



## **REGULATION H: 3.15**

### **Match Official Abuse Policy and Guidelines**

#### **Summary**

This Policy and Guidelines provide information about:

- **Regulation H – 3.15 Match Official Abuse Policy and Guidelines**

that the Joint Zone Competitions will operate under.

The Regulations, Procedures and Policies in conjunction with the Constitution and By-Laws of the Football Zone shall, with the approval of NSW Football and duly Registered with FA, apply from the date of approval and shall take precedence over any previous Regulations of the Football Zone.

Issued by the Joint Board of Directors of Macquarie Football, Newcastle Football, and Hunter Valley Football.

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# Match Official Abuse Policy and Guidelines

## 1. Introduction

Refereeing must remain attractive and enjoyable for all Match Officials.

The Match Official Abuse Policy and Guidelines document is provided to the membership of the three Zones (Hunter Football, Macquarie Football and Newcastle Football) of the Combined Competitions in order to define and reduce Referee Abuse.

The Zones recognizes that by addressing Referee Abuse through the Match Official Abuse – Zero Tolerance Initiative it will assist with referee development, recruitment, and retention at the community football level.

The growth of Football in the Hunter, Macquarie, and Newcastle zones is constrained by the number of Referees available and interested in performing this role, so as it follows, it is imperative that the three Zones (Hunter Football, Macquarie Football and Newcastle Football) address a barrier or hardship involved in the growth of the referee community and each individual referee.

As the role of a referee is one that takes years of practice, application, study, and commitment, the treatment of Referees by the players, coaches, managers, spectators, club officials and zone administrators should be supportive of one another that serve the principles of the game and in a respectful manner.

**“Match Official”** means the Centre Referee, any Assistant Referee (AR), any 4<sup>th</sup> Official appointed by the Match Official Appointment Officer (MOAO), Club Referee and/or any Duty Officer, charged with policing abuse of the referees.

## 2. POLICY:

### 2.1 Referee Abuse - Application:

For the purpose of this policy, abuse is any conduct that falls under the International Football Association Board (IFAB) Laws of the Game: Law 12, governing verbal, and physical abuse, acts contrary to good sportsmanship, and respecting the authority of the Match Official.

The scope of this policy expressly extends this standard beyond participating players to include club officials, coaches, managers, administrators, player interchange, medical personnel, or other persons allowed inside the playing enclosure or technical zones.

### 2.2 Definition:

Referee Abuse includes, but is not limited to:

- Any intentional, but nonconsensual, contact with any Match Official.
- Verbal and nonverbal (including social media) communication which contains foul or abusive language, or which implies or directly threatens physical harm or injury of any sort to any Match Official.
- Any threat of damage to or damage to a Match Official’s personal property.
- Repeated instance of on-field player dissent as defined in the IFAB Laws of the Game: Rule12.

- Repeated questioning of calls during ongoing match play, whether to the Centre Referee (CR) or to an Assistant Referee (AR) or to a 4<sup>th</sup> Official, by those permitted to be in the playing enclosure (reserve/interchange players, coaches, managers, trainers, etc).

No individuals may raise questions with Referee calls this includes head coaches and captains.

- Sexual or violent gestures and/or kicking or throwing objects towards a Match Official in response to the Match Officials' call, non-call, or other action in officiating the match.

### **2.3 Referee abuse is not limited to on-field behaviour:**

- Abuse may happen at any time that the Match Official is acting in their duties and may include arriving at and leaving the Match location.
- Abuse may happen through questioning/impugning honesty/integrity of Match Officials away from field.
- Abuse may also happen at any time questioning/impugning honesty/integrity of Match Officials through the use of social media platforms.

### **2.4 Referee Protocol in handling Referee Abuse**

As outlined in IFAB Laws of the Game: Rule 12 – Fouls and Misconduct, upon recognizing Referee Abuse, the Match Official may penalize a player and/or issue a warning, caution, or send-off to the player.

For Referee Abuse involving coaches, managers, replacement (reserve/interchange) players, or those (spectators) who are along the sidelines who are observed or perceived to commit abuse against Match Officials, the following protocols should be followed:

- i. The Match Official will issue a warning to any player, coach, manager, administrator, medical and support personnel, or other Team Official who is identified to have carried out Referee Abuse.
- ii. The Match Official will call time out and speak with the captain, the Head Coach, or the Duty Officer, requesting that the offending individual(s) (coaches, managers, replacement (reserve/interchange) players, or those (spectators) who are along the sidelines who are observed or perceived to commit abuse against Match Officials be addressed, to change behaviour immediately, or they may be ejected from the playing enclosure.
- iii. After being warned, as provided in this rule, any failure of any player, coach, manager, administrator, medical and support personnel, or other Team Official to immediately cease and desist will receive a caution - YELLOW card or send-off - RED card.  

If a send-off (RED card) is issued, the individual should leave the playing enclosure or technical zone on the request of any Match Official, with assistance of a Duty Officer.
- iv. Upon a subsequent offense, the Match Official will call time-out and request that the Duty Officer remove the offending individual(s) from the playing enclosure.
- v. And in the event of a third offense from others, or if the offending individual(s) refuses to leave, the Match Official will abandon the match.
- vi. Any match reporting required by the Referee Association/Branch should require Match Officials to report the abuse incident (s) in a manner that alerts Referee Association/Branch leadership (President, Secretary) within 24 hours.

## 2.5 Referee Abuse Reporting

- i. All Referee Abuse incidents are required to be reported to the Zone management by the Match Official.
- ii. Match Officials should still provide documentation – an Incident Report of any level of abuse in a timely manner, to the Referee Association/Branch leadership (President, Secretary) and Zone management, preferably within no more than 48 hours following the event.
- iii. Offenders who commit Referee Abuse will be dealt with through the Joint Football Zone Associations Competition Rules and Regulations.
- iv. Offenders (individuals, Teams, Clubs, etc.) who commit continual or serious Referee Abuse must be cited to appear before a Disciplinary Committee using the formal process as outlined by the Rules and Regulations: Regulation G.
- v. Additionally, Match Officials might choose to file a report of the incident with local police.

If a Referee has concerns, that Abuse is not appropriately handled, they can invoke a process through the Member Protection Information Officer (MPIO).

## 3. GUIDELINES:

The Zone and Referee Association/Branch should educate and promote a zero-tolerance policy for Match Official (Referee) abuse and are encouraged to address situations of referee abuse through the Joint Football Zones Match Official – Zero Tolerance Initiative. There are various forms of sanctions that can be imposed.

The following sanctions are available for any Zone or Association/Branch to employ:

- Increased Player, Spectators, Club and Team Official sanctions.
- Fines - Additional fines can be imposed.
- Restricted Allocations - Not providing referees.
- Zone Probations – A Clubs or Teams standing within a Zone may be modified, suspended, or withdrawn.
- Teams may have Zone Competition points removed from them.
- Additional referee allocations at the club's expense (4<sup>th</sup> Official) or Referee Coach fees – Match Official Appointment Officer agrees to allocations, however, will impose the fees and expenses associated with providing 4<sup>th</sup> Official or Coaching observations.
- Adherence to Technical Zones for all matches.
- Zone Competitions organizers Forfeits – Zone Match Organizers may also impose forfeits of matches where abuse is reported.
- Awareness that Referees have the option to file a police report in the event of any physical or verbal abuse.
- As in the case of reporting of Yellow/Red Cards, Abuse Incident reports are needed to be supplied to Zones, Referee Associations/Branches within 48 hours of the offence.

## APPENDIX 1:



### SPECTATOR CODE OF BEHAVIOUR

Spectators attending a Match or otherwise involved in any activity staged or sanctioned by FA or an affiliate Member Federation, Zone Associations or Club must:

1. Respect the decisions of Match Officials and teach children to do the same.
2. Never ridicule or scold a child for making a mistake.
3. Respect the rights, dignity and worth of every person regardless of their age, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, ability, race, colour, religion, language, politics, national or ethnic origin.
4. Never use violence in any form towards another person including fellow spectators, Players or Match/Team Officials (including Coaches).
5. Not engage in acts of discrimination, harassment or abuse towards any person, including:
  - a. the use of obscene or offensive language and/or actions.
  - b. the incitement of hatred or violence.
6. Comply with all Terms of Admission including provisions relating to security screening, intoxication, and items that are prohibited by law or restricted by policy from being brought into the Venue.
7. Not display, or attempt to display, within the Venue any offensive or inappropriate banners (whether in English or a foreign language) or any other sign, flag, emblem or insignia which may vilify a person on the basis of their age, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, ability, race, colour, religion, language, politics, national or ethnic origin or which may offend or incite hatred or violence, as determined by the relevant Competition Administrator.
8. Never throw missiles, projectiles or objects of any description at Players, Match Officials or fellow spectators.
9. Not obscure the view of fellow spectators.
10. Not enter or attempt to enter the field of play or playing arena without lawful authority.
11. Refrain from any disorderly conduct or conduct that may injure the reputation and goodwill of FA and the code of Football generally.

Any person who does not comply with this Spectator Code of Behaviour or who otherwise causes a disturbance may be evicted from the Venue and may be banned from attending future Matches.

## APPENDIX 2:

# JOINT FOOTBALL ZONES COMPETITIONS

## - ZERO TOLERANCE -

More than 45 per cent of the Joint Zone competitions youth match officials stopped refereeing over the past 12 months for a variety of reasons. But at least 4 of those quit mid-season specifically because of the abuse they received while refereeing. Our numbers of active Referees in the three Zones are diminishing due to several factors, however the increase in abuse is not helping retain them. This in turn is putting more stress on our Match Officials as well as Match Officials Appointments Officer, Football Zones Management and coverage of the over 350 weekly games. This situation is having a genuine impact on the sustainability of the game as we know and love it.

To quote Northern NSW Football – Zero Tolerance Initiative “Enough is enough”.

To align our Joint Football Zones Community Competitions with NSW Football Match Official Zero Tolerance Initiative we are fully committed to changing the culture and behaviour towards refereeing across all the Joint Football Zones competitions. This will mean a concerted and consistent determined approach to the changing of behaviours, attitudes and actions of players, Team/Club Officials and spectators.

In 2025, through the **Match Official Abuse Support Policy and Guidelines - Zero Tolerance Initiative**, the Joint Football Zones (Hunter Valley, Macquarie and Newcastle) will introduce Community Football based measures targeted at eradicating abuse and creating a safer, supportive and welcoming environment for match officials in our competitions under the umbrella of “Duty of Care” and “Work, Health and Safety”.

This initiative will consist of a three-pronged strategy to ensure the success of the implementation of Zero Tolerance:

1. An education campaign that communicates a clear message to everyone (Club Officials, Team Officials, players and spectators) involved in any aspect of the game across our three Football Zones of Hunter Valley, Macquarie and Newcastle.
2. Tangible support for all match officials in our three Football Zones.
3. Tougher sanctions imposed - more often and widely communicated to our football community.

## Clear and Consistent Messaging for Everyone involved in the Game

A clear and consistent message of Zero Tolerance will be communicated throughout our Joint Football Zones competitions to ensure everyone who is participating in, assisting or attending, our matches are aware of the behavioural expectations and consequences for match official abuse.

### 1. Zero Tolerance banners at every ground

All Joint Football Zone clubs will be provided with and required to display at each competition match the Joint Football Zone five-metre banner which will carry Zero Tolerance messaging.

## **2. Mandatory meeting of club leaders**

All Joint Football Zone club will be required to send at least five (5) Club and Team Officials/Representatives to attend a meeting with the Joint Football Zone Zero Tolerance Initiative team relating to new on/off field measures to combat match official abuse. This information will also be made available as a PowerPoint presentation for all Clubs as well as available on the three Football Zones websites.

## **3. Youth match official armbands**

All match officials under the age of 18 will continue to wear a bright orange armband to remind players, club/team officials and spectators that they are a minor (under 18) and, as such, are protected by Football Australia's Safeguarding Policy under the Member Protection Framework, the Joint Football Zones Policies, Rules and Regulations as well as Child Protection Legislation.

## **4. Green shirt reminders**

All Joint Football Zone clubs will be communicated through briefings and sent an email to remind them of the purpose of the green shirt program, with further communication sent to all registered players, coaches and Team Officials in our Joint Football Zone competitions.

## **5. Social media campaign**

A vigorous social media campaign will be utilised to reinforce the message of Zero Tolerance towards abuse of our match officials across the Joint Football Zones.

## **6. Certificate of Commitment**

Each member club of our Joint Football Zones Competition will sign and be presented with a Certificate of Commitment to the Match Official Abuse -Tolerance Initiative ensuring that all Club Members – Team Officials, Players and Spectators are committed to showing respect and demonstrate appropriate positive behaviour towards any Match Official.

## **7. Tangible Support for Match Officials**

The Joint Football Zones will provide significantly more support when and where match officials need it, including utilising NSW Football Referees Department to provide practical directives on how to deal with specific issues, especially those relating to Match Official abuse, appointing a Fourth Official and increasing the possible presence of well-being support on weekends.

### **A. Specific directives on dealing with abuse**

The Joint Football Zones will provide specific directives to all competitions match officials from Zone Football League through to the Joint Football Zones Adult and Youth Divisions/Grades on what constitutes match official abuse.

Match officials will be educated on what constitutes abuse and directed to implement consistent sanctions across all Joint Football Zones competitions.

These standards will be widely communicated to players, coaches, club/team officials before any matches are played in 2025.

### **B. Increased appointment of Fourth Official where necessary**

This extra Match Official will ensure that matchday standards are being upheld, support appointed Match Officials and liaise with club duty officers and provide an independent view on any potential incidents. If a Fourth Official has to be appointed, it will increase the cost of

Match Official appointments to the individual club for the specific match(es) that they are required to be appointed.

### **C. Mandated Duty Officer - Referee Support**

All clubs will be required to provide a designated Duty Officer - Referee Support for all Joint Football Zone competition matches; this will not be on top of any Duty Officer requirements.

The Referee Support Duty Officer will be clearly marked in a specific vest, supplied by the Joint Football Zones, and must remain inside the fence for the duration of the match, and escort the match officials to and from the pitch.

### **D. Referee Wellbeing and Support Officer**

In the future a new position of Joint Football Zones Referee Wellbeing and Support Officer may be created to provide immediate and ongoing support to match officials. This role will specifically work on weekends and, may also assisting with weekend appointments issues, will be there to support referees and be a presence at matches. They will also follow up with all referees involved in match official abuse incidents to provide further welfare support.

### **E. Explore reporting matchday experience**

Referees will have an easily accessible online form to report their experiences from match day. While major incidents are generally reported, this form will encourage referees to report more often on good, bad and other experiences. Teams, venues or people will be able to be identified allowing Joint Football Zones to manage issues much sooner.

### **F. Match Official Feedback reporting**

Team Officials (Coach/Manager), Captains and Club Officials will have an easily accessible online form to report their feedback about Match Officials. This form will need to be completed and submitted before an Official Complaint can be lodged with the Joint Football Zones Administration allowing any potential issues to be dealt with sooner and to allocation possible support to Match Officials to meet specific desired outcomes.

### **G. Tougher Sanctions**

Zero Tolerance means exactly that. To meet the Joint Football Zones commitment to Zero Tolerance, tougher sanctions will be implemented, which will be widely communicated to all parties, will initially be a key deterrent but will serve to make an example of those who continue to engage in match official abuse in 2025 and beyond.

#### **➤ Points deductions for match official abuse**

- Any first instance of match official abuse within a team will see that team given a three-point deduction which will be suspended until the end of the calendar year.
- Any second offence of match official abuse in that same team will see a three-point deduction for that offence, plus the enacting of the suspended three-point deduction from the first offence, for a total of six points for a second offence.
- Any third offence within the team will incur a further three-point deduction and the club will be required to attend a disciplinary hearing regarding further sanctions.

➤ **Significantly increased Club, Team Officials, and Players sanctions**

- The minimum sanction for any players or team officials for offensive language or gestures against a match official will be increased from four matches (mandatory automatic + three) to six matches (mandatory automatic + five).
- The minimum sanction for any players or team officials for repeated use of offensive language or gestures (actions) against a match official will be increased from five matches (mandatory automatic + four) to eight matches (mandatory automatic + seven).
- All other prescribed match official abuse sanctions will also be increased beyond 2024 levels.
- There has been specific and increased financial penalties for match official abuse incidents.

➤ **Minimum time suspensions for match official abuse against minors**

Any non-playing person aged 18 or over found guilty of match official abuse towards a minor (under 18) will be suspended from all football for a minimum period of 12 months.

This suspension will prevent any adult guilty of match official abuse towards a minor attending as a player, coach or spectator.

➤ **Reduced tolerance for coach and team officials behaviour**

Yellow cards shown to coaches or Team Officials are for incidents in which they are in full control, unlike players in match situations. As such the accumulation of yellow cards for coaches and Team Officials that will lead to a one-match suspension will be two.

➤ **Minimum mandatory suspensions for spectators in relation to match official abuse**

Any spectator found guilty of match official abuse will be banned from attending any football match under the Joint Football Zones jurisdiction for a minimum of 30 days.

➤ **Match officials advised of disciplinary outcomes**

All match officials will be formally advised of outcomes and sanctions issued in relation to match official abuse.

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