



24th August 2023

Dear Honorary Secretary

Re: Start of the 2023/24 Club Rugby Season

Last season, for the first time in three years, we were able to complete our domestic fixtures free from the effects of Covid. As a result, it was possible to apply our normal promotion and relegation for the first time since 2018/19. We therefore have a lot to look forward to in 2023/24 as all our leagues are likely to be at their most competitive since 2019. Those who were promoted face stiff challenges as they move up, and no doubt those who were relegated will be seeking to bounce back at the first time of asking.

With the domestic season about to begin, I wanted to write to all clubs in Ulster to remind them of their responsibilities in relation to maintaining standards of behaviour across the game. Over the past few seasons, the IRFU (Ulster Branch) has implemented a series of measures to address bad behaviour. I wish to reinforce the Branch position by drawing your attention to the following:

- **Code of Conduct** – a Code of Conduct, developed in conjunction with the IRFU, for players, coaches, volunteers and spectators is attached to this letter in Appendix 1. This must be prominently displayed within your club, circulated to all members and spectators via your various communication channels along with a reminder that your club will act against any unacceptable behaviour. In addition, Ulster Branch will also circulate media friendly versions of codes of conduct for sharing through the club's various social media platforms under the #respectURgame banner.
- **Referee Liaison Officer** – all clubs are required to appoint a Referee Liaison Officer (RLO), whose main role is be the point of contact with referees at home matches and to ensure any reported breaches of the code are followed up by the Club through the Club's Hon Secretary (see appendix 2 to this letter). **All** club matches, including youth, girls' and womens' must have a Referee Liaison Officer **or a designated nominee** in attendance. In the event of an incident of referee abuse the referee should report the problem as soon as it occurs to the RLO or his/her nominee who should take immediate action to address the matter through the Club's Honorary Secretary.
- **Acknowledgement of having undertaken the requirements above** – all clubs must sign the attached pro-forma to confirm that they have complied with the above requirements and return this to the Ulster Branch before the end of September 2023. Failure to do so could result in severe sanctions being applied to the club.

It may be appropriate at this time to remind clubs that the Branch has recently updated the criteria for the calculation of international ticket entitlement. Points have been deducted from each club for every red card and subsequent suspensions applied during last season, resulting in a reduction of tickets to the offending clubs.

At the Ulster Branch Council meeting at the beginning of August I paid tribute to our volunteers, without whom our clubs could not survive. I stated that clubs would not stand for a situation in which one of your hard-working volunteers was verbally or physically abused in your clubhouse or on your grounds. Please remember that our referees are also volunteers, their abuse is unacceptable and will not be tolerated by the Branch.

It is therefore the intention of the Branch going forward that off-field misbehaviour, especially that of referee abuse, will be carefully recorded and that such incidents could result in a significant reduction in a club's entitlement to international tickets.

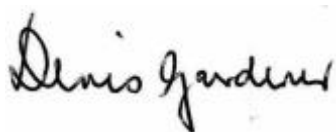
It is our understanding that in one of our fellow provinces, a club recently lost 50% of its international ticket allocation as a sanction for referee abuse.

When used responsibly, social media is an excellent medium for the sharing of information. Unfortunately, there have been instances of social media channels being used as a means of criticising and/or commenting negatively on various aspects of rugby within Ulster including the performance of referees, comments on opposition players and teams etc. The Branch, while encouraging the continued use of social media, would ask clubs and individuals to adhere to the same standards of good behaviour on social media as they are required to do at matches. Inappropriate postings which breach our code of conduct will inevitably be referred to the Off-field Disciplinary Panel.

The core value of respect must remain at the forefront of all that we do.

Finally, I hope to get around as many clubs, and to watch as many domestic matches as my schedule will allow during 2023/24. I am pleased to have this opportunity to offer my best wishes to all Ulster clubs throughout the season. Some will win leagues or cups; others will be less successful. Whatever the outcome of your season, I very much hope that it will be injury-free and enjoyable.

Yours in rugby,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denis Gardiner". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Denis Gardiner
President
IRFU (Ulster Branch)