

Walter Berry

# A 45th and last season for Mister Berry

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An emblematic figure in Quebec student football, Walter Berry will begin his 45th season as an official next summer (translator's: summer of 2019). It will be the last.

« I started when I was 15, a bit by chance when the referee did not show up for a match and I was asked to do it for him because I was the youngest coach of both teams. I liked the experience on the field, and I understood that it could become a nice little job on the weekends, leaving me time for my studies. »

« One of my best memories goes back to my first game with a full crew of officials. I had to make a decision on a play and some colleagues wanted to overturn it. The referee then declared: "He was the best positioned on this play; it is he who will decide!" »

« It gave me confidence and I always continued. I had the chance to climb the ladder. In 1989, I started making university games and was hired in 1999 in the Canadian Football League [CFL], where I worked for six seasons. However, I noticed that the mentality was different, it became more of a "real" job, and I preferred to focus on amateur football later. »

## **Great evolution**

The work of an official obviously evolved a lot in 45 years. "In my first year of university, we had to do an exam at the beginning of the year, we made it all together, giving each other the answers, before going for a beer! said Mr. Berry. Today, we must take training courses during the summer, pass a real exam; then we see each other before the start of the season for a series of physical tests. It's not as demanding as it is for athletes, of course, but there is a question of pride and everyone wants to prove that it has his place on the field.

« *The preparation has completely changed. People often think, "Ah, referees. They arrive a few minutes before the game, mess things up, pick up their check and go home." It may have been true in my early days, but it's not the case anymore.* »

— Walter Berry

« It's much more rigorous, says Berry. Take the last Vanier Cup [where he officiated as referee]. I had prepared a game plan during the week because I had to coordinate the work of all the officials. We arrived several hours before the game to review things to watch and make sure we were all on the same page, as there were officials from all four Canadian conferences. »

« And after the game, we took a few hours to review all the plays, write down what we could have improved and write a full report to our supervisors. It looks a lot like what we do all season. »

### **Inevitable errors**

With the increased media coverage of university football, the broadcast of games on TV and the internet, the proliferation of social media discussion forums, the work of the officials is obviously subject to more attention and mistakes are inevitable. Always involved in important games, Mr. Berry is often the target of sharp criticism of fans.

« I do not pay attention, he says. I'm not on social media and I do not read newspapers very much. As an official, you can not be on the lookout for things on the field; you must follow the action and react to what is happening. »

« Where it changes something is in the rules. The rules are much stricter now with special attention to all the upper body hits, especially to the head. We have to penalize those hits and we do it, but that does not change the way we referee a game. We must also respect the spirit of the game: we do not want to eliminate football from football, but we have to make it safer.

The exponential progression of the level of play in Quebec student football, with players ever heftier, stronger, faster, is not without imposing challenges to officials. Everything happens very quickly, and we have only a fraction of a second to make a decision.

« Football is a sport of angle, point of view, reminds Berry. If you are in the right place, it's very simple, if you're not, it becomes more complicated. You have to make your decision with what you have seen, and it sometimes happens that the faulty gesture has escaped your eyes. »

The referee admits having made mistakes during his career. He remembers, for example, having ejected Arnaud Gascon-Nadon of the Laval Rouge et Or during the 2011 Dunsmore Cup final against the Carabins. The defensive end had advanced on the field only to separate two players who were going to fight.

« I did not want things to get out of hand, but I selected the wrong culprit," Berry recalls. He [Gascon-Nadon] was in danger of being suspended for the Mitchell Cup and I immediately recognized my mistake. After the game, when the supervisor asked me what should be written in the official report of the game, I told him: "I was wrong! No one was ejected from this game. " »

### **His "friends" the coaches**

« I knew Danny Maciocia when he was a midget coach and I refereed games that Glen Constantin took part as a player; Walter Berry explains. I have known them for a long time and our relationship is excellent, despite all the pressure they face nowadays at the head of football programs that are as big as those of professional teams. "We meet all the coaches before the season to review the rules, the changes when there are, and to see with them how they want them to be applied. Take the example of holding penalties. There are probably occurring on all plays and we try to penalize only players who have had influence on the action. Some coaches, however, want us to not let anything go, by taking the time to explain how this can always have an impact. Of course, Danny [Maciocia] or Glen [Constantin] find this more questionable when you point to one of their players, but that's part of the game! »

### **In all conditions**

In 45 years, Walter Berry has experienced all situations in football. "When I started," he says, "there was a park in Trois-Rivières where all kicks were to be made at the same end of the field; at the other end, the ball would have gone to the river! And it happened to me to referee in all weather conditions, - 35 cold, snowstorms ... The worst, however, are the games played under the cold rains of autumn. We are completely soggy, completely frozen too, and it takes long hot showers after the game to recover a little. But that is also football! "

### **A succession for the officials?**

"There are good young officials, but it's hard to keep them and you always have to recruit new ones," says Walter Berry, who has been working for several years on recruits training and exams and being responsible for writing and translating rules. "It's difficult because young people seem less motivated than before. You really have to love football, and the officials of my generation are all true amateurs, who can spend hours discussing rules, plays or what we can do to improve things. Today, I often see officials who barely know their rules book, because they think they are indispensable and that we will give them a job whatever their competence ... "

### **Retirement?**

"I feel like I'm still at the top and I'll be happy to have one more season this year, even though my body is starting to get more painful after the games. However, I would not want to continue a "season too much", find myself in a position where I make a bad decision because I am no longer able to follow the game. And there are young people who are ready to take my place. If I do not leave, who can become the next Mr. Berry? "

Original article :

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