

## The ref cost us the game: The role of sports commentators and journalists in creating stresses on sports referees

Christopher Baldwin  
Australian Catholic University

Christopher Baldwin is a Lecturer at Australian Catholic University's Mount Saint Mary Campus, Sydney.

Contact:  
Christopher Baldwin  
(Room) D3.43  
(Ph) 0297014035  
(M) 0400831311

[c.baldwin@mary.acu.edu.au](mailto:c.baldwin@mary.acu.edu.au)

### ***Abstract***

*Sports referees are maligned and often controversial figures, yet they fulfill a crucial role in amateur and professional sport. The animosity that some sports referees attract comes from an array of sources, including, but not limited to, players, coaches, spectators and the sports media. This paper uses survey, focus group, and interview methods to examine the role that sports commentators and sports journalists have played in creating stress and anxiety for some sports officials. Results suggest that the portrayal of sports referees by the media can influence the decisions they make during a match, as well as contributing to stress and anxiety within officials.*

### ***Introduction***

The sports referee has long been a contentious figure in the realm of amateur and professional sport and to some extent, so too has the sports journalist. The way a referee interprets the rules can be compared with the way a sports journalist writes a particular article on a team or athlete. Both are subjective individuals, as the role they carry out requires them to be interpretive in the tasks they perform.

The subjectivity of the sports referee is an area that is not always well understood. The way one referee interprets a rule or law may be different from the way another referee interprets the same rule or law. Spectators, players, coaches and media personnel can see referees as inconsistent, when they do not understand referees' interpretations of law and rules. The research conducted for this paper suggests charges of inconsistency can frequently lead to stresses and anxieties developing in

sports referees, which in some circumstances can further develop into emotional and psychological problems.

### ***Background***

Referees have been the authority figure in sport since the 1870s when competition in sport began developing (Yendle, Leverton, Kemp & Batts, 2007). The introduction of the sports referee gave rise to the continual development of their role within the sport. The use of one referee soon became two and three and this format has since governed a number of sports to the present day, including cricket, football, rugby league, and rugby union.

Although referees were used in sport prior to 1870, there is no recorded mention of their involvement in organised sport until the 1880s. As ‘gentlemen’ played sport and the notion of honesty was an attribute of the ‘gentleman’ class construct at the time, the need for a referee was minimal. Captains of the designated teams were charged with the tasks of settling disputes and disagreements that occurred during a match (Colwell, 2000). Football is the only sport that makes detailed mention of an early history surrounding match officials and most of the research and writing surrounds European officials. Roy Hay, an Australian academic, wrote a paper detailing the history of Football refereeing in the 1850s through until the post-war years. Hay specifically looks at Australian officials and comments in relation to sports writers that:

Early newspaper soccer reports are interesting documents... I suspect that many of the early complimentary reports on refereeing performance were written by club officials who did some refereeing themselves. Later, when professional journalists take over, criticism of officiating becomes more common (Hay, 1999, p.22).

Hay argued that journalists were more critical of referees than other writers such as historians. Journalists tended to be more judgmental and say what they believed. Holt (2000) argues that reporters tend to exaggerate stories a little more than they need to; because the exaggeration and sensationalism can lead to higher sales of newspapers. Wolper (1995, p.15) suggests that newspapers “print anything, misdemeanor, speeding, whatever” and comments on the often minute aspects of sport that journalists focus on. Coverage extended to the

private lives of players, highlights the notion that for sports stars and sports coaches there often is no private life, as the public wants to know everything and anything about them.

Sports journalism and media have played a crucial role in the growth and development of organised sport worldwide (Anderson, 2001). Through assistance at the amateur and professional level, sports journalism and media coverage have assisted in the advertising and promotion of sport throughout Australasia. The use of sports journalists has changed significantly from the early uses of sports writers. If ever it was the style and convention to just report on the results of contests, now journalists often speculate and criticise performances of players, coaches, and more recently, referees. It is this later appraisal by sports commentators and journalists that will be the focus of this paper.

### ***Research Design***

The methodology used in this research paper was a series of qualitative and quantitative measures and this paper reports on data elicited from surveys and interviews conducted. The purpose of the surveys was to ascertain some statistical data for comparing results as well as establish material to test the notion that sports writers and journalists contribute to stress and anxiety within sports referees. The function of the interviews was to provide a forum for referees and reporters to elaborate on the survey questions and express their thoughts and feelings in a much more personal and detailed manner.

The interviewees were approached in July 2005 to partake in the research project. One hundred and fifty surveys were forwarded to referees across Australia seeking input into a number of aspects of their refereeing profession, including sports they officiate, perceived stresses, and the role which they perceived commentators and journalists play in arousing referee stress levels. One hundred and one surveys were returned completed, representing a return rate of 67 percent. The referees were also invited to write additional comments they believed relevant to this research on blank pages attached to the survey and 45 referees opted to do so. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with

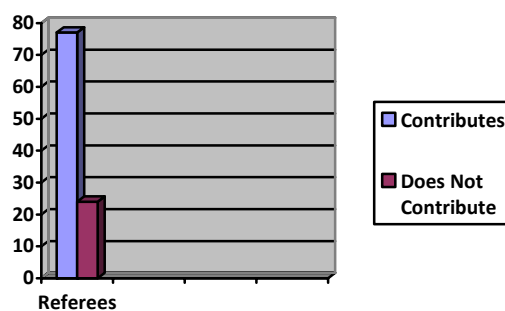
five sports referees considered to be at the semi-elite and elite levels of their respective sports. A further four interviews were conducted with sports journalists and writers. In this article, I will report on five questions from the surveys conducted; these questions are:

1. Do you believe the media can contribute to a referee's stress and anxiety levels?
2. Do you believe sports journalists and commentators over-exaggerate the impact of perceived officiating mistakes?
3. Have you personally felt stressed after reading or hearing a critical article or analysis of your refereeing?
4. Do you think that sports journalists and commentators have to be so critical about sports referees when they make mistakes?
5. Do you believe sports journalists and commentators are correct in their analysis of sports games?

### ***Findings***

Chart 1 looks at the number of referees who felt that the media (sports commentators and sports reporters) contributed to referee stress. Contributing to a referee's stress level included increasing stress levels and anxiety levels of officials, influencing in-game decisions by referees, and influencing referee coaches on appointments and the overall acceptance of a match official by players, coaches and spectators through coverage in the media.

***Chart 1. Referee perceptions of media creating stress within officiating***



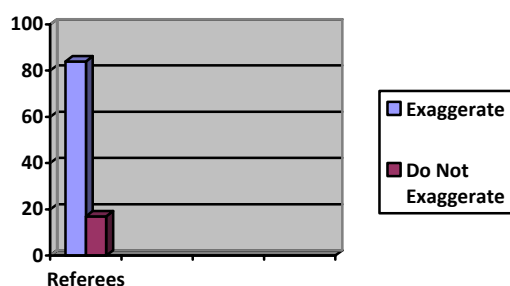
NB: 101 respondents completed surveys. 77 referees felt the media did contribute to stress, while 24 believed they do not contribute.

All five referees agreed that the media does create stress in referees and match officials. The sports commentators and journalists also believed that referees were likely to exhibit stress in some form and this may be linked in some cases to the way in which commentators and journalists report on a referee's performance during or at the end of a game.

Petrovic & Zvan (cited in MacNeill, 1998) acknowledge that sports commentators and journalists significantly influence athletes and sporting events by politicising information and promoting the importance of winning. This influence can be traced to having an impact on match officials and referees through increased pressures from players, coaches, spectators and the media to get decisions correct.

Chart two highlights sports officials' beliefs about sports journalists and commentators exaggerating articles and comments about sports referee's performances and abilities. The use of exaggeration may be for reasons of but not limited to shock value, generating interest in the sport, and a marketing tool to 'boost' sales. Surprisingly the vast majority of referees surveyed indicated that the use of exaggeration did not bother them as long as it was not written in a sense that they (officials) were being portrayed as cheats or questioning their integrity.

**Chart 2. Referee belief of exaggeration in sports commentating and writing**



NB: 84 referees felt the media did exaggerate while 17 believed they did not.

The interview and focus group results also supported the survey data in so far as that the focus groups, too, agreed that the use of exaggeration was to generate more publicity. The commentators and journalists indicated that the uses of exaggeration

were merely a marketing tool, especially concerning sports commentators who are frequently heard using exaggeration throughout their commentating. One journalist commented that "...commentators like to hear the sound of their own voice... this can sometimes get a little over the top..." (Footyref, 2006). We have seen a number of examples of this 'over the top exaggeration' throughout the 2007/08 cricketing summer and during the opening rounds of this years Super 14 tournament. Two such examples are from *The Telegraph* newspaper, which had headlines referring to referees and umpires. One read 'Not you too Rudi' referring to poor umpiring in a cricket match between Australia and India, while the other headline was 'Waugh blasts trigger happy referee' which was referring to NSW Rugby Union Captain Phil Waugh's opinion of the referee in their match against the Highlanders. Both of these articles headlines were referring to perceived mistakes by officials. However, although the blazing headlines lead the observer to think the article is about the mistakes made by the referee, when one actually reads the article they discover that there is actually only a small amount about the referee, in some instances just one paragraph of an entire one-page article.

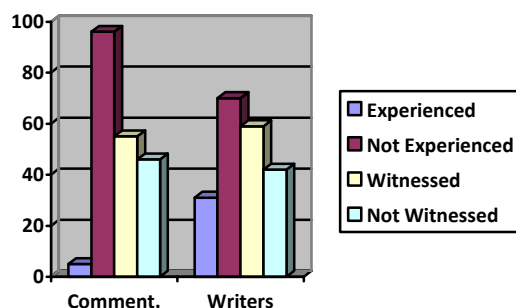
The comments by the officials who were surveyed regarding exaggeration by journalists and commentators was surprising as many of the referees indicated that they often used the mute button when watching sport. The referees felt that they were often angered and frustrated when listening to the sports commentators on television because more often than not the referees felt that the commentators did not know what they were talking about. One official stated that:

The media places great emphasis on mistakes made by referees and their individual outcomes. However, they do not explore the overall game for player/coach mistakes, or for errors, which determine the game's outcome. (Baldwin, 2008)

Murphy, Dunning & Williams (1988) recognise that journalists are not neutral observers of the social scene. They often have preconceived ideas of what is fact and what is fiction, very much like people of society. The difference, which the authors acknowledge, is that journalists often play on the idea of fact and fiction depending on the current trends within society at the time. The same can be said about sports commentators and journalism; for example the hype and pageantry that surrounds

sports media during the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race in December compared with sports coverage on yachting during the rest of the year.

**Chart 3. Referee experiences with facing and/or witnessing stress through commentators and sports journalists**



NB: 96 referees had not experienced stress from commentators; 5 had. 55 referees had witnessed stress by referees as a result of comentator comments; 46 had not. 31 referees had experienced stress as a result of sports writers articles; 71 had not. 59 referees had witnessed referee stress as a result of sports writer articles; 42 had not.

Chart three details referees' experiences with facing or witnessing stress through sports commentators' and writers' articles or comments. As the referees surveyed were from a variety of levels, including many non-elite referees who do not have much contact with actual sports commentators, this result was somewhat lower than what could be expected had the survey focused entirely on elite officials. Results focusing on sports journalists and writers indicated that referees had significantly more even contact between the elite and non-elite officials, showing that local sporting events were becoming more widely reported as opposed to 10 or 15 years ago. The witnessing of stress within referees through television or the paper is far more common than actually experiencing it personally. This was due to the cross-section of officials who were surveyed, with more tending to be from the non-elite ranks and thus experienced limited face-to-face exposure with journalists and commentators personally.

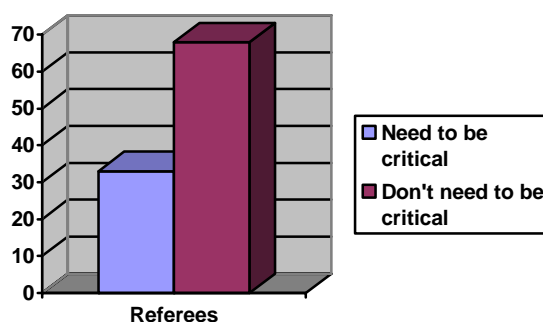
The referees from the focus groups and interviews supported their colleagues' responses above, adding, "As ambassadors for the game, commentators should support and encourage referees to get more participating" (Baldwin, 2008). The sports commentators and journalists disagreed, alluding that although some of the comments on television and within the paper could be seen as exhibiting stress by one referee,

another referee could interpret the comment entirely differently. Greg Thomas, writing for NZRugby World prior to the 2007 Rugby World Cup, added that abuse of match officials was fast getting out of hand. Many people think that abuse only happens at the non-elite level with irate parents but this is not the case. Abuse of match officials is a regular occurrence at the elite level of sport and is fast becoming as frequent as it is at the non-elite level. Thomas adds that abuse is leading to accusations being made through sports writers and commentators about cheating and referee bias, which only adds further stress and anxiety for referees to deal with.

Chart four identifies referees' beliefs and perceptions regarding the need for sports commentators and journalists to be critical and judgemental of their performances. The results show that the vast majority of referees feel that journalists and commentators do not need to be so judgemental and critical when analysing referee's performances, especially when many of the comments made are not correct. In the written section of the survey some officials did make mention that they understood it was the job of the sports journalists and commentators to analyse and at times criticise the performance of people. Many of the officials believed the media need to be held more accountable for their comments, especially when they get things wrong so frequently, adding that:

Their knowledge of laws, scenarios, and interpretations is limited to what the referee knows by law. They are not always accurate; however, the public is not always aware of this or as knowledgeable as a qualified referee (Baldwin, 2008)

**Chart 4. Referees perceptions on sports comentators and journalists being critical**



NB: 68 referees felt that sports comentators and journalists did not have to be so critical while 33 referees felt they did need to be critical.

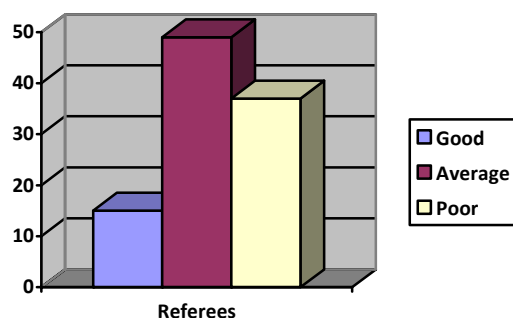


The interview and focus group results reinforced the data elicited from the surveys. The sports commentators and journalists added that journalism focuses on why, and for that reason answers to why teams lost or performed poorly are required. Referees as a group remain silent and never speak out publicly about their performances on the field, and that often makes them an easy target for criticism. Sports commentators and journalists alike can often be seen harbouring this persona through headlines such as 'ICC axes Bucknor', 'Shocking calls show Umpire too old', and 'Waugh blasts trigger happy ref'. Headlines such as these inadvertently create a stressful environment for referees to officiate in.

Holt (2000) adds that the repeated use of media personnel to criticise referees will generally be accepted by the regular reader as being part of the common societal environment. Therefore, should the media persist in its often negative perception of referees, in time society will accept this belief as being common acceptable practice. This is a persona that we as a society do not want to create, as referees and match officials are an essential element in allowing organised sport to function effectively.

The final chart identifies referees' opinions surrounding sports commentators' and journalists' knowledge and accuracy in their analysis of a match. The results of this chart highlights the broad belief in many referees that commentators and journalists have an average or poor understanding of the laws and rules of most sports they cover. Only 15 referees out of 101 actually believed sports journalists and commentators knew what they were talking about.

**Chart 5. Referee perceptions of sports commentators' and journalists' sporting knowledge**



NB: 15 referees felt that sports commentators and journalists had a good knowledge of sport; 48 referees believed they had an average knowledge, and 37 referees felt that commentators and writers had a poor knowledge of sport.

The focus group participants agreed that on average commentators and reporters have a reasonable knowledge; however, they did concede that there were commentators and journalists that had a poor knowledge of sport, which affected the profession as a whole. Footyref, a peer-contributing website, offers an insightful analysis that supports what many sports referees around the country believe.

It could be argued that the listener might be swayed by their opinions... It therefore often surprises me that those media responsible for bringing us the game, more often than not, appear to neither fully understand the laws of the game or how a referee or the assistants are applying them (Footyref.blogspot.com, 2006, p.1)

The view presented on footyref poses a question on the credibility of sports writers and journalists given their often lack of comprehension of the rules. Yet despite this often glaring lack of understanding, there still lies a strong following of readers and listeners. Rowe (1999) believes that by putting people on television who do not have any credibility with the sport they are covering sends messages to the public that the network does not care about its exposure or perception of the sport.

### ***Discussion***

Results of this study have indicated that sports journalists do in fact play a role in the stress and anxiety levels of sports referees. The extent and frequency with which commentators and journalists affect sports referees is dependent on the level that the referees officiate at. Referees officiating at the elite national and international level were far more likely to experience stress and anxiety due to their exposure from sports journalists and commentators than the non-elite referee who rarely encountered the media.

It is quite evident from sports referees that the use of technology within sport and the media has increased the scrutiny with which referees are observed. On the one hand, the use of technology has aided officials in their officiating duties, ensuring they are better able to get decisions correct. However, on the other hand the use of technology has focused more attention on the sports referee as never before and the expectation that with this technology the referee will always get the decisions correct. This is somewhat an unachievable expectation as referees are human, and as humans, we are all destined to make mistakes. The use of technology does not eliminate these mistakes; it seems to make us question our decisions more than we would had we not had the use of the technology.

footyref.com acknowledges a growing tendency of expecting referees to get decisions right and blaming them for every decision that is not right. This has only really arisen due to spectators, coaches and players being able to see a replay not once but in some cases five or six times. Bellamy (1998) further adds that the advent of new playing facilities with state-of-the-art cameras covering every possible angle has highlighted many flaws in both players and referees that had gone unnoticed in previous years. The use of in-game commentary by players is fast becoming a source for media to utilise to get opinions and ideas from players while they are actually involved in the contest, which can create even further stress and anxiety in referees.

It is interesting to note that although referees seem to get little or no praise within the media surrounding their performances on the field, many reporters

are criticised themselves for being 'cheerleaders' to players and teams. Anderson (2001) writes that sports journalists and writers can often endanger their credibility if they appear to be too kind to a particular team or coach. Sports writers are expected to be critical and decisive in their commentary. Koppett (2003) also accepts that some journalists are perceived as cheerleaders if they are not seen as being critical of players and coaches. However Koppett concedes that it is not always appropriate or suitable to be critical of players all the time and certain games do not warrant being critical. On too many occasions, it is far too easy for coaches, players and spectators to see sport as life or death. Likewise, it is often too easy to blame the sports referee for a team's performance when it is clearly out of the officials' hands.

There is no doubt that sports referees suffer from stress and anxiety through officiating. This stress and anxiety comes from numerous sources, one of which is sports media personnel. Referees are not the sole recipients of stress and anxiety through their association with sport. Coaches, players and spectators suffer from anxiety and stress throughout games and so do commentators and reporters. Reinardy (2006) indicates that sports journalists are prime candidates for stress and burnout due to the long hours they work, including nights and weekends, and the continual necessity to work to deadlines. Reinardy's study shows that sports journalists demonstrated a moderate rate of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Reinardy says that sports journalists, like players and coaches, need to ensure that they allocate time for themselves and their families; he concludes that newspaper reporters exhibit less stress and burnout due to the availability of accessible and quick feedback from colleagues and editors.

### ***Conclusions***

The sports referee is and most likely always will be a much criticised and hated figure in the realm of sport. Hated and despised by coaches, players and spectators alike, the role and job of the sports referee is not for the faint hearted. The criticism labelled at referees is often harsh, personal and not very helpful. Referees are a special population who ensure that amateur and professional sport functions, week in and week out. Without referees, sport as we know it could not function successfully and safely.

The media has the ability to portray referees in a positive or negative light and the results of this study show that many referees perceive their portrayal to be negative at the moment. “So-called journalistic integrity doesn’t apply to sports reporters... uninformed opinions dictating to the unintelligent masses” (Baldwin, 2008). The concern with this perception is that if the media continues to project referees in a negative light, the public will begin to take this perception as being true. There is debate that the public is well beyond this perception already. Holt (2000) adds that “...it seems reasonable to suppose that the regular media presentation... becomes simply part of the environment, which in turn influences our ways of looking at our environment” (Holt, 2000, p.100).

As sport continues to grow and the demand for sporting telecasts grows, so too will the demand for higher levels of technology and more intimate forms of viewing and listening to sport. Redhead (2007) indicates that the days of attending sport are dwindling. The ability to watch live sport from home while also having access to in-game commentary, live audio from players and officials, and the ability to watch aspects of the game over and over while also accessing player profiles, betting and weather conditions, has made armchair viewing far more appealing than watching a game live.

To combat the stresses that are apparent in covering sporting competitions we need to have collaboration between referees and commentators to ensure that comments made by journalists do not invoke too much stress on referees. This is a difficult process as by restricting analysis and criticism from journalists about referees we are in fact restricting a journalists’ or commentators’ ability to perform their job, as well as restricting their ability for freedom of speech. Referees concede that stress naturally occurs within a game and can transpire from a number of sources, such as players, coaches, spectators, the environment and the type of game taking place (Baldwin, 2008). Many of the stresses that influence an official, whether pre-game, post-game or in-game, are out of the control of the referee. Sports officials, therefore, have concluded that these stresses are in part, actual elements of the game that they themselves need to

accept. Referees understand that at some point during a match players may inadvertently swear at them; this is not because they hate the referee, or dislike him/her, it is something that has transcribed during the heat of battle.

Referees understand and acknowledge that criticism surrounding one of their performances will always take place at the end of a game. Dolly Stark, a baseball umpire in the United States, famously stated, "Officiating is the only vocation performed before the public where the only accolade is deadly silence" (Kerkhoff, 2000, p.244). Journalists and commentators have a job to do; likewise referee and officials do as well. An area that has been of great concern to referees and officials has been their support networks, and adequate mentoring to ensure that when officials are stressed, or put in stressful situations, they are able to deal with the situation appropriately and successfully. It may be apparent that this training needs to include instruction on how to deal with media criticism, or perhaps referees and officials should be given the same ability players and coaches have in giving their own post-game analysis.

There is no definitive answer as to how we can minimise referee stress. The perceived impact that journalists and commentators have in creating stress on referees is apparent as the results of this study show. Making commentators and journalists more accountable for what they say in print and on television may curb some of the more controversial material that is said, but ultimately what commentators and journalists want to say is going to be heard. The findings of this research may challenge the sporting world to persuade media broadcasters to ask more questions of their journalists and commentators when compiling stories and reporting on contests. However, the reality is all referees can do is to ignore the comments, criticism and gripes that are targeted towards them and get on with refereeing the game.

Let me conclude by way of saying that it has not been my intention to put the blame for referees' stress on sports commentators and journalists alone. Referees themselves do deserve the criticism and stress they receive on some occasions. I acknowledge that sports commentators and journalists themselves often work under stress and anxiety pressures due to deadlines. The aim here

has been to inform the wider community about sports officials and the story they have to tell. Referees are a special population within the sporting world, a population that we can ill afford to go without if we are to continue enjoying our interest in the world of sport.

### **References**

- Anderson, W. (2001). Does the Cheerleading Ever Stop? Major League Baseball and Sports Journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 355-382.
- Baldwin, C. (2008). *You're kidding Ref! Pre and Post Game Stress Levels amongst Referees and Match Officials: An Australian Perspective. Proceedings of the second international colloquium on leisure and tourism*. Chiang Mai, Thailand. ICTL.
- Bellamy, R. (1998). *The Evolving Television Sports Marketplace*. London, England: Routledge.
- Colwell, S. (2000). The letter and the spirit: Football Laws and Refereeing in the twenty first century. *The Future of Football*, 201.
- Conn, M. (2008, January 10). Shocking calls show Bucknor is too old: Bird. *The Australian*, p.13.
- Dorries, B. (2008, February 6). Not you too, Rudi: Koertzen's howler adds to Indian woes. *The Daily Telegraph*, p.67.
- FootyRef. (2006). *TV & Radio Commentators*. (p.1.) Retrieved 8 November, 2007, from <http://www.footyref.blogspot.com>
- Hay, R. (1999). Black (Yellow or Green) Bastards: Soccer Refereeing in Australia: A Much Maligned Profession. *Sporting Traditions: Journal of the Australian Society of Sports History*, 19-36.
- Holt, R. (2000). The Discourse Ethics of Sports Print Journalism. *Journal of Culture, Sport, Society*, 3(3), 88-103.
- Kerkhoff, B. (2000). *Upon Further Review: Controversy in Sports Officiating*. (p.244.) Lenexa, USA: Addax Publishing Group.
- Koppett, L. (2003). The Rise and fall of the Press Box. *American Journalism, summer 2006*, 120-121.
- MacNeill, M. (1998). Sports Journalism, Ethics and Olympic Athletes' Rights. In L.

- Wener (Ed), *Media-sport*, (pp. 100-115). London, England: Routledge.
- Murphy, P., Dunning, E., & Williams, J. (1988). Soccer Crowd Disorder and the Press: Process of Amplification and De-amplification in Historical Perspective. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5, 645-673.
- Payten, I. (2008, March 2). Waugh blasts trigger happy referee. *The Sunday Telegraph*, p.58.
- Redhead, S. (2007). Those Absent from the Stadium are Always Right. *Accelerated Culture, Sport Media and Theory at the Speed of Light*, 31(3), 226-241.
- Reinardy, S. (2006). It's Game-time: The Maslach Burnout Inventory Measures Burnout of Sports Journalists. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(2), 397-412.
- Rowe, D. (1999). *Sport, Culture and the Media*. Philadelphia, USA: Open University Press.
- Thomas, G. (2006). Hot Air Bringing Game into Disrepute. *New Zealand Rugby World*, pp. 36-37.
- Wolper, A. (1995, October 28<sup>th</sup>). Did Paper Cave in to Coach's Pressure? *Editor & Publisher*, pp. 9, 15.
- Yendle, C., Leverton, J., Kemp, J., & Batts, F. (2007). Brief History of Soccer Referees. Retrieved 30 November, 2007, from <http://www.gdsra.com.au/history.htm>

**Copyright Statement:** Articles submitted for ANZCA08 remain the copyright of the author, but authors by virtue of submission agree to grant the Department of Communication, Journalism & Marketing at Massey University a copyright license to permanently display the article online for public viewing as part of this conference proceedings, and to grant the National Library of Australia a copyright licence to include the ANZCA08 Proceedings in the PANDORA Archive for permanent public access and online viewing. Articles first published in this ANZCA08 proceedings may subsequently be published elsewhere by authors, provided the next version acknowledges this original publication in the ANZCA08 refereed proceedings.