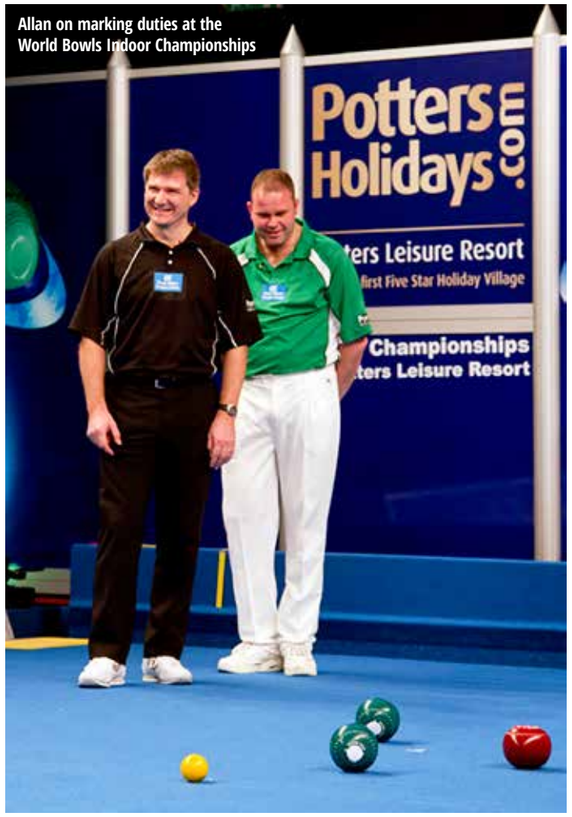
Official's ethos

It is rare for me to be disillusioned with the recruitment and standard of umpires. After all they are volunteering their time to help the sport we all love stay on track in respect of the Laws of the Sport.



Allan on marking duties at the World Bowls Indoor Championships

It may be me just being paranoid, but I have noticed a change in the 'quality' of official over several years. I can't quite put my finger on when the trend started, many still blame COVID-19 for quite a lot of things, and I find it hard to define the change. It seems to be a combination of attitude, self-importance, lack of understanding of the game and pedantry.

In my own experience, I often speak about my approach as similar to that of Italian soccer referee, Pierluigi Collina, named as the world's best referee for several years. His autobiography, *The Rules of the Game* took me into the world of the referee, the preparation needed for each game, the managing of players and the other officials and the camaraderie behind the scenes. You probably should understand that I have no interest whatsoever in the game of football and avoid it at all cost. However, this book struck a chord with me and, to an extent, influenced my ongoing approach to officiating the sport of bowls. Not really a like for like you may imagine, but the principles and approach taken by these top referees are what I believe should be embedded in our own approach to umpiring.

Officiating is a challenging role, often undertaken in a potentially hostile environment, granted not on the same parr as football though. Umpires need to be of strong character if they are able to cope with the officiating environment in a positive manner. It is important that umpires know their own strengths and weaknesses in order to undertake effective self management. Umpires need to develop a philosophy towards their involvement in sport that is in line with the aims of the competition. Umpires should be aware that their approach to officiating can influence the players' experience and enjoyment of the sport.

> **"Umpires need to be of strong character if they are able to cope with the officiating environment in a positive manner"**

One of the most important aspects of the umpire's role is to relate well with players and others prior to, during and following competition. The adage of 'treating people as you would like to be treated' provides an appropriate model for relating to others in the sporting environment. An individual's style and manner will have an impact on the relationship with those with whom they are engaging. All participants and others associated with the sport should be treated with respect and, where appropriate, empathy. Of course, there should also be an inclusive approach and style, regardless of the participant's gender, race, disability, religion or age.

Each umpire becomes the 'face' of officiating at competitions. People often judge all umpires by how an individual umpire behaves, hence the need for professional and responsible approaches when dealing with participants, coaches, administrators and others involved with competitions.

ATTRACTING EXPERIENCED PLAYERS

So that is the ideal, but where is that all going wrong.

I am seeing instances of individuals wanting to become umpires after just one or two years experience of playing. Whilst it is commendable for those to gain a better understanding of the laws, going out on the field and applying them is a very different matter with very little practical experience. Recruitment of officials is a challenge especially of those that have a very good understanding of the game by being accomplished players. This in my opinion is absolutely key to understanding the application of Laws.

Why is it we are unable to lure the younger competitive player to the officiating role? I guess the answer is simple, it's very difficult to both play and officiate at a high level. That was certainly my experience and whilst I stuck to playing competitive bowls until I was an established international official, playing eventually lost its appeal.

I don't mean to be rude but the vast majority of individuals that we see coming into officiating are on the older side of middle aged many of whom may have reached the twilight years of their competitive playing careers or recognised that they will never be much good but wish to be involved in the sport, nonetheless. When carrying out introductions on umpire training workshops the common reasons for becoming umpires are:

- I am struggling with bowling on outdoor greens nowadays.
- I want to learn more about the laws because of all the disputes in my club
- I am (was) a coach and now want to become an umpire
- I want to give something back to the game.

All very commendable reasons.

An umpire briefing at the 2022 Commonwealth Games

ATTITUDE AND RESPECT

When I first qualified at age 21, I had to gain a lot of respect in order to be taken seriously by players for whom I was officiating. I had already been playing for over seven years and whilst not of any particularly high standard, I understood how the game was played. I was lucky, I had good mentors both as a player and as an official.

We often hear comments from players and spectators about how over officious a particular umpire is. Why is that? What prompts those comments? Is it the attitude taken by the official or are they just being super pedantic. For me, being an official is about being part of the teams, working with them to assist with the smooth running of the game. Those that are antagonistic are often ignored on the field and will simply be standing in the corner not being called.

CHALLENGING SITUATION

To end, I am seeing an ever-increasing number of individuals that like to challenge established principles, processes and experience even before they are qualified or very recently qualified. There is nothing wrong with an enquiring mind but when it develops into obsessive challenging behaviours then one has to question what type of official they going to be out in the field. Are they a team player? Why did they want to become officials? Dare I say it, are they on a power trip? Whatever the case maybe, these challenges and attitudes undermine those that work hard to do a great job for the sport, either as active officials, administrators running a process or both.

> **"Recruitment of officials is a challenge especially of those that have a very good understanding of the game by being accomplished players"**

Thankfully, I believe these traits to still be in a minority and there are many hundreds of excellent officials that do a fantastic role in serving this sport. As the saying goes: 'It only takes one bad apple.' Let's hope the orchard is still confined to one small tree.

Allan chatting to Darren Burnett (Scotland) and Robert Paxton (England) at the 2010 Commonwealth Games

Communication is key when you are an umpire