

RFU HEAD OF JUDICIARY SANCTIONS GUIDANCE

MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE

1. The RFU Head of Judiciary is authorised to issue practice notes and sanctions guidance (RFU Regulation 19.1.17).

MATCH OFFICIAL ABUSE

2. Offences that involve match official abuse (“**MOA**”) contrary to RFU Rule 9.28¹ can take a number of different forms. It may be verbal, by gesture and, in rare cases, physical. It may come from players involved in the match or from coaches, parents or spectators. It may occur during the course of a game but sometimes only occurs after a game has finished.
3. A guide as to the different categories of MOA is set out in the RFU’s “Match Official Abuse – A Guide for Referees” ([link here](#)). It is important to consider which category of MOA the proven or admitted offending falls within:
 - 3.1. Disrespecting the authority of a Match Official, ordinarily described as “dissent”.
 - 3.2. Verbal abuse.
 - 3.3. Using threatening actions or words towards Match Officials.
 - 3.4. Making physical contact with a Match Official, and
 - 3.5. Physical abuse of a Match Official.
4. It is essential that discipline hearings are conducted in a fair and just manner. That means that a Discipline Panel should determine the relevant facts and then impose the appropriate sanction to those facts.
5. RFU Regulation 19, Discipline (Appendix 2) (“**Appendix 2**”) sets out the sanction entry points. There are three entry points:
 - 5.1. Low-end,
 - 5.2. Mid-range, and
 - 5.3. Top-end.
6. The appropriate entry point is determined by an assessment of the seriousness of the offending conduct in accordance with RFU Regulation 19.11.8.

¹ On occasion, MOA is charged as Misconduct or as an offence contrary to RFU Rule 5.12. Sanctions for MOA charged as Misconduct or as an offence contrary to RFU Rule 5.12 should be dealt with in accordance with this guidance (i.e. as if it was charged contrary to RFU Rule 9.28).

7. It is important to recognise that the low-end and mid-range² entry points are fixed. It is equally important to recognise that the top-end entry point is not fixed. The Discipline Panel should identify an entry point between the top-end and the maximum sanction for the particular offence.
8. Appendix 2 distinguishes the starting points for the different categories of conduct that are contrary to RFU Rule 9.28. Those categories are the same as those set out in the RFU's "Match Official Abuse – A Guide for Referees" (see paragraph 3, above).

THE NEED FOR A DETERRENT

9. Offences of MOA are of considerable concern to the RFU. Rugby Discipline can only meet the overriding objective of RFU Regulation 19 to maintain and promote fair play and to protect the health and welfare of Players with the support of Match Officials. The recruitment and retention of Match Officials is affected by the number of instances of MOA.
10. The discipline statistics from the community game show that 18% of all discipline cases that were heard across the country last season were instances of MOA. The largest category of offences are for those involving dissent. Surveys of Match Officials in 2022 and 2023 revealed that 49% of the Match Officials who responded stated they were abused in the previous season.
11. That level of MOA offending is unacceptable.
12. In the same surveys the Match Officials who responded asked the RFU to consider increasing the sanctions available for cases of MOA.. The consequence of the frequency of MOA is that Match Officials are leaving the game and MOA has discouraged people who otherwise would have taken up officiating. An additional deterrent is required to focus the minds of Players on the importance of respecting Match Officials and the consequences of not doing so.
13. Some Constituent Bodies, for understandable reasons, have either aggravated the sanctions imposed for MOA or used the extended powers of sanction available for MOA, Misconduct and Rule 5.12 cases (the power to suspend the effect of any sanction and to impose any other appropriate sanction, see RFU Regulation 19.11.20).
14. It is important that sanctions imposed for all offences dealt with by Rugby Discipline, including MOA, are consistent and determined in accordance with Regulation 19 and Appendix 2. Albeit that each case must be determined on its own facts, similar instances of MOA should attract similar sanctions whether the offence is dealt with by the RFU or a Constituent Body. It follows that any existing Constituent Body memoranda should be replaced by this guidance so that sanctions for MOA are imposed on a consistent basis throughout Rugby in England.

² With the exception of offences that had the potential to result and, in fact did result in serious / gross consequences to the victim (RFU Regulation 19 – Discipline (Appendix 2)). That is not applicable to this guidance.

THE SANCTIONS GUIDANCE

15. In order to provide an additional deterrent, from 1 January 2024, any offence contrary to RFU Rule 9.28³ will be aggravated in accordance with RFU Regulation 19.11.13(b) as follows⁴:

- 15.1. Low-end, by 2 weeks,
- 15.2. Mid-range, by 3 weeks, and
- 15.3. Top-end (whatever starting point is determined), by 4 weeks.

IMPLEMENTATION

16. It is important to recognise that the mandatory aggravating element as set out in paragraph 16 above should be applied after the Discipline Panel has determined the appropriate starting point and reduced the sanction, if it is appropriate to do so, for mitigating factors. The following examples assume that a Player has maximum mitigation of 50% available:

- 16.1. An offence of disrespect of a Match Official (dissent) that attracts a mid-range entry point of 4 weeks would be reduced to 2 weeks, and then be aggravated by 3 matches, making a total of 5 weeks. (see first example infographic on page 4)
- 16.2. An offence of verbal abuse of a Match Official that attracts a mid-range entry point of 12 weeks would be reduced to 6 weeks and then aggravated by 3 weeks, making a total of 9 weeks. (see second example infographic on page 4)

17. For the avoidance of doubt, the power of a Discipline Panel to suspend a sanction or to impose any other appropriate sanction (for example, to write a letter of apology or to attend a Refereeing course) remains available⁵. The suspension of any part of the sanction should be used only in conjunction with an additional sanction, such as attending a Refereeing course. Ordinarily, only one third and no more than half of a playing sanction should be suspended. It would be usual for the period of suspension to be for 12 months.

Richard Whittam KC

Independent Head of RFU Judiciary

³ This includes any case of MOA that is charged as Misconduct or contrary to RFU Rule 5.12.

⁴ A fixed number of weeks provides for a more consistent outcome than a percentage.

⁵ Regulation 19.11.20.

JOE BLOGGS, TWICKENHAM STADIUM RFC

World Rugby Law 9.28 – Disrespecting the Authority of a Match Official (Dissent), Twickenham Stadium RFC v Wembley RFC (01/01/2024)

ENTRY POINT	-	MITIGATION (Max 50% of Entry Point)	+	AGGRAVATION	FINAL SANCTION
LOW END (2 WEEKS)					
MID RANGE (4 WEEKS)	-	2 WEEKS	+	3 WEEKS	5 WEEKS
TOP END (6+ WEEKS)					
HEAD CONTACT <input type="checkbox"/> RECKLESS <input type="checkbox"/> INTENTIONAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PLAYER INJURED <input type="checkbox"/> VULNERABILITY OF PLAYER/MO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		ACCEPTED COMMITTING AN ACT OF FOUL PLAY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD RECORD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REMORSE / APOLOGY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD CONDUCT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANY OTHER (Details in judgment) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		REPEAT OFFENDER <input type="checkbox"/> NEED FOR DETERRENT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANY OTHER FACTORS <input type="checkbox"/>	MATCHES UNAVAILABLE 06/01/24 v Team A 13/01/24 v Team B 20/01/24 v Team C 27/01/24 v Team D 03/02/24 v Team E

FOUL PLAY RESULTING IN HEAD/NECK CONTACT RESULTS IN MINIMUM OF MID RANGE ENTRY

JOE BLOGGS, TWICKENHAM STADIUM RFC

World Rugby Law 9.28 Verbal abuse of a Match Official, Twickenham Stadium RFC v Wembley RFC, 01/01/2024

ENTRY POINT	-	MITIGATION (Max 50% of Entry Point)	+	AGGRAVATION	FINAL SANCTION
LOW END (2 WEEKS)					
MID RANGE (12 WEEKS)	-	6 WEEKS	+	3 WEEKS	9 WEEKS
TOP END (18+ WEEKS)					
HEAD CONTACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RECKLESS <input type="checkbox"/> INTENTIONAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PLAYER INJURED <input type="checkbox"/> VULNERABILITY OF PLAYER/MO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		ACCEPTED COMMITTING AN ACT OF FOUL PLAY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD RECORD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REMORSE / APOLOGY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD CONDUCT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANY OTHER (details in judgment) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		REPEAT OFFENDER <input type="checkbox"/> NEED FOR DETERRENT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANY OTHER FACTORS <input type="checkbox"/>	MATCHES UNAVAILABLE 06/01/24 v Team A 13/01/2023 v Team B 20/01/2024 v Team C 27/01/2024 v Team D 03/02/2024 v Team E 10/02/2024 v Team F 17/02/2024 v Team G 24/02/2024 v Team H 02/03/2024 v Team I

FOUL PLAY RESULTING IN HEAD/NECK CONTACT RESULTS IN MINIMUM OF MID RANGE ENTRY