

## **REFEREE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING FOR YOUTH AND HIGH SCHOOL RUGBY**

**The tremendous growth of Youth and High School rugby in the USA has made the recruitment and training of referees in sufficient numbers one of the most critical issues in our game today.**

This is not a concern unique to our game, but it is one that has the potential to negatively impact all levels. As such, it is essential that **the entire rugby community** - USA Rugby, the local youth organizations, local referee organizations, coaches, parents, and athletes – all work together to face this challenge.

When it comes to recruiting referees there is no magic elixir. Conversely, this paper and our joint effort at the Youth Conference will develop a stew of **diverse strategies**, from which any combination of components may be used to cater to specific local needs and strengths. It is hoped that this process will contribute significantly to an ongoing, nationwide recruiting and retention campaign. Sharing this type of information nationally will help us to move forward together and avoid having to “reinvent the wheel.”

Over the years we have learned that innovations come from every part of the country, not just established areas of the game. This paper will be just the first step a living document and is not set in stone. Over time it will be as good as the input we receive, so please honor the game by sharing your ideas with us to improve this document and make it more relevant for everyone.

**Recruiting** sports officials is a challenge that faces amateur athletics nationwide. The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) recently conducted research among 30 different amateur sports organizations and found that 90% of the organizations were experiencing officials' shortages. Recruiting Rugby officials is only a piece of the equation: **retaining** the officials that you identify and train is critical for long-term success.

### **Some Points to Consider**

- Develop an overall strategy first, put some thought into the process of how to deliver the strategy and stay focused. Start with a plan. What do you want to accomplish? What is your goal? What are your resources? How will you retain the officials that you recruit?
- Select strategies and adapt the material generated from those strategies to fit each level of your plan.
- Establish and communicate a reliable way for people to contact you, whether an email address, voicemail box, website, P.O. box or home address, or all of the above.
- Get the message out to the public. Once the circumstances are understood, people will be more likely acknowledge the need for more officials and show genuine interest in officiating.
- Keep in mind: “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

- Today's recruits are technologically savvy, digitally enlightened, and visually literate individuals. Take advantage of using an array of methods for communicating with them.
- Officiating and coaching groups should collaborate in drawing people to the sport of Rugby. There is a shortage of both groups and combined resources and efforts can go a long way. Don't be afraid to combine roles.
- Fundraising may also be a part of your recruiting and retention efforts, in order to support local training programs or to sponsor "scholarships" for officials to travel to training clinics
- Results will not always come quickly. Stay the course and continue to modify and monitor the progress of the strategy before changing your campaign.
- All plans must include training and support elements.

### **Recruiting Referees:**

#### Strategy #1: Partnership with Local Referee Organization (LRO)

As already mentioned, there is a shortage of referees and match officials throughout the country. LRO's have struggled with this reality since the dawn of time. These societies and associations have grown in direct response to the regional or local need to promote and support the sport. No other group is more acutely aware of the shortage of officials.

Of course, recognizing the problem and having the answers do not always go hand in hand. However, in the local referee organization you have a strong and dedicated ally to assist you in recruiting and retaining your officials. There are many reasons why a partnership with your LRO is beneficial:

- LRO's are recognized by the rugby community as the primary point of contact for becoming a referee.
- LRO's, through the Referee and Laws Committee, have a constant and direct line of communication with USA Rugby. As a result, most LRO's have trained and experienced educators, referee coaches, and performance reviewers who combine to create a support and development system, essential to retention and improvement.
- LRO's have established assignment and communication systems that facilitate getting the right referee to the appropriate game. Administration of these aspects of the game is an additional layer that youth and high school administrators can avoid with a working partnership.
- Many members of LRO's are also associated with High School and Youth organizations.

Where successful partnerships already exist, youth and referee administrations work together to coordinate venues and schedules, optimize availability of resources, plan training activities, and share valuable experiences.

#### Strategy #2: Recruit directly from local clubs, colleges and parents.

Today, many youth and high school players enter the game because one or both parents, or an uncle, or friend of the family played. These are all potential officials. As a matter of fact and survival, many of these already have been volunteered into refereeing.

Additionally, College students are great candidates for officiating. Although transportation may be an issue, many college students have their afternoons free and are interested in flexible part-time work.

Most colleges and universities in this country have a recreational or intramural sports program. This is an opportunity for students to participate in men's and women's athletics on a non-varsity level. All of these intramural sports need qualified officials, and interested students can earn some extra money by officiating intramural contests. On campuses where these programs are particularly competitive, instruction is often given to intramural officials on the rules of the games that they officiate. Students who have experienced the "baptism of fire" in intramural sports, and who persevere in officiating, are certainly prominent candidates for rugby training and officiating - especially if they can get back-to-back assignments on the Saturday and Sunday afternoons, when intramural events are not normally scheduled at colleges and universities. You may find a number of intramural officials who would be interested in officiating at a higher level and/or for better pay outside of campus. (See strategy #4)

The National Intramural & Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) has a strong presence on many large college campuses—especially those schools that offer degrees in Sports or Parks and Recreation Management. On large campuses (where the Director of Intramural Sports and the Intramural Staff are normally NIRSA members) there is often more demand for intramural officials than there are students willing to undertake these responsibilities. The Intramural Director at a local university may be reluctant to support your request(s) to identify officials to work youth, middle school, or sub-varsity rugby games if they do not have sufficient resources to cover their own intramural leagues. However, it never hurts to ask, and you can also consider approaching schools with smaller intramural sports programs, which may have more students would be interested in outside officiating opportunities.

Particularly consider targeting universities with club rugby teams, whose participants would have an interest in rugby as a sport to officiate. They will serve as a great resource for recruiting their peers on campus, including those currently officiating intramural programs.

Once you have the interest, consider hold a training clinic near by or even on campus targeted at students/intramural officials. USA Rugby or your LRO can assist in putting this together.

### Strategy #3: Recruit from other Sports.

The following strategy was developed by USA Lacrosse.

The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) a.k.a. the "Federation" is your best resource to determine which high school officiating groups are operating in your state. The active members of the NFHS are the 50 state high school athletic/activity bodies, plus the District of Columbia. There also are affiliate athletic/activity members, including groups in the U.S. territories, Canada and other neighboring countries. You can find web sites for all 50 of the NFHS state organizations at [www.nfhs.org/members.htm](http://www.nfhs.org/members.htm).

The Federation requires that all 50 state high school associations conduct mandatory rules interpretation meetings for the coaches and officials in each of their separate high school sports. Thus, on most of the 50 web sites you will find the dates, times, and locations of these mandatory rules meetings—listed by each separate sport—along with the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the key personnel for each officials' organization, in the state you are interested in. Given this information, not only can you find the time, date and location for the mandatory Alabama High School Federation wrestling rules interpretation meetings in each part of the state

[www.AHSAA.com/coaches/rulesclinicsschedule.asp](http://www.AHSAA.com/coaches/rulesclinicsschedule.asp), but you can also find information on every officials' organization in the State of Alabama. At the very least, you will be able to e-mail the appropriate individual at the State Federation Association and request this information.

Find the organization that supports the local high school sports officials and forge a relationship with the leaders. This relationship will hopefully lead you to a large number of sports officials who are interested in a second sport. For example, the Texas Association of Sports Officials has an active roster of 13,000 officials across the state of Texas. By posting an announcement in their quarterly, direct mail campaign, this organization should yield a number of qualified recruits.

Another approach is to arrange for a brief presentation at the beginning of one of the pre-season training sessions that many states require for certification in a particular sport. The USA Rugby's Youth Promotional can serve as a "commercial" for rugby officiating. Be aware that the calendar year for officials' training in other sports may vary dramatically from your training timetable: basketball often begins its pre-season training in September and October and soccer begins in July and August. Rugby officials' training takes place at different times around the country, from the fall through the spring. Wherever you are located, though, making a year-round commitment to recruiting officials is sure to pay off! Finally, if any of your local officials work more than one sport and are Federation members, you have wonderful contacts for other officials' associations. Use these connections to your advantage. A final point to keep in mind is that over 10,000,000 kids played varsity sports last year. The average high school has 22 athletic teams and each of those sports requires officials: go find them!

#### Strategy #4: Compensation

One of the traditional elements of rugby officiating is the spirit of amateurism that has long underpinned our game. However, it is questionable whether this noble and creditable attitude can be sustainable when the need and competition for match officials is as high as it is today. It is very improbable that rugby will be able to draw greater numbers into its ranks, when the model across the country for recreational sports officiating includes clear, established fee structures.

There are already a number of LRO's who have adopted match fee structures (Eastern Rockies, East Penn, MidSouth) which are recognized as directly payable to the referee. Other LRO's collect match fees as an organization, a portion of which may go to the referee (Northern California).

This is a sensitive issue and needs to be explored, both within high school and youth organizations, and in partnership with the LRO's.

Strategy #5: Develop Youth-Specific Referee Pool.

This has been done in a number of ways across the country.

In many locales, youth and referee organizations have worked well together to identify appropriate referees, who are interested officiating age grade rugby. In some cases these referees are assigned as part of the regular local procedures (Eastern Rockies), and in others coordinating identified referees is done by the youth organization or club (Northern California). Either way requires cooperation and planning between the groups to mitigate competing for this shared resource.

Oregon Youth Rugby, confronted with the referee shortage, has developed a more independent model, and, incorporating some of the strategies discussed in this paper, has created its own pool of referees, for whom they take responsibility of training, certifying, outfitting and compensating. Included in their program is a league point incentive for recruitment of referees. While this does provide a greater degree of control, there is a level of administration involved that may not work for all.

Strategy #6: Sharing

And this is what the Youth Conference is all about. As stated elsewhere the goals of the conference are to:

- 1. Identify areas with the greatest impact on the development of youth & high school rugby*
- 2. Share tools that help develop the game*
- 3. Create solutions & concrete steps for the challenges facing youth & high school rugby*

I look forward to meeting you, and exploring the future of our game through the lens of youth and high school competition.