



U.S.R.F.R

ULSTER SOCIETY OF RUGBY FOOTBALL REFEREES

IRFU Ulster Branch
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The Report of the Honorary Secretary of the Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees for season 24/25.

The 2024-2025 rugby season began for the **Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees (USRFR)** with our **Pre-season conference** in August 2024, held in Newforge Sports Complex, Belfast. With over 115 attendees, with the primary focus of adapting the Society to the new laws and regulations for the season ahead.

Firstly, we would like to recognise the dedication and contributions of our members who represent the USRFR on many Ulster Branch committees;

- Mark Orr on the Branch Committee,
- Simon McDowell on the Rugby Committee,
- Teddy Hall on the Clubs Committee,
- Jonathan Peak on the Schools Committee,
- Michael Cairnduff on the Youth Committee,
- John Mawhinney on the Age Grade Committee,
- Laura Taggart on the Women's and Girls Committee.

We also extend our sincere thanks to the Ulster Branch staff for their outstanding support of our work: Jill McCullough, Lesley McGaughey, Paula Parker, Graeme Ormiston, Paul Whitten, Alice Piper and Chris Webster.

Membership Statistics (as of April 2025)

- Active referees – 141 (This is a decrease from 159 for the 2023-2024 season)
- New recruits – 22 registrations (with 9 graduating to full membership)
- Evaluator and Coaching – 32 (an increase of 2)
- Non – Active – 25 (a decrease of 2)
- Honorary Life Members – 4

We again must note the success of our referee Trainee Coordinator, Lee Evans, who successfully inducted 9 new referees into the society for the 2024-2025 season. This number is lower than anticipated – largely due to the reduced February intake thanks to storm Eowyn – Lee's efforts remain commendable.

Lee is stepping down from his role as Referee Trainee Coordinator, and we are very thankful for all the work Lee has put into our members. We are pleased that Lee will continue to contribute as a valued member of our Selection Committee.

Up to the end of April 2025, USRFR refereed a total of 2598 adult fixtures across Male and Female Leagues and Cups which is an increase on the same period last season. USRFR Members were appointed to 3735 fixtures covering all roles – Referee, AR1, AR2, TJ1, TJ2, No. 4, No. 5, Coach, Evaluator, Results Official and Ref Cam Official. This remarkable level of engagement reflects the tireless commitment of our volunteers in supporting and growing the game of rugby.

These figures indicate a need for additional recruitment from within Rugby Clubs, if we are to continue to endeavour to support the same level of fixtures for the coming season. Referees like players have diverse domestic and professional requirements with demands on their time. As noted in the figures above the society is pleased that an additional 12% of Youth fixtures and 16% in Schools fixtures were refereed by an appointed USRFR Referee, in the hope of aiding continual improvement within the player base.

The Society is pleased to acknowledge the ongoing support and efforts of the Youth and Schools Committee in identifying the fixtures that require particular attention. Their work continues to be instrumental in ensuring appropriate referee coverage across all levels. However, we must also recognise the persistent challenges in certain geographical areas, where referee availability remains limited.

It is once again disappointing to report that eight clubs within Ulster currently do not have an active USRFR referee - a figure unchanged for the second consecutive year. Addressing this issue and further support from clubs for referee recruitment remains a priority, for the Society and for the Ulster Branch.

Notable Appointments

The 2024–2025 season has been one of the most successful in recent years for USRFR representation at the highest levels of the game.

- Chris Busby refereed his first Tier 1 International – *Scotland vs Australia*. This marks the first USRFR Tier 1 referee appointment in 28 years, and is a tremendous achievement reflecting Chris's dedication and the support of the Society throughout his career.
- Peter Martin was promoted to the IRFU High Performance Panel. Since then, he has continued to excel, refereeing in the U20 Six Nations, and receiving appointments as both referee and assistant referee in EPCR, URC, and World Rugby Sevens competitions.
- Peter Ferguson and Tim Lowry continue to represent both the USRFR and IRFU as Citing Commissioners in the Six Nations, URC, and EPCR competitions.
- Colin Stanley and Mark Patton continue to serve as TMOs in the professional game.
- Alana Kerr officiated at the U18 Girls Six Nations in April.
- Keane Davison refereed the Portugal vs Germany match in Rugby Europe in February.
- Dan Carson was awarded the Energia AIL Referee of the Year.
- Alana Kerr was named Ulster Rugby Referee of the Year.
- Full USRFR teams of match officials were appointed to both the Women's All-Ireland League Final and the All-Ireland League Final in April.

Quality control & Development

The Society is very grateful to Richard Kerr, our IRFU Ulster Branch Referee Development Manager, for his continuing dedication to the Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees. Richard continues to bring his experience to the role, facilitating meetings and training, both on and off field - and is always available to support referees with any queries. Throughout the season, Richard coordinated additional workshops and resources for our NPDG and AIL panels.

Within the USRFR, we operate a robust quality assurance system, assessing all active referees. Competence to officiate is determined solely on evidence-based evaluations.

For the 24-25 season:

- Approximately 278 evaluations on Society members, plus evaluations for National Panel Development Group and AIL.
- 77 Coaching reports. Were conducted for all levels of referees.
- We now have two Ref cam operator, providing a valuable development tool that allows referees and coaches to review both video and audio from matches. A total of 28 ref cams were completed this season.

Special thanks to Graham Cardwell and Clive Bowles for continued support in delivering this resource.

This season also saw the launch of the Society Development Group, led by Mark Hermin - a seasoned rugby official with extensive experience as both a Player, Coach and Referee. Mark was instrumental in developing this pilot group, which has already proven to be a great success in fostering referee development.

A sincere thank you goes to the Selection and Operations Committee. The time and commitment involved in coaching and evaluation should not be underestimated. The Evaluation, Coaching, and Mentoring Team plays a central role in the personal development of individual referees and is vital to our continued success. It is a testament to the Selection Committee that the USRFR successfully provided teams of three officials (Referee and two Assistant Referees/Touch Judges) for all finals played at Kingspan Stadium. Youth finals held elsewhere also featured full USRFR teams of three.

Discipline.

It is with much relief that we report an improvement in both on-field and off-field discipline from the 2023–2024 season to the 2024–2025 season. However, it must be noted that 24 off-field incidents were still recorded across Clubs, Schools, and Youth Rugby - highlighting that further progress is needed. The Society continues to work closely with the Ulster Branch to enhance procedures and policies surrounding disciplinary matters. We are encouraged by the support of the vast majority of Ulster schools and clubs, who are actively working to educate and manage their patrons. The involvement of the Schools Committee in addressing and correcting inappropriate behaviour by players, officials, and spectators is also greatly appreciated.

Reports and Offences

- **Total Reports:** 104 reports of offences received, via the USRFR.
- **Youth and Schools Games Reports:** 23, which is an overall decrease from the 2023-2024 season
- **Double Yellow:** 18, a rise of 38% .
- **Main Reasons for Cards:** Physical and Verbal abuse now more frequent than Dangerous Tackles. Punching and illegal use of the boot were the most cited offences

The Society extends its sincere thanks to the following individuals for their work in maintaining discipline and supporting our referees: Stephen Elliott chair of the on-field disciplinary panel, Stephen Hilditch chair of off-field discipline committee, Stephen Black of the schools committee, Paula Parker who handles our reports at the branch, and Society representatives to the committee, Brian McCargo, Peter Ferguson and Steven Robb.

Resignation of Chris Busby

It would be remiss not to mention the disappointing news of Chris Busby's resignation from the Professional Game. The resignation casts a sobering light on the growing issue of referee abuse both on and off the field.

What should have been a celebrated role - upholding the values, fairness and integrity of rugby, has instead become an emotionally taxing position, marked by personal attacks and undue pressure. On-field and off-field abuse – including verbal dissent from players and disrespectful conduct from coaching staff and spectators does not align with the values and spirit of rugby that we strive to protect.

Not only has Irish rugby and the professional game lost a highly capable and respected official, but this behaviour also risks deterring future referees from taking up the whistle. Without addressing the culture of abuse and restoring respect for match officials, the foundational values of rugby - respect, teamwork, and sportsmanship - are at serious risk.

Charity

The Society was pleased, on the recommendation of our President Mr Ken Spence, to offer support to 'Friends of the Cancer Centre' as our nominated charity for 24/25 season.

Support

It must be recorded that the Society is grateful to those professionals who have supported us during this season. Peter Fitzgibbon as IRFU National Referee Manager, and IRFUs Dudley Phillips who continues to contribute as an Ulster resource.

A significant portion of our progress is due to Colin Stanley and the dedicated efforts of his Operations Committee, as well as the leadership of Roger Cleave as Chair of the Management Committee. It has been an honour and a privilege to work alongside these remarkable individuals, including Chris Russell as our Honorary Treasurer and Paul Morriss as Chair of Activities, on the management team.

The Society officers and management are deeply aware that we volunteer for a sport we love and are passionate about. Despite increasing demands, everyone strives to the best of their abilities to serve our sport, our Branch, and our Union. As we often say, without referees, there is no game, and without our volunteers supporting the Society's aims, we would have no referees. We deeply value and acknowledge all their efforts and contributions to the game of rugby.

I am personally grateful for the dedication and hard work of each volunteer. Your commitment not only keeps the game alive but also inspires all of us to give our best. Thank you for your unwavering support and passion for rugby.

Barry O'Hara
Honorary Secretary
Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees.