

12th July 2025

Language

**"Jack was embarrassed – never hero more,
And as he knew not what to say, he swore."**

Lord Byron, *The Island* (1823)

In my twenties, I was a football referee. I was qualified to referee amateur football, and I was involved with under-14 games, youth-club matches, Boys Brigade tournaments, and the like. I loved keeping in touch with the kids who played, and football matches were a much-needed respite from the busyness and stress of parish ministry. And the exercise was good too.

There was never much trouble with my age-group. The youngsters were respectful and played fair. But as with refereeing at all levels, I always met the teams in their dressing-rooms before a game, to introduce myself, remind youngsters to "play to the whistle" and, above all, make it absolutely clear that no "foul and abusive language" would be tolerated. It's a no-no in football. In plain terms, swearing simply isn't allowed.

But ... even with such a strong "law", there was always room for interpretation. Swearing *at* an opponent or team-mate was strictly off limits. Even swearing at a spectator brought severe punishment. And as for directing bad language at *me* – absolutely unthinkable. But what about the odd "swear word"? What about the kid who misses an open goal and shouts "Shit!", to no one in particular? What about getting thumped by a heavy tackle and muttering, "Bugger! Bugger!" as you roll around?

Even if Lord Byron's Jack *is* embarrassed, the "hero" mantle can slip, and, when no other words can be found, he swears! In a football match, a quiet word from the referee usually suffices. A little warning, a reminder, a comment, a highlighting, is generally all that's needed. It's about what's appropriate, and what isn't. And, of course, it's about finding the more acceptable words that Byron's Jack failed to find.

The old song reminds us: "Oh, be careful little lips what you say." Language is precious. There *are* richer ways of expressing ourselves than by resorting to "foul and abusive language". There are better words for Jack, and for all of us, to use. All that's required is a bit of self-restraint – even if all we're doing is expressing our frustration, as we miss an open goal or end up writhing in agony on the ground after a heavy tackle.

A prayer for today

I hope I can find the right words today, and link them with the right actions.