

SOUTH EAST UMPIRES MONDAY MIXER

ELITE HOCKEY COACHING PERSPECTIVE

SUPPORTING EXCELLENCE IN UMPIRING

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Welcome

Thank you for the opportunity to share insights from Premier League and international hockey. This presentation aims to bridge the gap between coaching and umpiring perspectives, strengthening our shared commitment to developing the game.

Today's Focus

8 areas where coaching and umpiring perspectives align to create the best possible environment for elite hockey.

1. How the game is developing in terms of tactics - particularly in terms of final third of the pitch.
2. What rules are players particularly keen to exploit to get an advantage?
3. Pre-match - what do you appreciate as a coach from your umpires?
4. Communication with / from the bench - any observations that colleagues may find interesting in terms of management and communication.
5. Setting boundaries - what do you and your players appreciate early on in a game?
6. Ladder of escalation (in terms of offences) works most effectively for your players?
7. in terms of decision making - what areas of the game do umpires need to focus on the most in terms of consistency and accuracy?
8. How can we recruit more top players into the umpiring ranks after they retire from top level hockey?

1. Tactical Evolution: The Final Third

Modern Attacking Patterns

Crash balls and counter pressing: Teams are playing more balls into the circle to play the percentages and strikers are skilful at counter pressing defenders and not giving away a free hits.

Aerials vs Zonal and M2M defence: Use of aerial balls into the circle.

Transition speed: Quick transitions from defensive press to attacking overloads in the circle.

Pass quality: Switching play from baseline to top of circle, exploiting defensive shape

Implications for Umpiring

Aware of defensive team tactics (Zone and M2M).

Positioning is crucial: More bodies in the circle means more potential for obstruction, stick block, physical play and the urge to give an easy free hit to the defence.

Early recognition of aerial ball and landing zones, particularly in the circle.

Circle entries: More varied entry points requires excellent positioning.

Quick transition (speed and fitness).

2. Rule Exploitation & Tactical Fouls

Common Areas of Exploitation

Body positioning in the circle: Attackers learning to "buy" fouls by initiating contact while appearing to be fouled.

Breakdown play delays: Defenders slowing quick free hits through "accidental" positioning or slow retreat.

Aerial ball receptions: Players aerial reception towards the defender to make it appear that they are obstructed.

Self-pass manipulation: Using self-pass to draw defenders into 5m violations.

Tactical fouls: Deliberate fouls outside the 23m to prevent dangerous transitions.

What Coaches Appreciate

Umpires who recognise **patterns of behaviour** rather than isolated incidents. We want fair play, but we also want consistency when players are attempting to gain unfair advantages systematically.

3. Pre-Match: The Foundation

What Coaches Value

- ✓ **Professionalism and punctuality:** Arriving in good time, being prepared and focused.
- ✓ **Calm confidence:** An umpire who radiates authority without arrogance sets the right tone.
- ✓ **Consistency between umpires:** Pre-match alignment between both umpires on key focus areas and clear comms between umpires during matches.

What We Don't Need

- ✗ **Lengthy pre-match discussions about specific rules or interpretations**
- ✗ **Warnings about what you'll be "looking for" - this can create unnecessary tension**

4. Bench Communication

The Reality of Modern Benches

Premier League benches are emotional, passionate environments. Multiple voices, high stakes, and rapid substitutions create complexity.

Identify the head coach: Know who you need to communicate with and manage. Although the Team manager is responsible for the bench, there is value in building a relationship with the Head coach. Although not always possible.

Brief, factual explanations: When we question a decision, we want clarity not debate.

Don't ignore escalation: Address rising tensions early before they become unmanageable

What Works Well

- **Proactive approach:** "Coach, that's enough" said early and calmly is far better than letting frustration build.
- **Consistency in management:** If you manage one bench, manage both the same way
- **Acknowledge valid questions:** "I've seen it, I'll keep watching" goes a long way.
- **Use breaks effectively:** Quarter breaks are opportunities to reset relationships if needed.

5. Setting Early Boundaries

First 10 Minutes Are Critical

Players and coaches read the game through early decisions. This sets the tone for 70/60 minutes.

Physical contact standards: How much body contact will you allow in tackles?

Breakdown play: Will you allow players to slow quick restarts?

Restart location: How much wriggle room are we going to allow for precision of free hit location and stopping the ball?

Communication with players: Managing dissent from the first whistle.

What Players Respect

- ✓Firm but fair: Strong early decisions that are consistent throughout.
- ✓Verbal warnings that matter: If you warn, follow through with cards when needed.
- ✓Controlling captains: Use team captains to manage player behaviour collectively.
- ✓Clear communication: Brief explanations help players adjust their game.

6. Effective Escalation Ladder

Level 1: Verbal Warning

Pattern emerging, tactical fouls, persistent infringement - make it clear and public.
Sometimes it's just one team.

Level 2: Green Card

Continued infringement after warning, deliberately breaking down play, minor dissent.

Level 3: Yellow Card

Repeated green card offences, dangerous play, clear tactical fouls, dissent.

Level 5: Red Card

Serious dangerous play, violence, serious dissent/abuse.

Coaches Thoughts

- Don't skip steps unnecessarily: But also don't over-warn - if warned, card next time.
- Some warnings are for a particular team and will be for everyone, make this clear.
- Explain the ladder: Let captains know where players are on the escalation path.

7. Critical Decision-Making Areas

Where Consistency Matters Most

1. Circle Decision - Penalty Corner and penalty stroke.

The biggest game-changers. Need absolute clarity on legitimate goal-scoring opportunity vs. breakdown play.

2. Stick Tackle Contact

Body vs. ball contact is the most common area of dispute. Consistency across both umpires is vital.

3. Obstruction - Shielding vs. Legitimate Play

Modern 3D skills make this complex. Focus on whether the player is playing the ball or just blocking.

4. Breakdown Play - Tactical vs. Accidental

Players know how to slow the game. Pattern recognition is crucial here.

5. Aerial Ball Interference

5m rule application varies hugely between umpires - this needs standardisation.

We can accept tough decisions going against us. What frustrates coaches and players is **inconsistency** - between umpires, between halves, or between similar incidents. Accuracy develops with experience, but consistency should be non-negotiable.

8. Recruiting Retired Players

The Challenge

Many elite players finish their careers and want to stay involved. Umpiring offers a pathway, but we're not capitalising on this pool of expertise effectively.

Barriers we hear from players:

- "It takes too long to reach a competitive level"

"I don't want to start at junior level when I've just retired from international hockey"

"The time commitment to progress is too high with work/family"

"I'd feel awkward umpiring players I just competed against"

Potential Solutions

1. **Fast-track programme:** Elite players have game understanding - create an accelerated pathway that recognises this.
2. **Video feedback roles:** Position these as entry points that use tactical knowledge while learning officiating.
3. **Mentorship from current elite umpires:** Pair them with top officials from day one.
4. **Flexible start points:** Begin at National League level based on assessments.
5. **Financial support:** Elite umpiring should be properly compensated to make it viable.
6. **Active recruitment:** Personally approach retiring internationals rather than waiting for them to express interest.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Understand the tactical evolution of the game, particularly in the attacking third.
- ✓ Recognise patterns of exploitation early and manage them proactively.
- ✓ Set clear boundaries in the first 10 minutes.
- ✓ Use a clear, progressive escalation ladder.
- ✓ Prioritise consistency over perfection in key decision areas.
- ✓ Actively recruit and support retired elite players into umpiring.

Thank You

*Questions and discussion
welcome.*