



**Directive for all Rugby Organisations and Participants**  
**Match Official Abuse**

1. This is a directive issued for the purposes of clause 13.4(e) of Rugby AU's Code of Conduct and rule 87(b) of Rugby AU's Disciplinary Rules. Its issuance is to be taken as a proper and sufficient basis to increase sanctions by reason of aggravation in cases of Match Official Abuse (MO Abuse) occurring on and off the field.
2. This directive is to place all Participants, Members, Clubs and Rugby Bodies on notice that increased sanctions will be imposed going forward under the Disciplinary Rules (for on-field incidents) and Code of Conduct (for off-field incidents) for anyone who commits MO Abuse. It is also to provide decision-makers in this space, including Judicial Committees, Code of Conduct Committees and Appointed Persons, guidance around sanctioning.
3. Our message is clear; whether you are playing in a match or watching from the sidelines, **if you engage in MO Abuse, expect to spend time away from the Game.**
4. MO Abuse is one of the biggest threats to our Game. It threatens the very fabric of our sport, is harmful and hurtful to the Match Official and must be stamped out.
5. MO Abuse can be described as any behaviour that is directed towards a Match Official which is not in line with the core values of our Game: discipline, respect, integrity, passion, and team work.
6. MO Abuse takes many different forms and can come from many different sources, including players, coaches, support staff, parents, spectators and other volunteers. It may occur during a game, or after, and can occur on the field or off the field. It can consist of dissent, harassment or verbal or physical abuse and can look to frighten or intimidate, or harm or disrespect, a Match Official.
7. Despite previous communications calling for action across the Game, including to all participants, volunteers, and administrators, the number of reported incidents of MO Abuse compared to this time last year has significantly risen.
8. Match Officials at every level of Rugby have the right to be, and feel, safe and respected, week in, week out. There is a person at the end of the abuse. Recruitment and retention of Match Officials is already an ongoing challenge for our sport and will only worsen should they continue to be subject to abuse or incidents do not result in the strong sanctions they deserve.
9. Put simply, enough is enough. Without our Match Officials, there is no Game.
10. Whilst I know we are all working hard to eradicate this problem, collectively we need to be doing more. One way we can do that is through tougher sanctions for individuals





and Clubs who engage in MO Abuse to deter them and others from engaging in similar behaviour. This effort will sit alongside and be further complemented by the Three Strikes Policy set to commence across all community competitions in 2024.

### **On-field MO Abuse (Disciplinary Rules)**

11. All instances of MO Abuse are to be treated with the utmost seriousness and ought to be sanctioned as such.
12. The Disciplinary Rules require a four-step process for the determination of sanction and provide a sanction table in Appendix 1 that covers disrespect/dissent, verbal abuse, physical contact, threats, and physical abuse.
13. Whilst every case will be decided on its own facts, Rugby AU expects strong sanctions to be ordered in all types of MO Abuse cases so as to serve the objectives of general and specific deterrence.
14. In this regard, and not to erode the decision-making function of a Judicial Committee or Appeal Committee in any way, Rugby AU expects to see the following across all MO Abuse decisions made under the Disciplinary Rules:
  - a. Careful consideration being given to the level of seriousness of the offending and the consequential entry point for sanction. In MO Abuse cases, features such as the nature of the offending and the vulnerability of the MO are likely of significant and particular relevance and may of themselves have an overall increasing effect on the level of seriousness.
  - b. Careful consideration being given to whether a discount for reasons of mitigation is justified and if so, the amount. Rugby AU is concerned that in many cases, not just MO Abuse cases, the full 50% discount for mitigation is afforded to the individual where the circumstances do not merit it. Whilst important in all cases, we are urging that particularly careful consideration be given to whether the individual ought to be afforded the full 50% discount in MO Abuse cases.

World Rugby's guidance on mitigation is clear; whilst there is a range of mitigating factors that must be taken into account in determining whether a reduction is appropriate and the extent of any such reduction, in order to justify the full 50% **all** of the following must be present:

- Admission of the act of Foul Play
- Clean disciplinary record
- Apology (which must be meaningful and directed to the appropriate person/s or entity/s)





- Remorse (which must be genuine and considered against any attempt to explain away the behaviour).
- c. All sanctions (except those already at the Maximum of the sanction table) increased. In all cases, Judicial and Appeal Committees must determine whether the sanction ought to be increased on account of any aggravating factor. One such factor is whether there is a need to deter a particular type of offending where the teams have been put on notice that such a need exists. Accordingly, by reason of this directive and the directives from 2022, it must always follow that this factor is present and therefore the sanction **must be increased** in all MO Abuse cases. This increase must occur irrespective of an “already high” sanction entry point (even where that entry point is already in the upper range) and whether a reduction for mitigation has been afforded. The extent of that increase should be determined having regard to the seriousness of the conduct itself.

#### **Off-field MO Abuse (Code of Conduct)**

15. The Code of Conduct applies to all instances of off-field MO Abuse. All such instances, and alleged instances, are to be treated with the utmost seriousness and are to be sanctioned accordingly.
16. All proven instances of MO Abuse must be sanctioned. Whilst every case will be decided on its own facts, Rugby AU expects to see strong sanctions being proposed by Appointed Persons in Breach Notices and ordered by Code of Conduct Committees and Appeal Committees.
17. In this regard, and not to erode the decision-making function of a Judicial Committee or Appeal Committee in any way, Rugby AU expects to see the following across MO Abuse decisions made under the Code of Conduct:
- a. Given the serious nature of MO Abuse, the harm such abuse causes to the Match Official, the integrity and reputation of the Game, and its offence to the general public’s sensibilities, most MO Abuse cases being classified as a **Mid-Level or High-Level Breach**.
  - b. Sanctions incorporate a period of **suspension or exclusion**, given the above classification.

If we are going to stamp out MO Abuse, suspensions or exclusions are the only appropriate sanction. Reprimands, warnings, apologies, and fines on their own, are unlikely to achieve this aim. Whilst we do not want to see any members of our Rugby community spending time away from the Game, MO Abuse will not be tolerated, and the full force of the Code of Conduct ought to apply.





- c. The length of the period of suspension or exclusion must be reflective of the need to deter such behaviour by both the individual concerned and the Rugby community at large. That length should, in our view, be determined having appropriate regard to the length of sanctions outlined for the same conduct in the Disciplinary Rules. This is because MO Abuse is just as harmful whether it occurs on the field or off it.
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18. Sanctions that do not appear to have resulted from a proper application of the sanctioning process under the Disciplinary Rules or the Code of Conduct will be scrutinised and, where appropriate and in the interests of the Game, may even be appealed.
  19. All Member Unions who consider that a MO Abuse case within their Union may not have been sanctioned appropriately, must bring the case to Rugby AU's attention for its consideration.
  20. Thank you for your concern and your efforts to protect our Match Officials and the Core Values of our Game. Together we can ensure Match Officials are given the respect they deserve.

**Andy Marinos**

Chief Executive Officer

**14 June 2023**

