-Match

At no time will either Assistant Referee discuss the referee's performance with spectators or club members of either team. The team of three should, however, be prepared to discuss their own individual and joint efforts with any duly appointed Society, Group or RFU Adviser or Coach. They should also be prepared to listen politely to any constructive comments from players who participated in the match, or from the coaches of either team, providing that such comments are offered in good spirit.

## POINTS FOR ASSISTANT REFEREES TO REMEMBER

The referee is the leader of the team. Their briefing must adhere to these guidelines but may include additions which they want followed for that match. All signals should be given clearly but without flamboyance.

You must not discuss other referees' instructions unless invited to do so by the match referee. Referees will not comment on other Assistant Referees' performances in previous matches. The referee should be offered some time alone, which they can accept or decline.

You must never do anything, either before, during or after the match, that may cause players or spectators to question the referee's authority, or give cause to cast doubt on any decision.

At all times the referee will take the lead in discussion, and may seek your input or views. You must never make comments concerning the referee to an Adviser that you have not been prepared to discuss with the referee in any exchange of views. You should be polite to anyone who approaches you, but not appear over friendly, an action which may cause anyone to doubt impartiality.

As a match official you must take the match every bit as seriously as the players, coaches and the referee. In return, you are also entitled to the same hospitality as the referee.

After every game referee assistants should always self-review. Ask for feedback from the referee and other referees assistant.

**The RFU would like to thank the below for their work and input into this publication:**

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