

Although Referees in general are not comfortable with the more demonstrative expressions and moaning that have always been part of nearly every football match, Referees are expected to tolerate it to a certain degree, provided that it keeps within the bounds of decency, and does no violence to fundamental norms. However, this attitude does not satisfy the purists, whose aim is to rid the game completely of all forms of dissent, or at least, to understandably rein it back to a more acceptable level. Whilst these sentiments are laudable, the attraction of football has (and always will have) an element of feistiness' that makes it such an exciting sport. To tolerate something, is to approve it. Therefore, it is only when the conduct offends the Referee, that he needs exercise his toleration, by taking some form of disciplinary action.

On the whole, society has accepted that dissent and bad language is part of the game of football, and a single Referee attempting to start a crusade all on his own to rid the game of bad language, will fail dismally unless he has the full backing of the Football Association and all other Referees. Every now and then, however, we wake up to the fact that although bad language and dissent has been normalised, it is not normal in other forms of society and sport. Whilst our tolerance acceptance does not eliminate our sense that there must be alternatives to controlling bad language, it would require a mutual commitment by all the participants of the game, to increase levels of behaviour, particularly the players and managers. It is interesting to note, that the more polite that Referees have become, the worse the level of behaviour becomes. Hence there is a conflict for some Referees, on how best they can balance the Laws as they are written, against the need to officiate using a level of tolerance.

Punishment for specifically using bad (foul) language was taken out of the Laws of Association Football in season 1997/1998, following a complete rewrite of the Laws. The wording of the sending-off offence was changed from '**uses foul or abusive language**', to '**uses offensive, insulting or abusive language**'.

Due to the accepted increase and tolerance of foul language in general society, it was deemed by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) that foul language **alone**, was no longer to be automatically punished with a sending off, but that it now expected Referees to judge when the words actually constituted (or contributed to) an offence or not. In other words, it is not the words alone that create an offence in this more tolerant society, but both the words used **AND** the ambience in which they are delivered and meant.

This stance was not unexpected, as Referees had for many years previous to 1997/1998 season, already applied their own understanding of the (foul language) Law. In other words, it was generally only when foul language was delivered in an **abusive, insulting or offensive manner**, that the red card was used.

Anyone who watches a game of football at any level, appreciates that it would be impossible for a Referee to play 90 minutes, if he was mandated to send off every player who used foul language. Hence, the change in the Laws brought in a level of realism to reflect the changes in society. The Referee is now expected to interpret what is required of him in respect of foul language, without actually being given any guidelines from the authority that changed the Law! This is not unusual in the world of Refereeing, as the Laws are written in such a way that it allows the Referee a huge amount of leeway in how to interpret them - rather than applying them as they are written in black and white. The Law change from **'uses foul or abusive language'**, to **'uses offensive, insulting or abusive language'**, has generally been a success in Refereeing terms, as the sport of football continues to expand its following. But there is a danger that as the tolerance of bad language in society increases, at what level will the Laws have to be changed once again? Only time will tell - in the meantime, the Referee will continue to be judge and jury, in terms of what is acceptable and what is not at the level in which he officiates.

It must be emphasised here, that whilst Referees are expected to strive towards consistency in terms of the level of foul language they allow, they do not actually condone its use. Referees are placed in an awkward position. They are criticised by those who want players to be "Saints" on the field of play, and criticised by others when they send off players for **offensive, insulting or abusive language**'. It is a no win situation for Referees. The difficulty is more prevalent in youth football, where the Referee is expected to also educate young players by sensible application of the Laws. Yet, very often, it's the managers, coaches and parents who are the instigators of bad language and exhibitors of bad habits as far as their protégées are concerned. But one thing is for certain, it is the Referee (and the Football Association) that is at the forefront of trying to bring respect back into the game. It is a very difficult balance to achieve for the men in black, who are governed by the Laws on one side, and a changing (and a more tolerant) society on the other side. The only reasonable guideline that a Referee can use, is to adhere to the level of tolerance used in his locality, or in the league in which he officiates. There is little point in an individual Referee embarking on a crusade to curb bad language by overly strict application of the Laws, as this will ostracise him from the footballing community. A Referee who feels strongly about the slipping standards of bad language usage, can achieve better results by being proactive rather than reactive. In other words, as soon as bad language materialises, the Referee can use strong man-management skills to curb it at the onset. This is particularly a very useful method to use in Youth football, where nobody wants to see the Referee continuously stopping play to admonish players for bad language every minute or so! In short, a Referee who is proactive in attempting to deal with bad language, is more accepted, than the Referee who reacts by sending off perpetrators, without attempting to make any effort to curb it on the first place!

One of the greatest problems to beset Referees, is the popularity and coverage of football on television, where bad language is sensationalised by television companies who zoom in and virtually translate the lip movements of irate players. The difficulty that Referees have at the lower levels, is how to enforce the Laws that seem to be ignored at the top levels. This is a subject that will be aired for many years to come. But a Referee at the lower levels should take his steer from the Law book, and the interpretations and methods used at his level, and not what is seen (and supposedly accepted) in televised games. To do otherwise, will only create more problems for him, in his sphere of practise at the lower levels.

From season 1997/1998 onwards, it is important for Referees to distinguish 'bad language' (e.g. foul language), from 'offensive, insulting or abusive language'. Foul language is no longer banned in the modern Laws.

The reasoning behind this, is the fact that swear words (foul language) are unfortunately part of the common vocabulary of many people. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect players who use such language in their day-to-day lives, when speaking to their friends and families, to be expected to clean up their language when they are in the fierce intensity of a game of football. It is the language that is intended to insult or offend, or to provoke, that referees are now asked to punish in accordance with the Laws. It is not the Referees' job to try and convert society to become monks! The Referees job is to apply the Laws, and punish the language that is intended to insult or offend, or to provoke. Standards of behaviour in public have been falling steadily and good manners and common decency are less evident. This is a fact that cannot be ignored.

For example: A Player who says, "that was not a f***ing penalty Ref.," , is likely to receive a less severe reaction from the Referee, compared to a player who says, "Ref., you are a f***ing c***!"

Law 12 (Fouls and Misconduct) does not include a definitive listing of what constitutes offensive or insulting or abusive language; or dissent. Some of the words in the Bad Language Mapping image above, are 'foul language'; words; but when they are used as part of conversation on the field of play, they are not necessarily illegal as far as the Laws are concerned. They only become illegal, if the context in which they are being used, becomes 'offensive, insulting or abusive' in any way. This is an important concept for Referees to grasp. It is possible for even the most vilest of swear words to be vocally delivered in a such a way as not to seem offensive. Conversely, it is also possible for a non-offensive word to be vocally delivered in such a way as to seem offensive! Therefore, Referees need to get away from the concept that such words as, "F***ing hell", or "boll**ks" are always going to be punished with a red card.

One of the greatest difficulties for a Referee to learn - is how to interpret the following two points of Law:

Law 12: Sending Off Offence: - A player is shown the red card if he uses, offensive or insulting or abusive language, and/or gestures.

Law 12: A player is cautioned and shown the yellow card if he shows dissent by word or action.

You have probably heard mentioned, that "Every Referee has their own tolerance level" and will only react to bad language or dissent when this level has been breached. This is only partly true. If Referees only relied on the 'Letter of the Law' in respect of the Law 12 rulings above, then the number of players remaining on the field of play would quickly reduce to a level that would leave the Referee no choice but to abandon almost every game.

Therefore, a Referee's individual tolerance levels **do have** an important part to play.

The 17 Laws of Associated Football (LOAF) are very simple, yet conversely complicated to enforce. Thankfully, Referees are not expected to be 'Robots in Shorts', and are given a huge amount of discretion within the Laws to inject some realism.

Referees are human beings, capable of using a balance of common sense, experience and interpretation as well as Law knowledge when officiating in games. The Referee is not just a 'policeman' who blows his whistle every time one of the players makes a comment - he is (thankfully) allowed to interpret each situation sensibly - this ensures that the game 'flows' properly, and is allowed to continue when it can.

The difficulty arises when calls of inconsistency are levelled towards Referees.

For example, if a player says to a Referee.

"Keep up with play Ref.!"

One Referee may decide to show a yellow card and caution this player. Another Referee hearing the same words in another game may decide that a strong warning to the player would suffice. And in another game, if the same words are said to the Referee in a joking sort way, then that Referee might just smile and join in the fun!

Yes, this is inconsistency as far as the actual words themselves are concerned - but that is of little concern. Because it is not the words themselves that constitute offensive or insulting or abusive language. The human voice is capable of projecting a huge range of emotions using the same words. Factors that determine the severity of vocal words are numerous, and can be affected by a player's temper, loudness and direction of voice, tone, the eyes, facial and body language to name but a few. It is therefore possible for even the most vilest of swear words to be vocally delivered in a such a way as not to seem offensive. Conversely, it is also possible for a non-offensive word to be vocally delivered in a such a way as to seem offensive!

It is more important for Referees to be consistent in the way they deal with instances where the "ambience of the words" are against the 'spirit of the game' rather than trying to be consistent in relation to just the words themselves.

Words on their own are not so easy to categorise into neat areas such as offensive, insulting, abusive or dissenting listings. As human beings, each Referee will react differently to verbal stimulation!

A Referee does not automatically discipline every player who uses bad language. The Laws of Soccer allow the Referee to make a judgement based on the whole environment surrounding the delivery of the words.

It may be that the words constitute a touch of humour.

It may be that the words are an innocent act of frustration on the player's part after he has missed an "open goal".

It may be that the words are offensive.

It may be a million other things.

It is not the words themselves taken in isolation that constitute an offence. In other words, the Laws allow the Referee to make a judgement using common sense, which could result in no punishment being administered by him; a sending-off; a strong warning or maybe a caution as an alternative punishment.

(The only exception to this, are words of racial connotation. These should always be punished properly, irrespective of how they are delivered).

Note: It is also possible for certain words to be more readily accepted in one country but not so readily accepted in another. Therefore, it would be impossible to have a global listing of easily punishable words. For example - the biggest no-no in American baseball games: You absolutely cannot call the umpire a "cock-sucker". It doesn't matter whether it was screamed or mumbled, doesn't matter whether there were children present, doesn't matter what play action has just transpired. If you call the umpire a "cock-sucker", you are out of the game (irrespective of the ambience of how the words were delivered). (Thanks to Marissa for the pertinent note above).

The Language Mapping diagram will give Referees a starting point, in trying to understand the differences between issuing a Red card, a Yellow card, or giving a verbal warning to players who use bad language or show dissent. The main message of the Language Mapping Venn diagram is that there is no definitive listing of where each word should appear in the map.

It is not just that word itself that should be the sole measurement of what is bad language and what is not.

The inner Red oval contains words and word-types that Law 12 state **could** be dealt with by the issue of a Red card.

But once again - it is not so much the words themselves that count; it is the ambience that they carry when delivered. For example:

- (a) Were they loud?
- (b) Were they directed at the Referee?
- (c) Were they uttered in frustration after the player missed an open goal?
- (d) Were they said in an angry way?
- (e) Are there young children nearby?
- (f) Are they threatening?
- (g) Are they racial?
- (h) Does an angry facial expression accompany them?
- (i) Were they meant as humour?

There are many more examples.....

Each Referee must learn by experience, the nuances of what is deemed to be unacceptable language.

The outer Yellow oval contains words that Law 12 state **could** be deemed to be dissent, and punished by the issue of a Yellow card.

But yet again - it is not so much the words themselves that count, it is the ambience that they carry when delivered. For example, were the words directed at the Referee or one of his Assistants, and did they question the Referees' decision? Or were they said in frustration?

The four small Orange ovals that are positioned partly on the inner Red oval, and partly over the outer Yellow oval, contain words that could either be dealt with by the issue of a Yellow card for dissent, or by the issue of a Red card – depending on other factors. (For example, were they abusive or were they said in a dissenting fashion?)

There are four Green ovals that are positioned at each corner of the diagram, partly over the outer Yellow oval, and partly outside of the diagram. These contain words (and phrases) that could either be dealt with by the issue of a Yellow card for dissent, or by the issue of a verbal warning to the player – depending on other factors. (For example, were they said in frustration, or in a joking way, or were they really meant?)

The aim of the Language Mapping diagram is not to offer Referees a category listing of:

- (a) Red card words.
- (b) Yellow card words.
- (c) A listing of words that constitute a verbal warning.
- (d) A list of words that can be ignored

The Language Mapping Venn diagram demonstrates that the same word (or words) could fit into any of the categories above. There is no definitive listing of words that constitute a sending off or a caution for dissent or a verbal warning.

Each Referee will need to continually adjust the pallet of colours in the Language Mapping diagram to fit each 'bad language' incident as it arises. And this can only be done by not restricting yourself to a dedicated listing of categorised words.

Law 12 does not have a definitive listing of what constitutes offensive or insulting or abusive language. Or dissent.

Therefore, Referees need to get away from the concept that "F*ck You" is a red card; "Crap decision" is a yellow card; and "You must be joking Ref" is a warning. There is a little more to it than that!

93% of interpersonal communication is not what is being said. Scientific analysis has determined that in person-to-person communication:

- Words convey 7% of the message
- Intonation, pitch and pace of speech convey 38%
- Vibes, body movements, gestures, facial expressions convey 55% .

Tolerance Levels By Julian Carosi www.corshamref.org.uk

Tolerance Levels for Controlling Bad Language

In Season 1997-1998, the wording of Law 12 was changed. The sending-off offence of: "Foul and Abusive Language" was replaced by: "Using Offensive, Insulting or Abusive language". This change meant that the individual Referee on the day, can now decide what is 'offensive' or 'insulting'. Because of human nature, every individual Referee has his own tolerance level as far as bad language is concerned.

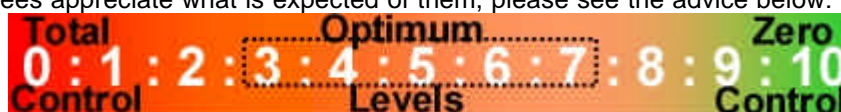
FIFA gave the following as the reason for this change: A player may now be sent off if, in the opinion of the referee, he is guilty of using language or gestures, which are offensive or insulting or abusive. The referee must take into account the severity of the offence. He continues to have the authority to decide whether, in his opinion, a player's unacceptable language or gestures are to be deemed a sending off offence.

This allows the Referee the option of cautioning a player for unsporting behaviour or dissent, as appropriate, if, in the Referee's opinion, the offence committed is not serious enough for the Referee to award a sending off.

On top of this, each country, and each region, and each competition also has its own different in-built tolerance level that has developed, and established itself over the years.

It is no wonder that new Referees have difficulty in knowing when to send a player off, when to award a yellow card, or when to give a public warning when bad language is used. To help understand this difference in tolerance levels, and to help Referees appreciate what is expected of them, please see the advice below:

The Levels of Tolerance



In the above image, Level 0 (Zero) Tolerance, shown at the red (left) end of the spectrum, is where a Referee officiates by using no common sense, no interpretation, and in complete and total accord with the Laws of the Game.

A Referee who officiates in this manner, will have a complete dominating control over the players, and will be seen as a unwelcome dictator. If a player so much as says, "Bloody Hell Ref!", the red card will be flashed in an instant. This type of Referee is also known as the 'Law Book on Legs'. He will be the most unpopular Referee around, and his services will inevitably not be required in the future by the players or the Football Association.

Conversely, a Referee who officiates at the right (green) end of the tolerance spectrum, at tolerance level 10, is the type of Referee who has no interest in applying the Law, ignores all bad language, and generally allows the players to dictate how the game progresses. He does not have a tolerance level - he lets everything go. If a player says, "F%^&*ng Hell Ref!", the Referee will probably respond along the lines of; "I hope they do for your sake mate!".

This type of Referee is known as the 'The 'Plonker''. At first, he will be seen as the players' friend 'Mr Plonker', but as soon as there is any trouble to sort out, he will be re-christened, by substituting the first 3 letters of his name with 'WA'

He will be the second most unpopular Referee around, and his services will inevitably not be required by the players or the Football Association.

Therefore.....the tolerance level for an efficient Referee must lay somewhere between Level 0 (zero) and Level 10 (ten).

The optimum level will be anything between tolerance levels 3 and 7. Refereeing within these levels ensures that that the Referee uses the Laws in conjunction with common sense and proper interpretation of situations. For example, a player who swears in frustration ("F%^&*ng Hell Ref!") because he has just missed an open goal, can be treated differently to the same player saying the same words, but directed towards the Referee, after the Referee has awarded a decision against this player. ("F%^&*ng Hell Ref!") If the bad language is directed at the Referee or at another person, and is made with intense anger or with the intent to demean, disrespect, or incite the other person, then a sending off is warranted. If a player uses bad language in a momentary display of anger or temper against himself, then a caution (or a strong warning) might be considered as an appropriate punishment. The Referee must aim to keep players on the field of play, and not to look for clauses in the Law that can be used to expel players.

There are more ways than one in dealing with bad language. A strong public verbal warning is a good starting point when a player has only slightly stepped across the line. Inform the player that although his language was not directed at any other person, it is still unacceptable as far as the Laws of the Game are concerned. Make it clear to the player, that if he continues to use such language, it may result in a stricter sanction. Taking this action every early in the game, is a very good way for a Referee to stamp his authority on a game, and it gives the players a strong message, that bad language will not be tolerated.

Varying the tolerance levels in a game is also another useful way to manage players. For example, if the game starts of 'fast and furious', and players are more interested on kicking lumps out of each other, rather than playing the ball - the Referee should use tolerance level 3, or even 2. Do not allow any advantage, apply the Laws more strictly, and stop play for every little foul. And publicly warn every player (or caution if necessary) when they use bad language. A Referee needs to show that he is the one who is controlling the game, and that he is not willing to 'share' control with the players. If the players cannot accept his control, then he must 'boss' the game.

As soon as the players get the message and start playing football, the Referee can ease off his strict management, and move up a few steps to tolerance levels 5, 6 and 7, where he can let the game flow as much as he can.

Question: So how can a Referee decide which tolerance level to begin with?

Answer: There is no text-book answer. But.....

A Referee who strongly believes that EVERY player who uses bad language, should receive a red card, will be unable to last very long without the backing of his Football Association. A single Referee, on a personal crusade to clean up the game, will end up antagonising the players and being offered ZERO appointments.

An ambitious Referee, will correctly adjust his tolerance level, to suit the league he is officiating in. For example, a Sunday morning 'Parks' Referee at the beginning of his career, will not use the same tolerance levels used by the top Referees in the English Premiership, professional football league. It would not work.

There is a simple solution to this complex question. To progress up the ladder, a Referee has to do what is expected of him, at the level at which he officiates. If he attempts to Referee in a manner completely alien to what is expected at his local level, then he is a fool! A successful Referee will spend time looking at games at his level, and gauging what is expected as far as tolerance levels are concerned, and then apply it to his performance.

He can then concentrate on the other things that he is good at - without fear of becoming a martyr!

“Ignore what needs to be ignored, and hear what needs to be heard.”



<---vary your tolerance within levels 3 and 7 ---.>

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