

The Character Clause
by Tony Hales

I have a thorough knowledge of the Laws and Interpretations of Australian Football and can apply them, I am one of the fittest umpires in the group, I average over 90% for my bouncing, I am conscientious with set kick control, I have excellent communication and observation skills.

Why am I being overlooked for the main Grand Final or why am I unlikely to ever take my umpiring to the next level?

Am I a person of the highest character?

There are certain characteristics which an AFL umpire must possess and indeed these apply to officials in any sport. The AFL Umpires Association lists INTEGRITY as its core value and the supporting values of FAIRNESS, RESPECT and TRUST.

So how do these apply in the match day conduct of umpires or perhaps to put it in a more pertinent way, "How do they pervade the entire day to day behaviour of the umpire?"

The football world has certain expectations of umpires and apart from the aspects such as having the necessary knowledge to actually umpire the game and see that it is played in a fair manner, overseeing the administrative requirements such as match day paperwork and having the necessary level of fitness to get into a comfortable decision making position, I believe the following are just as important.

Umpires must speak appropriately at all times taking into considerations such as never belittling players, treating players with respect, not getting into arguments and long winded explanations where having the last word is paramount and basically speaking to players in a manner in which you would like to be spoken to.

Recently, I was looking at some observations I wrote for umpires about five years ago. The following extract was what I wrote for a 21 year old umpire who had been umpiring for three years and had aspirations of umpiring at a higher level:

You need a totally new approach to your umpiring. Communication was unacceptable. "Oi, you, get back here, it's a mark", "Get out of the 50" to the runner, "Get back, get back or you're gone". If you keep speaking to players and officials like this, you'll get no respect and you'll end up with reports every week (as had been happening). When you have to speak, be polite. Ask, don't tell players what to do. Just think how you would resent it if you were spoken to in this authoritarian manner.

The advice was heeded and the umpire concerned became a better communicator and ended up umpiring a senior Grand Final at local level that year.

However, his off field behaviour wasn't always exemplary. In the following year he turned up to one of the finals as a spectator obviously intoxicated and began abusing club officials who knew he was an umpire. The image portrayed by this umpire damaged the reputation of the whole umpiring group from that league.

Given the negative views that many people in football have of umpires, it is so important that umpires uphold those values of integrity, fairness, respect and trust. How can anyone respect or trust an umpire who behaves in such an unacceptable way?

Before 1990 when VFL/AFL umpires would travel to country leagues to umpire, they learnt how to conduct themselves in a different environment. The umpire stood out in his suit, everyone knew who he was and it went without saying that if he couldn't gain the respect of the locals, it would impact on his umpiring performance.

That's not to say that umpires who travelled around the Victorian, New South Wales and South Australian countryside didn't know how to have a good time. They did but the vast majority of them earned the respect of their hosts by conducting themselves judiciously.

The same applies today. An umpire must always be in complete control of himself/herself and his/her behaviour towards others before, during and after the game. After the match, the umpire should accept a club's hospitality but never outstay his/her welcome.

The first thing that most people notice about an umpire is how he or she is dressed. Most umpiring groups have regulations about dress standards and it is important for the image of any umpiring group that these are adhered to.

However, the appearance of umpires on the field can also have an impact on how people react to umpires. If an umpire is looking disheveled it might be as a result of a faded shirt or socks or dirty shoes or boots. It mightn't result in better decision making but the highest standards in appearance can affect how others perceive you and in umpiring that is a big part of how seriously people are going to regard you and maybe even affect their level of respect for you.

If an umpire attends to these matters he or she is exhibiting self-discipline and self-respect but a further aspect of this is the respect that the umpire shows for the opinions of his or her coaches.

A young umpire recently told me that there were only four people he regarded as having opinions worthy of him listening to. At first this might sound like an arrogant out of touch comment but I actually think it demonstrates that this young man has a very discerning view of what he needs to do to advance in his umpiring, a view which he has garnered after listening to a lot of advice from about 100 umpires he would have run with and about ten coaches who would have observed him.

I only mention this anecdote because this particular umpire is never disrespectful by not paying attention when someone he doesn't rate seeks to offer him some advice. He'll listen, process it and then determine whether the advice can do anything for him.

I'm a firm believer that any umpire who has a thorough knowledge of the laws and their interpretations and is able to apply them, has a high level of fitness and has the skill to bounce a football so that it is contestable can make it to the top of their profession.

However, unless that person is of sound character and can communicate effectively, is a positive role model in behaviour and appearance, treats everyone they meet with respect and seeks continual self-improvement, then they will fall by the wayside just as so many have over the years.

To quote the AFLUA again, "The AFLUA brand represents values which together with the desire, capability, strength and the courage of one's convictions to make the right decision, portrays the image of ethical, responsible and accountable conduct."