

HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES.. ... TO BE A BOWLS REFEREE?

Before you click away, take a few minutes to read the following feature and dispel the notion that those who can, bowl; those who can't, referee.

Love them or hate them, the Referee is an integral part of our sport – and rightly so. I can think of no competitive sport that does not have a referee, umpire or official whose duty it is to see fair play.

Self adjudication by players is fraught with problems, whereas an unbiased official will make a decision according to the rules of the game. These may be controversial, yes, but referees are human too and the top ones have played the game at the highest level and understand what it feels like to be under match pressure.

Researching into the role of a sports referee was quite illuminating and one particular source came up with a system he called 'the High C's' – the six characteristics of an effective referee, and here they are.

1. Competence.

This is the foundation from which the other characteristics are built. One must have a thorough understanding of the current laws of the game – and they **do** change. Several of the top referees I spoke to all say they re read the rules before each game at which they officiate. The laws and their interpretation become second nature, but you are constantly learning. However, it isn't just about having a better knowledge of the rules than the players, there are other considerations.

2. Compassion.

Effective referees show their human side when defusing a tense situation and they feel empathy with players. One needs to show respect and flexibility when dealing with players, officials and spectators. A referee who gets on with everyone, gains the respect of everyone.

3. Confidence.

You know the rules and you have passed the exam. How do you carry yourself on the green? What does your body language convey? You need to look happy to be there, approachable, alert and ready for anything.

4. Communication.

Effective referees consistently give clear signals and information to players and assistants throughout the match. No one wants misunderstanding, delay or ill-feeling between players, team members or other officials. Clear decisions are important whatever the pressure, so 'common sense' is another quality highlighted by several referees I spoke to.

5. Consistency.

The more experience one has as a referee the more comfortable one becomes with handling the challenges arising from incidents and misconduct from players and spectators. Some

matches largely manage themselves; others need more direction and intervention. Treat all players equally, dealing with similar incidents in the same way.

6. **Courage.**

At the end of the day, there is only **one** official on the green – **the Referee**. There are times when only they can make a decision that could affect the outcome of a match. It is not possible to be popular with everyone. Be fair but have the heart of a lion if you know you are right. Everyone will think better of you that way.

You need to be consistently on the move, with fitness another paramount quality mentioned by those I spoke to. You could call it a great calorie burner. It is not easy with four or five games to watch at any one time, but the referee who is not '**there**' when something happens is never forgiven. The more experience you have the more you can anticipate incidents and be ready to make a decision. The referee is constantly bombarded with misinformation from coaches, team members and others trying to make their point and influence the outcome of the game. Your decision will cause a reaction from all sides. Keep your composure. Ask those involved – the players – what happened and make your decision based on the other five 'C's'. Above all stick to your guns.

Those referees contacted felt they had something positive to give back to the sport and they all share a willingness to see the game continue, develop and improve. Crown Green bowls has changed a great deal over the last thirty years and has a more professional look. The implementation of a dress code for all matches and the improved status of the Referee indicates the sport is being taken seriously.

Without doubt our biggest challenge is to encourage and recruit younger referees, those in their twenties, thirties and forties. Having a thorough grounding in the laws of the game that being a referee gives you, can be a huge asset to your own confidence and performance. It gives you a new aspect on the sport you love. Personal communication and group management skills can be learned, developed and practiced in a favourite environment.

A major misconception among younger players is that being a referee one might lose the respect of ones friends and team mates and is something to think about only when you no longer play at the top. One of the youngest, qualified referees doesn't agree. He has found the confidence in his own game is much stronger, and his peers respect him for his greater knowledge and often seek his advice about the rules and their interpretation. Younger players should seriously consider adding referee skills and qualifications to their contact with bowls, especially if they have played at county level. It doesn't spell the end of a bowling career, if anything, it deepens ones involvement. It's just a question of balance.

A few referees mentioned the dress code required for their role. For younger 'wanna be' referees it might be worth looking at a more relaxed but smart uniform; one that commands attention, yet more appealing to the fashion conscious individual.

Great. You got this far.

So have you decided to hang up the long tapes or are you itching to take that exam, get on the green and get involved in action packed, and fair play?

There is no denying that being a referee is no 'walk in the park', but the value and importance, responsibilities and respect due to this role cannot be over emphasised. Referees give any sport integrity and says 'we mean business'. You can only affect the future of refereeing from the inside, by getting involved **as** a referee. Only by having a broader involvement in the bowling world can **you** help to develop and mould the sport for the future.

Your sport needs **you**. Are **you** ready for the challenge?

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