

Australian research points to national referee bias

March 24 2014, by Rose Trapnell



Professor Lionel and Dr Katie Page's research into international refereeing has confirmed what many think - the refs can be biased - just not always intentionally so.

An avalanche of penalties and yellow cards against the Queensland Reds in their game against the Lions in Johannesburg at the weekend is an example of what many suspect and QUT research proves - the referees are biased, though it might not be intentional.

The Reds fell to the Lions 23-20 after having led 20-3 late in the first half and were on the receiving end of a 17-4 penalty count from South African referee Stuart Berry that saw them down to 13 players.

QUT researchers Professor Lionel and Dr Katie Page have found that bias is tied to a referees' identity.

"Put simply, when a referee is of the same nationality as one of the teams in the match he's refereeing, there's a good chance his decisions will favour that team," Professor Lionel Page said.

The researchers from the Queensland Behavioural Economic (QuBE) group primarily looked at data from the Super 14 Rugby Union competition in 2009 involving South African, New Zealand and Australian teams and the European Super League from 2006 to 2009 involving one French and the rest British teams.

But they've also considered results in Super Rugby in 2011 and more recently the Queensland Reds v South African Natal Sharks game in July 2012.

"We found evidence that referees tend to systematically favour their own national teams and this favouritism has a strong impact on the result of matches," Professor Lionel Page said.

The QUT researchers carefully compared the results of teams referred by an official of their same nationality to the situation when the referee was neutral. They found that, controlling for teams' ability, teams were much more successful when they were facing a team from another country with a referee from their own nationality.

Prof Page said research indicated such bias was systematic throughout the Super Rugby competition.

"This is not just about referees making mistakes. We've discovered a systematic bias in favour of home or national teams."

He said while national bias was always considered to be a factor in sports such as figure skating and gymnastics where a measure of subjectivity was involved, in sports such as rugby this was not thought to be the case

because referees were considered to enforce rules rather than judging performance.

Professor Page said not only do referees make more decisions in favour of the team of their own nationality, the favouritism is more likely to happen at critical times of the match when the issuing of yellow and red cards or the awarding of tries when the scorelines are close.

He said the research found bias was more likely to happen when a degree of ambiguity was involved and when scorelines were close, particularly towards the end of the match

At the same time, the QUT research shows referees are less likely to be biased when matches are televised or relayed enabling strong crowd or audience scrutiny and when the scoreline difference is large, particularly towards the end of the match.

Professor Page's said research did not look at how conscious or otherwise referee bias was but pointed out that referees' decisions were made under intense pressure and in split seconds.

He put forward several possible solutions to the problem.

- Introduce neutral referees
- Ensure [referees](#) receive better training and make them aware of allegations of bias
- Monitor referee performance for use in the evaluation of their professional performance
- Give teams a "challenge" option like in sports such as tennis, cricket or American football. Team could ask one or two contentious decision per match to be reviewed by the television referee.

He said the research had implications for all sports competitions

involving [teams](#) from different countries not just rugby.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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