

USRFR HISTORY



In the early days of organised rugby football, the teams played without a referee. The two captains agreed the rules of engagement beforehand, and arbitrated on any disputes. Some say that it is from this gentlemen's agreement that the concept of advantage stemmed; no captain would complain when benefitting from the opposition's errors.



The first record of an international fixture being officiated by a referee is Ireland v Scotland in 1875, with, coincidentally, the man in the middle hailing from Belfast. Abram Coomb, a Queen's College graduate, was employed as an engineering works master. Incredibly, he had played for Ireland against England only a few months previously in a ref-less match.

While referees increasingly became a fixture in international and then club rugby, it took a many years - 75 to be precise - for them to organise themselves into a society; some would say that the pace of change t'was ever thus. In the interim period, the Ulster Branch took the lead. For example, the Ulster Branch report 1937/38 notes that over 800 matches were covered by 51 active referees. Indeed, in an era when we are constantly looking for new members, it is worth noting that more than a third of the 40 Branch members in 1950 were themselves referees, and that our first two Presidents, R Wallace Harland and Sam Donaldson, were also past Presidents of the Branch itself.

Rugby Football had gripped the public imagination in the post-war years. By 1950, international matches attracted crowds of over 40,000 to Ravenhill; Instonians hosted Racing Club of Paris before 8,000 spectators; more poignantly, 80 Welsh supporters were tragically killed in a plane crash returning from their Triple Crown win in Belfast.

FIRST SOCIETY MEETINGS

It was in this year that the first meetings of the new Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees took place, with the first steps taken by a small group who invited interested parties to attend a meeting in Thompson's Restaurant, Belfast on Friday 2nd September 1949 to explore establishing a new umbrella organisation. A series of meetings with Branch Officers resulted in the acceptance of rules for the new Society, which was properly "born" on 18th April 1950.

Early topics of discussion included: provision of training; need to encourage school referees; to encourage all Senior clubs to provide at least two referees; to ensure every referee is assessed. The first full season of the Society was 1950/51. Minutes from that year record a meeting of nine referees at the house of the inaugural President, RW Harland, in Ulsterville Avenue, Belfast. This record refers primarily to overdue subscriptions and the annual Golf Society outing to Cloughey; there's nothing new under the sun!

The following season, 1951/52, saw the inception of the Selection Committee, with a group of five committee men meeting monthly at Branch Office to appoint officials. The monthly meeting was also established, with Thursdays deemed a most appropriate evening, a tradition still in place to date. Incidentally, the first complaint regarding a referee arrived to the Honorary Secretary, Mr T Mayne, with Banbridge RFC requesting that a certain gentleman not be appointed to their fixtures in future; it didn't take them long!

The first Annual Dinner was held in Thompson on 26th April 1952, with guests from Ulster Branch and Leinster Association of Referees. Members were charged 12/6, roughly equivalent to £50 today.

More autonomy came in 1954/55, with the Society devolved power to run its own affairs largely, and here begins the current structure and organisation of the Society. This year also saw the introduction of a range of initiatives: programmes for monthly discussions; interchange fixtures, whereby Leinster and Ulster referees gained experience "over the border"; improved notice of fixtures; proper grading of referees; standardised assessment reports.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL CAP

Despite having to deal with a flu epidemic in the winter, the Society proved successful, with fourth division games served for the first time and our first Society International cap awarded to Oswald B Glasgow and, in 1955, Bob Mitchell.

The following years saw the development of a metaphorical conveyor belt of outstanding practitioners invited to join the Inter-pro and International panels. Highlights included the appointment of RC Williams to referee Scotland v Wales and England v France in 1957. By 1963, Ray held the record for appointments to International games. Ronnie Gilliland followed him in 1963, with three fixtures that year and one the following.

What is most notable is the contribution of these notable figures in world rugby to the domestic game; all are recorded as playing leading roles as organisers, committee men and, after giving up the whistle, assessors and law-makers. This pattern has been followed by our most recent Internationalists.

As an aside, the landmark of 1960 can be summarised with two comments - the North West referees had yet to join the Society, and the need for warm plates at the Annual dinner was been recorded in the minutes.

The names recorded in minutes during the 60s and 70s still resonate maybe half a century later: Ronnie Gilliland, Dr John Stewart, John Leslie, Ike Kerr, Alan Sturgeon, Brian Baird, Stim Smyth... all characters in their own right. The top honours kept coming, with International appointments for Alfie Jamison (1972), Ken Clark (1973 & 1976) and Michael Rea (1979, 1981 & 1982).

GOLDEN AGE

With hindsight, maybe the 70s and early 80s was the Golden Age for Ulster refereeing; not only did we “own” some of the top figures in world rugby in refereeing terms, but we continued to service thousands of fixtures with a backdrop of civil unrest, road blocks, high-jacking and bombing. The bravery of many referees, many of whom were themselves servicemen, driving to some of the more rural clubhouses on dark autumnal evenings cannot be underestimated.

Reading the minutes of monthly meetings in that era is fascinating. In 1978 alone, the President of the Society wanted to set up a sub-committee to deal with “Rough Play”, a Ladies’ Night was arranged to be held in Collegians RFC, and the first training course to be held at Clongowes Wood College was held, with Ulster nominating ten names, some of whom may well be familiar: Armstrong, Cole, Cowie, Crothers, Duffin, Hilditch, Irvine, Patton, Stirling, Sturgeon, Templeton, Ward.



From that list, Stephen Hilditch and Brian Stirling both reached international level; Hilditch officiated at an incredible three subsequent World Cups while Stirling remains the only Ulsterman to referee a Tri-Nations match. It has also provided assessors, administrators and law-makers at Ireland and IRB levels – the early 60s repeated.



These years were also marked by the establishment of close ties with the Scottish Borders, Edinburgh and Manchester Societies, all of whom shared officials on interchange, which helped develop good referees and even better tourists! Sadly, these annual events so impressively hosted for many years by Tom Mercer have now gone into abeyance.

ALL-IRELAND LEAGUE & THE PROFESSIONAL ERA

The introduction of the All-Ireland League in 1990 and the subsequent emergence of professional provincial rugby in 1995 ushered in a new era in the USRFR. The increase of numbers on IRFU panels, the increased use of touch judges in senior rugby and European competitions has had mixed effects on the Society. Positively, more members have had the experience of refereeing beyond Ulster and exposure to high level competition beyond our domestic leagues. We can also boast of female referees who will hopefully follow the excellence of Ulster Women's teams and make the jump to the next level. However, that has put a strain on resources; how can the selection committee provide referees to schools and youth teams when up to 20 bodies are removed from the system to service AIL and European Cups?



In terms of high-performance, Simon McDowell has been highest profile in recent years, touch-judging in Six Nations and World Cup, while there has been a string of others who have been knocking at that door – David Wilkinson, Mark Patton, Stuart Gaffikin, Johnny Erskine. The demands of professional rugby have meant that the school teacher, in the mould of Hilditch or Stirling, can reach the top grade, a point perhaps pre-empted by 1970 President, B Brotherston, who had to assure members of the Society that “in making appointments there was no pro-pedagogue bias!”



But that is to miss the point. The USRFR has always been about service, to rugby football and, especially with recent emphasis on fundraising, to the wider community. Almost 70 years on, the same passion for the game, the same camaraderie, and the same grumbles about selection and the same conspiracy theories about sister Associations abound... and who would change it?