



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 2025-2026.

In Memoriam

It is with sadness that the Ulster Society of Rugby Football Referees records the passing of two valued members of the Society: Former President Mr Victor Outram and long-serving member Mr Brian Lyle. Both gave many years of service to rugby in Ulster, and their contribution and friendship will be fondly remembered by all who knew them.

Season Opening and 75th Anniversary

The 2025-2026 season commenced with the Society's Pre-season conference in August 2025 at The La Mon House Hotel. With over 100 attendees, this conference was particularly significant as it also marked the beginning of the Society's 75th Anniversary, celebrating 75 years of contributing to rugby in Ulster. The conference programme centred on Global Law Trial and Law Updates, with the Season Objective "**Raising the Bar**". The conference consisted of sessions on Practical Resilience and ensuring referees, evaluators, coaches and members are prepared for the season ahead. The 75th Anniversary season ended with a highly memorable gala dinner in City Hall with all members receiving a commemorative coin.

Representation and Ulster Branch Engagement

The Society continues to benefit from the involvement of members who represent the USRFR across the Ulster Branch structure and help to keep USRFR aligned with developments in the game. We are grateful to the following members for their ongoing commitment:

- Mark Orr - Branch Committee,
- Roger Cleave - Rugby Committee,
- Teddy Hall - Clubs Committee,
- Jonathan Peak - Schools Committee,
- Michael Cairnduff - Youth Committee,
- Holly Cox - Age Grade Committee,
- Laura Taggart - Women's and Girls Committee.

We also extend our sincere thanks to the Ulster Branch staff for their support: Jill McCullough, Lesley McGaughey, Paula Parker, Graeme Ormiston, Adam Cavan and Chris Webster.

Membership Overview

(Position as of April 2026)

- Active referees registered – 155
(increase from 150 in 2024-2025)
- New recruits – 19 registrations
(15 graduating to full membership)
- Non-Active members – 23
(reduction of 2)
- Honorary Life Members – 7

These figures reflect a stable membership base, but support for continued recruitment and development is required.

Match Appointments and Workload

Up to the end of April 2026, USRFR refereed a total of 2366 fixtures across male, female, youth and schools competitions in both leagues and cup formats.

In total, 3476 appointments were fulfilled by USRFR members across a wide range of roles, including Referee, AR1, AR2, TJ1, TJ2, No. 4, No. 5, Stats Official, Time Official, Coach, Evaluator, and Ref Cam Officials. This extraordinary contribution highlights the dedication, **availability** and **commitment** of our **volunteers** in supporting rugby at all levels across the province.

Recruitment Challenges and Club Engagement

Despite stable numbers the Society continues to face pressure in covering all weekly fixtures. During the season, Youth rugby saw a 17% increase in matches, many of which were covered by USRFR referees.

We are pleased to see the establishment of a working party by the Ulster Branch via the Rugby Committee to support referee recruitment initiatives alongside the Society's ongoing efforts.

The Society remains disappointed that eight Ulster clubs are currently without an active USRFR referee: three in Championship 2, four in Championship 3 and one at Provincial level. Collective support is required to ensure all clubs play their part in supporting the Society.

Performance Pathway

The 2025–2026 season once again saw USRFR members achieving appointments at the highest levels of the game. Highlights include:

- **Peter Martin:**
 - IRFU High Performance Referee.
 - Appointed as Referee for URC and EPCR competitions.
 - Member of the World Sevens referee panel, refereeing the Finals of the Vancouver and New York rounds in March 2026
- **Keane Davison:**
 - IRFU High Performance Development referee.
 - Made his URC debut in January 2026 when he replaced the injured Andrew Brace in the Leinster v Connacht fixture
 - Appointed as Referee for the Rugby Europe Championship semi-final Portugal v Spain in March 2026
- **Ross Whitfield:**
 - Appointed as Referee to the Rugby Europe U20 & U18 Championships in Poland in November 2025
 - Selected as **Ulster Rugby Referee of the Year 2025-26**
- **Alana Kerr**
 - Appointed as Referee to the Dubai Sevens November '25
 - Refereed the Energia WAIL semi-final UL Bohemians v Old Belvedere in April 2026
 - Selected to referee at a Rugby Europe Women's Sevens event in Moldova in June 2026

In addition, Colin Stanley and Mark Patton continue to serve as TMO and FPRO's in URC, EPCR and Rugby Europe competitions, while Peter Ferguson and Tim Lowry represented the USRFR and the IRFU as Citing Commissioners across World Rugby, URC, EPCR and Rugby Europe competitions.

Numerous other members have achieved significant domestic and professional appointments throughout the season and should be highly commended.

Recruitment, Development and Referee Support

Recruitment and development remain central to ensuring long-term sustainability. The 25–26 season saw Alastair Rowan take on the role of Referee Trainee Coordinator. Working closely with Richard Kerr, IRFU Ulster Branch Referee Development Manager, 15 new referees were successfully inducted into the Society.

It is highly recognised and we thank Richard for his support and commitment given to the Society. Throughout the season Richard provided valuable guidance through meetings, training sessions, workshops and one-to-one support, aligning the Society with the IRFU's Referee Department's strategic objectives.

Evaluation, Coaching and Quality Assurance

USRFR operates a comprehensive quality assurance system, with referee progression determined via evidence-based evaluations.

For the 2025 – 2026 season:

- Approximately 231 evaluations were completed across all grades within the Society, including All Ireland League Referees
- 116 coaching and mentor reports were submitted
(an increase of 32% on the previous season)

In December 2025, thanks to Ulster Rugby, all evaluators and coaches were issued with radio communication equipment, which enables real-time listening to the referee during fixtures. This supports the referee by providing a better understanding of referee decisions and match management. The use of radios can only enhance the quality, accuracy, consistency of evaluation reports by providing members with clearer, more constructive feedback, supporting their development.

The Society's Ref Cam programme continued in 2025-2026, with two trained operators. A total of 18 ref cam recordings were completed which included post-match editing and analysis. While this was a slight decrease on numbers from 2024-2025, the system remains an invaluable development tool which we will continue to use moving forward.

Special thanks to Graham Cardwell and Clive Bowles for their continued support and commitment to filming and post-match video editing.

Operations and Appointments

The Selection and Operations Committees continue to carry out one of the most demanding roles within the Society. Supported by a dedicated team of Duty Selectors, and working closely with Jill McCullough, Adam Cavan and Graeme Ormiston from the Ulster Branch, fixtures are appointed throughout the week, including evenings and weekends, to maximise referee coverage.

This season also saw the introduction of an enhanced messaging initiative, proposed by the Admin Committee, which allows active USRFR members to be notified quickly when fixtures become available at short notice. This has been a highly effective and successful method of ensuring as many games are covered as possible and we plan to continue its use going forward.

Working alongside the Evaluation, Coaching and Mentoring teams, these committees play a key role in ensuring referees across the Society are supported and developed in line with their abilities and aspirations.

Discipline

The 2025-2026 season has once again seen an overall decrease in the number of reports for both on-field and off-field discipline.

Reports and Offences

- **Total Reports:** 88 reports of offences were reported, via the USRFR. An overall decrease of 15%.
- **Youth and Schools Games Reports:** It is disappointing to note 33 red card reports related to Youth and Schools rugby, a 43% increase in Youth Red Cards on the 2024-2025 season. We encourage all coaches to emphasise the importance of rugby values and mutual respect in all aspects of the game, both on and off-field.
- **Double Yellow:** 5, a noteworthy decrease of 72%.

- **Main Reasons for Cards:** Physical and Verbal abuse provides the most common offence for Youth and Schools, with Dangerous Tackles the most cited offence for Adult rugby.

We would like to thank all those involved in maintaining disciplinary standards and supporting the USRFR throughout the season. Thanks to Stephen Elliott (Chair of the on-Field Disciplinary Panel), Simon McDowell (Chair of the Off-Field Discipline Committee), Richard Clingan (Chair of the Schools Committee), and Paula Parker for her work handling branch reports. Special thanks also to Chris Logan, who manages and quality-assures all referee reports, liaising with officials as required before forwarding submissions to the Branch via Paula Parker. Thanks also to our Society representatives on the committee — Brian McCargo, Peter Ferguson and Steven Robb (all USRFR) — for their continued support.

Charity

The Society was pleased, on the recommendation of our President Mr John King, to offer support to 'The Air Ambulance' as our nominated charity for 2025-2026 season. Over £8,400 has been raised so far via various events.

Support

During the season, the Society has been thankful for the advice and support received from within the IRFU referee structure. This engagement continues to contribute to the broader environment in which referees in Ulster operate and develop.

Much of the progress made this season would not have been possible without the work of Colin Stanley and the Operations Committee, whose behind-the-scenes efforts ensure matches are covered and referees are supported week in, week out. We are also grateful to Roger Cleave for his leadership as Chair of the Management Committee, along with Chris Russell, Honorary Treasurer, and Alan O'Neill, Chair of Activities, who all continue to give significant time and commitment to the running of the Society.

Everyone involved in the Society does so on a voluntary basis, motivated by a genuine love of the game. As fixtures increase and demands on referees grow, our members continue to step up, giving their time, experience, and energy to support rugby across the province.

It's often said that without referees there is no game — and just as importantly, without the volunteers who support and develop referees, there would be no officiating structure at all. The Society truly values the collective efforts of everyone who plays a part in supporting refereeing in Ulster.

On a personal note, I would like to thank all volunteers for the commitment shown throughout the season. Your dedication keeps the game going and sets a brilliant example for others within the Society.

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