



An Open Letter to the Central Victorian Football Community

From AFL Central Victoria and the Bendigo Umpires Association

To all affiliated clubs, players, members, parents, and spectators,

When watching a game of football, have you ever stopped to count how many mistakes are made during play? A poorly timed handball, a missed shot on goal, a tackle that gives away a free kick – all decisions made in the heat of the moment. These errors are part of the game, and we accept them because we know players are trying their best under pressure.

Umpires, too, are part of the game. Like players, they make split-second decisions. And like players, they will occasionally make mistakes. Even our most experienced umpires cannot get every decision right. But their commitment, effort, and intent should never be in question.

Unfortunately, we continue to see a troubling trend across our leagues: verbal abuse directed at umpires – some of whom are as young as 12 years old – by spectators, including adults. This is not only unacceptable; it is damaging to our game.

The Bendigo Umpires Association and AFL Central Victoria have received multiple reports this season of spectators berating umpires, both during games and as they leave the field. In some cases, groups of adults have targeted individual junior umpires.

Ask yourself: what is gained by this behaviour? Is it meant to impress others? To vent frustration? Whatever the motivation, the outcome is clear – it discourages young people from becoming, or remaining, involved in umpiring. And without umpires, there is no game.

Our region – covering six leagues including the BFNL, HDFNL, LVFNL, NCFL, CVFLW and BJFL – relies on the Bendigo Umpires Association to fill hundreds of appointments each weekend. That task is becoming harder every year. If the current trends continue, we will face a future where clubs may be forced to provide their own umpires, even at senior level – a burden we all want to avoid.

We all have a role to play in supporting umpires – especially our youngest ones. Like players, umpires need guidance and development, not hostility. Constructive feedback is a vital part of that growth. The **appropriate way to provide feedback** – whether positive or critical – is **formally through your affiliated club using official league communication channels**. This ensures all feedback is received in a respectful and structured way and can be reviewed and actioned by umpire coaching staff.

To the vast majority of our community who do the right thing: thank you. Your support helps create a safe and respectful environment for everyone involved in our game. To the small minority who cross the line: this behaviour will not be tolerated.

We all love football. We all want it to thrive. Let's work together to ensure our game remains inclusive, respectful, and sustainable for generations to come.

Respect the umpires. Respect the game.

AFL Central Victoria

Bendigo Umpires Association