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Refereeing as a Post-Athletic Career Option

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11 **Abstract**

12 Athletes may be especially primed to become referees, yet we do not know what former athletes
13 think about this career choice. To address the worldwide referee shortage, it is important to better
14 understand athletes' perceptions of refereeing. From a Career Contingency Model framework, it
15 is evident athletes' perception would influence their decision to consider refereeing. This study's
16 aim was to examine athletes' perceptions of the refereeing environment (RQ1) and identify
17 referee recruitment barriers (RQ2). Utilizing a descriptive phenomenological approach, 23
18 current and former athletes took part in semi-structured interviews based on their lived
19 experience as an athlete. The participants identified the officiating environment as a High Stress
20 Environment with Financial Instability, while Time and Lack of Knowledge and Support were
21 identified as recruitment barriers. The results contributed to the burgeoning line of research
22 attempting to address the global referee shortage and provide both theoretical and practical
23 implications for sport managers.

24 *Keywords:* referee, athletic career, referee recruitment, sport official, sport officiating

25 **Refereeing as a Post-Athletic Career Option**

26 Most organized sports, including basketball, football, and soccer, require a referee who
27 acts as an arbitrary third party that enforces the rules of the sport. For some, refereeing is a full-
28 time job, and for others, it is viewed as a hobby or leisure choice (Phillips & Fairley, 2014).
29 Referees, also called officials, umpires, judges, etc., are an essential part of sport. Unfortunately,
30 the referee population is declining across all sports (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger, Kim, et
31 al., 2017, Zvosec, et al., 2021). This decline is problematic for the sport industry and sport
32 organizations, and the need to better recruit and retain referees is paramount. For example, in
33 Texas, 80% of officials quit after two seasons, and 70% of new youth soccer referees in South
34 Carolina quit after one season. The Florida High School Athletic Association has estimated a
35 loss of over 3,000 officials in a 10-year span while the Illinois High School Association lost an
36 estimated 1,500 officials across all sports in a 3-year span (Barnhouse, 2018). Consequently,
37 better understanding perceptions of the refereeing experience is vital to recruiting more referees
38 and addressing the current referee shortage.

39 The referee decline is not limited to the United States; sporting organizations across the
40 globe are having a difficult time recruiting and retaining referees (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013;
41 Zvosec et al., 2021). Hockey Canada, a national governing body of ice hockey and ice sledge
42 hockey, reported a 33% loss in registered officials each year for the past decade. The Ontario
43 Hockey Federation, a regional branch of Hockey Canada, experienced a 15% decrease in
44 registered officials between 2014 and 2017 (Fowler et al., 2019). Brackenridge et al. (2011)
45 described a 17% loss of active officials between 2008 and 2009 for the English Football
46 Association, the oldest governing body of football in the world.

47 Several factors, both on- and off- the- court or field, influence a person’s decision to
48 become a referee, as well as a referee’s decision to leave the profession (Warner et al., 2013). A
49 recent survey of over 17,000 officials from more than 15 different sports found five key elements
50 that led referees to begin and continue refereeing: the love of the game, the exercise, the
51 challenge, the participation in a competitive sport, and the hobby aspect (“NASO National
52 Officiating Survey,” 2017). Several researchers have reported similar or identical elements
53 playing a key role in the decision to become a referee (e.g., Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Phillips
54 & Fairley, 2014; Warner et al., 2013; Zvosec et al., 2021). Warner et al. (2013) reported that
55 staying part of the game and competition and challenge were the most salient factors that led
56 former basketball referees to begin refereeing. Among Australian rules football umpires, Phillips
57 and Fairley (2014) found that umpires described umpiring as a great exercise opportunity.
58 Umpires regularly trained to improve their fitness which was beneficial for both umpiring and
59 other sport pursuits outside of umpiring, such as recreational sport participation. Forbes and
60 Livingston (2013) found that the primary motivators for hockey officials were the love of the
61 game and the opportunity for exercise. By better understanding what draws people to refereeing,
62 sport managers can more effectively recruit. Based on these findings, it seems athletes would be
63 well suited for the role; however, we do not know what former athletes think about this career
64 choice. Thus, better understanding athletes’ perceptions of refereeing would build off this extant
65 and important literature base and would dually help to understand barriers to referee recruitment.

66 **Athlete to Referee?**

67 Athlete recruitment and retention, like referee recruitment and retention, are important
68 stages of one’s career. The athletic career is limited and unpredictable. Almost every athlete will
69 eventually reach a point where continuing to compete is difficult or strenuous; at that point,

70 athletes will need to find a new outlet or hobby to replace participation in their chosen sport
71 (Stier, 2007). The termination of an athlete's sporting career occurs through a myriad of events,
72 both sport related and non-sport related (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Erpič et al., 2004;
73 Fernandez et al., 2006; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 1999).
74 Athletic career termination, for either reason, is usually a step toward an individual's identity
75 shifting from athlete to non-athlete (Brown et al., 2018; Hickey & Roderick, 2017).

76 At the end of an athletic career, not only does an individual's identity shift, but so does
77 their career path. Similarly to Kadlcik and Flemr (2008), Cabrita et al. (2014) narrowed an
78 athlete's post-athletic career search to one of two paths: sport-related or sport-unrelated. Sport-
79 related professions allow an athlete to continue to fine-tune sport-related skills while sport-
80 unrelated professions do not. For a basketball player, a sport commentator or coach would be
81 sport-related professions; conversely, an engineer or chef would be sport-unrelated professions.
82 For an athlete, refereeing would be a sport-related profession. Lally and Kerr (2005) indicated an
83 athlete's identity influenced their career choice. That is, when a participant's athlete identity was
84 strong, their career choices were largely sport-related. Strongly identifying as an athlete was
85 characterized by a large focus on sport and limited time and desire for exploration in non-sport
86 extracurriculars such as music, theatre, arts, and social clubs. Conversely, when individuals'
87 student or academic identities were stronger than their athlete identity, participants' career
88 choices were largely sport-unrelated. Investing in the academic identity allowed for more varied
89 career exploration that strayed away from athletics (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Interestingly, Sartore-
90 Baldwin and Warner's work (2012) suggested that athletic identity does not seem to change over
91 time as both current and former athletes reported high athlete-identity. Thus, appealing to one's
92 athletic identity may prove valuable when recruiting new referees. Recently, Zvosec and

93 colleagues (2021) studied the social identities and motivations of sport officials. Their findings
94 showcased the criticality of “having a connection with sport, mentors serving as gatekeepers to
95 the officiating group, and group membership” (p. 1) in relation to officiating persistence. This
96 suggests that former athletes would be particularly well-suited for officiating considering their
97 inherent connection with sport and social identity as being a member of an important stakeholder
98 group (i.e., athletes) within the sport ecosystem.

99 Even as a part-time job or a hobby, refereeing can provide former athletes with a social
100 network, a way to stay in shape, and a new role to take on as their athletic career end (Kellett &
101 Warner, 2011; Phillips & Fairley, 2014). Although some researchers have determined factors
102 that attract people to refereeing (e.g., Warner et al., 2013; Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017; Ridinger,
103 Warner, et al., 2017; Zvosec et al., 2021), little to no empirical research has focused on athletes
104 specifically. Within popular media there are anecdotal accounts of former athletes who described
105 why they pursued the role of referee. For example, some former NFL players reportedly became
106 officials to “stay around the game” (DofuStream, 2019). More recently, two female former
107 college basketball players became referees to give back and stay close to the sport, as well as
108 encourage other females to officiate (Vandersloot, 2020). There are accounts of a few athletes
109 who chose to officiate, but there is little to no empirical research as to why they choose to do so.

110 The transition from being an athlete to being a referee is not instantaneous. There are
111 several steps required before moving from one position to the next, including transforming their
112 definition of the athlete role to include the position of referee and being enticed into refereeing.
113 Every athlete will eventually have to transition out of sport as an athlete; Stier (2007) described
114 this transition as a role exit. The role exit process illustrates four steps in which an individual
115 evaluates their current role, envisions alternative roles, and ultimately decides to leave their

116 current role; thus, creating an ex-role identity, which is the identity an individual creates after
117 they leave a role, in this case the athlete role. This process of creating an ex-role identity is
118 challenging, distressing and could take weeks or years to form after an athlete resigns from their
119 sport (Bowers, 2011; Cosh et al., 2013). This is also the point, which Cabrita et al. (2014)
120 described the two career paths emerge (i.e., sport-related or sport-unrelated).

121 **Referee Recruitment**

122 Given the global decline of referees, it is imperative to understand why anyone, athlete,
123 or non-athlete, would choose to begin officiating. A Furst (1989) study among sport officials
124 determined that an individual actively chooses to become a referee through various experiences,
125 including sport participation and interaction with significant others. In fact, 87% of referees
126 surveyed officiated a sport they previously played. Yet, it is clear not enough athletes are
127 choosing this path. Furst also indicated coaches and peers were the main significant others that
128 influenced recruitment and the top reasons for officiating were interest and enthusiasm in the
129 sport, challenge and excitement, and justice and fair play. Interest and enthusiasm, such as
130 wanting to stay close to the sport, was ranked as the most important reason by 75% of
131 respondents (Furst, 1989). A subsequent study further supported that individuals actively seek to
132 become a referee and that relationships with others, particularly other officials, were major
133 influencers in that decision (Furst, 1991). Warner and colleagues' (2013) concluded that initial
134 involvement was due to: wanting to stay part of the game, competition and challenge, becoming
135 part of a community, and remuneration. The findings of Furst (1989, 1991) and Warner et al.
136 (2013) have been further supported by the National Association of Sports Officials ("NASO
137 National Officiating Survey," 2017).

138 Phillips and Fairley (2014) found that umpiring enhanced lives, while Kellett and Warner
139 (2011) found the sense of community experience within the refereeing community was vital to
140 referees. Phillips and Fairley's work also emphasized that refereeing did not only increase
141 participants' physical fitness, but it also helped them establish an ex-role identity of 'elite
142 athlete.' Both studies suggest that the sporting atmosphere provides former athletes with a sense
143 of familiarity that promotes not only recruitment, but also retention. At the end of their athletic
144 career, athletes lose sport participation opportunities and a community of teammates. Refereeing
145 can address that by allowing athletes to stay part of the game and by providing a social
146 community (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Phillips & Fairley, 2014).

147 There are already many referees who consider themselves to be athletes (Jacobs et al.,
148 2019; Phillips & Fairley, 2014); therefore, the similarities between the two roles could
149 potentially be used to recruit athletes into referees. The path from athlete to referee can be
150 facilitated; however, a clear understanding of how athletes perceive the role of refereeing is
151 needed. Simply, understanding athlete's perceptions of refereeing could impact their future
152 decision to become a referee and is an important first step. Therefore, the purpose of this study is
153 to determine athletes' current perception of refereeing and to identify the barriers to referee
154 recruitment. This purpose will be carried out via the two research questions:

155 RQ1: What are athletes' perceptions of officiating environment?

156 RQ2: What are the perceived referee recruitment barriers for athletes upon ending their
157 athlete careers?

158 **Theoretical Framework**

159 Prus' (1984) Career Contingencies Model provides the theoretical framing for this study.
160 The model details factors that influence how an individual gets involved with a career as well as

161 why they continue, why they quit, and why they may choose to resume the career after quitting.
162 This Career Contingencies Model occurs through four phases: initial involvement, continuity,
163 disinvolvement, and reinvolvement. The model describes the full cycle of career involvement;
164 however, this study will mainly focus on initial involvement as this stage is a fundamental and
165 important first step to addressing the current referee shortage. Initial involvement entails seeking
166 a career, being recruited to join the career, and the factors that motivate an individual to pursue
167 that career.

168 The initial involvement process consists of four main stages that can occur independently
169 or simultaneously: seekership, recruitment, closure, and drift. When an individual is attracted to
170 an activity, they are in the stage of seekership. According to Prus (1984), this attraction or
171 seekership is molded by the individual's frame of reference about the activity coupled with how
172 significant others view the activity. For example, athletes at the end of their athletic career are
173 seeking another hobby or career. Existing knowledge of refereeing may attract them to the
174 profession and support from significant others will positively reinforce that attraction.
175 Recruitment is how others encourage involvement with an activity. This includes actively trying
176 to get an individual involved, supporting an individual's decision to get involved, or providing a
177 role for the individual to undertake while involved. Athletes can be recruited by friends or
178 coaches who referee, similar to how athletes are recruited to teams. In the closure stage, the
179 purpose of involvement is to meet a set of goals or obligations; involvement is a need rather than
180 a want. For example, former athletes who want to coach choose refereeing to gain a better
181 understanding of the game. In this case, refereeing is needed to reach the main goal of coaching.
182 By contrast, drift is activity involvement that stems from the freedom to act; there is no pressure
183 to get involved (Prus, 1984). Revising the previous example, some athletes choose refereeing

207 same phenomenon or concept, in this case being a current or former athlete. Descriptive
208 phenomenology includes categorizing the subjective lived experiences of participants as they
209 relate to a phenomenon without inserting any of the researcher's biases or knowledge (Giorgi,
210 2008; O'Halloran et al., 2018). This approach allows the researcher to define a phenomenon
211 solely based on explanations from the participants. Because the researchers are the main tool
212 used in data collection and analysis, it is important to acknowledge their positionality (Singer et
213 al., 2019). Author One is a current athlete, but previously exited sport and pursued a sport
214 unrelated career. The lead researcher's experience with exiting sport and then returning to pursue
215 a sport related career inspired this study. The lead researcher had no officiating experience or
216 prior familiarity with officiating recruitment or governance. Author Two and Three are former
217 athletes that have conducted several studies on sport officiating. Author Two did not pursue
218 refereeing, while Author Three is a former sport official. This outsider (i.e., author with little to
219 no refereeing knowledge) and insider (i.e., authors with substantial officiating experience and
220 knowledge) dynamic provides a balanced perspective (Tingle et al., 2014) and ensured
221 bracketing occurred. That is, the researchers were aware of their positionality and consciously set
222 aside all perceived notions and a priori knowledge, to stay focused on the descriptions of
223 experience of the participants (Bevan, 2014; O'Halloran et al., 2018). Specifically, athletes were
224 interviewed to better understand their lived experience of being an athlete, their perceptions of
225 the refereeing environment, and any barriers that prevent them from becoming a referee.

226 **Procedure**

227 After IRB approval was received, participants were recruited via snowball sampling
228 (Creswell, 2007). Flyers explaining the study were emailed to university club sport teams as well
229 as undergraduate and graduate level classes. Email recipients were encouraged to send the flyer

230 to any current or former athletes. To accommodate for COVID-19 meeting restrictions, video
231 interviews were conducted via WebEx. WebEx was used to record and transcribe the interviews.
232 Demographic items, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and education level, were collected at the end
233 of the interview. After the interview, the WebEx-generated transcript was reviewed and edited
234 twice by the lead researcher to ensure accuracy.

235 **Participants**

236 Because this study involved athletes' perception of referees, athletes involved in sports
237 where a referee plays a crucial role were recruited to participate. Sports like basketball, football,
238 and soccer require a referee to start and stop play, call out misconduct and/or illegal plays, and
239 keep play running smoothly. Conversely, sports like golf or swimming either do not require a
240 referee, or the referee has a trivial effect on game play. Therefore, 23 current and former athletes
241 who have played sports that require the use of a referee in a large capacity were recruited via
242 snowball sampling and voluntarily agreed to participate. Nine participants identified as current
243 athletes; the other 14 were former athletes. The sample included 12 females and 11 males, aged
244 19-39 years ($M = 23.7$, $SD = 4.96$). Over half of the participants were white (56.5%), 21.7%
245 were Asian, 17.4% were Hispanic, and 17.4% were Black. It is worth noting that the NASO
246 (2017) reported that 90% of referees were White and only 8% female. Thus, the more diverse
247 sample in this study is reflective of athletes. All participants reported having at least some
248 college as their highest level of education: 52.2% indicated receiving some college education and
249 the remaining 47.8% completed at least one post-secondary degree. Although most participants
250 reported playing multiple sports, ten sports that relied on heavily on a referee were represented:
251 rugby ($n = 11$), basketball ($n = 11$), soccer ($n = 10$), football ($n = 7$), baseball ($n = 6$), lacrosse (n
252 $= 3$), softball ($n = 3$), wrestling ($n = 3$), cricket ($n = 1$), and flag football ($n = 1$).

253 Instrument

254 Because little is known about athletes' perceptions of refereeing as a career, semi-
255 structured interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interview format is more fluid than a
256 structured interview and allowed the researcher to adapt their questions or topics based on the
257 responses given by the participant (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Importantly, semi-structured
258 interviews "can produce powerful data that provide insights into the participants' experiences,
259 perceptions or opinions" (Peters & Halcomb, 2015, p.6). An interview guide was used to keep
260 the conversation on topic while also allowing the participant to expand on whatever they choose.
261 Thus, the researchers had the freedom to reword the questions so they were better understood by
262 the participant (Edwards & Holland, 2013). This process aligns with the descriptive
263 phenomenology approach by allowing the participants to drive the conversation with minimal
264 input from the researcher (O'Halloran et al., 2018). The interview guided started with broad
265 questions and then narrowed to ask about specific questions guided by insights from the Career
266 Contingencies Model. For example, "*What sport(s) have you played?*"; "*How important are*
267 *referees to sport?*"(*seekership*); "*Have you ever had a specific positive or negative experience*
268 *with a referee? What do you think are some of the factors that encourage individuals to*
269 *referee?*" (*recruitment*); "*Are you aware that there is a referee shortage around the world?*"
270 (*closure*); "*Have you ever thought about becoming a referee?*" (*drift*). By following a five-step
271 process to develop the interview guide (Kallio et al., 2016), these broad, open-ended questions
272 decreased the prevalence of response bias and increased the likelihood of spontaneous, in-depth,
273 unique responses.

274 Data Analysis

298 considering becoming a referee. While not all the data can be included, through an iterative
299 process, the researchers came to an agreement on the inclusion of each quote based on its
300 saliency, representativeness of the theme, and aim to ensure all participants were heard (Dixon,
301 Warner, et al., 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The identified themes related to RQ1 (“What
302 are athletes’ perceptions of officiating environment?”) are presented first, and followed by RQ2
303 results (“What are the perceived referee recruitment barriers for athletes upon ending their
304 athlete careers?).

305 **Athletes’ Perceptions of Officiating Environment**

306 *High Stress Environment*

307 Twenty-one of the 23 participants perceived the officiating environment to be a High
308 Stress Environment. This theme included any stress and/or pressure stemming from elements of
309 the sport environment, including abuse from fans and the negative stigma associated with
310 referees. High Stress Environment was perceived primarily because of fan abuse, which is the
311 verbal mistreatment (e.g., insults, yelling, profanity) and/or physical mistreatment (e.g., pushing,
312 thrown objects, fighting) of a referee, perpetrated by fans, athletes, and coaches. Seventeen
313 participants mentioned referees being yelled at or booed by fans and coaches at sporting events
314 (Jessica, Amanda, Bonnie, Cleo, Dalia, Ethan, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Kathy, Lisa, Noel,
315 Olive, Sonny, Victor, Winston). Quincy noted that in sport “there is a lot of emotion, a lot of
316 hostility...” which can inspire “negative talk between people.” Five participants also mentioned
317 referees being threatened both on the field and off (Bonnie, Isaac, Mary, Victor, Winston). Isaac
318 was particularly concerned that “what you do doesn't just stay on the field, like, it follows you
319 around.” He was worried about being confronted in public and fans expressing their displeasure
320 with his performance as a referee. While Winston explained:

321 Every referee is going to make a bad call, but if I make one bad call in a crucial game, I'd
322 be getting death threats... I'm not perfect at my job. Nobody's perfect at their job. I make
323 mistakes, but I'm not getting death threats [in my current job].

324 Along with fan abuse, the High Stress Environment was also created by the negative
325 stigma associated with referees, which clearly contributed to the athletes' perception of the
326 officiating environment. That is, the referee is perceived as always wrong, regardless of the call
327 made, or the referee is seen as an enemy of an athlete or a team. For example, Oliva viewed the
328 referee as the "scapegoat." Twelve participants believed that the purpose of the referee is to
329 make the right call in the right moment (Amanda, Ethan, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Mary,
330 Noel, Sonny, Victor, Winston, Xavier). However, as Winston alluded to, this belief inadvertently
331 creates a negative stigma around referees.

332 I feel like referees can earn this stigma. Like you make this super controversial call and
333 now half of the country, or half of the world, now hates you. And now anything you do
334 it's "This guy's an idiot." and "Get this dude off the field, someone should fire them." and
335 there's all these sorts of like the stigma that comes with that. (Victor)

336 Five participants emphasized the fact that, despite the belief that referees need to be perfect, they
337 are still human (Ethan, Garrett, Kathy, Ross, Sonny). Humans make mistakes and 'human error,'
338 as termed by Garrett, is an inevitable part of sport, among both athletes and referees. This
339 perception only further supported the notion that referees are involved in High Stress
340 Environments. The athletes in this study clearly perceived the officiating environment to be a
341 high stress one.

342 ***Financial Instability***

343 Of the 23 participants, 20 mentioned some form of Financial Instability regarding their
344 perception of the officiating environment. Financial Instability was defined as financial
345 compensation and/or benefits received from refereeing, as well as any costs associated with
346 being a referee, including buying uniforms or paying for trainings. Jessica, Hillary, and Paul, for
347 example, perceived the officiating environment as one did not provide an adequate source of
348 income given the responsibilities. Lisa believed the officiating environment to be unreliable
349 given that games can get rescheduled or cancelled. Four participants also mentioned the initial
350 cost to becoming a referee (Cleo, Fiona, Winston, Xavier). Winston termed the upfront costs to
351 buy the necessary equipment as an investment.

352 Cost barrier ... is there just a cost and the stuff that you have to buy? Right? For example,
353 baseball, a referee has to buy a chest protector, and a face mask, and all these things. And
354 for me at the time, because I was in grad school, you know, 3 or 400 dollars for just the
355 equipment that you would need is a challenge, right? There's a lot of people that wouldn't
356 get started just because of that initial cost... You had to buy the shirt you had to buy all
357 this stuff, and you were making an investment. (Winston)

358 Amanda, Kathy, and Victor were unsure if the pay was enough given the position. In Amanda's
359 view, being a referee, whether volunteer or paid, takes time away from other job opportunities
360 which may pay more than refereeing. Victor and Kathy were concerned about the balance
361 between the effort put into refereeing and the pay they get out of it. If they felt that their efforts
362 were not being adequately compensated, then they would not be attracted to the officiating
363 environment.

364 If the pay isn't worth all the trouble, I'm definitely not going to take a low pay . . . At the
365 heart of it, if I'm not getting paid well, for what this is, then I'm not going to [do it]. If I

366 feel like the work outweighs the pay and I'm probably not going to do it... And if I don't
367 think that you value my time and energy and what I'm going through at the right amount,
368 I'm not going to want to do the job. (Victor)

369 The participants distinctly articulated that they perceived the officiating environment to be rife
370 with Financial Instability, including both startup cost and compensation.

371 **Perceived Barriers to Entry for Athletes Becoming Officials**

372 *Time*

373 All 23 participants listed Time as a barrier to becoming a referee. Time included conflicts
374 with other pursuits, including family responsibilities, career aspirations, and social endeavors.
375 Winston compared time to a currency, when explaining why he has not considered refereeing.
376 He stated, "If I choose to do something that takes my time, even if I don't get paid for it, there
377 has to be some kind of other value for me. Because for me, my time is the most valuable." This
378 sentiment was consistent across all participants; the decision to referee must allow adequate time
379 for other priorities. Over half of the participants noted that spending Time with family would
380 impact their choice to begin refereeing (Dalia, Ethan, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Mary,
381 Quincy, Sonny, Victor, Winston, Xavier). As a child, Dalia recounted the strain put on her
382 parents when her father served as a referee.

383 It became very stressful for my mother when my dad was reffing, because he would be
384 gone on weekends. She's coming off her full-time job during the week to, for the whole
385 weekend, watch two toddlers. And, I mean, you can support a passion as a significant
386 other to a certain degree. But . . .you're gone for [all] that time, and so you miss those
387 moments. The time it takes out of the people who want to support you and the time it
388 takes away from other responsibilities you have. (Dalia)

389 The Time needed to pursue other career aspirations, whether that be school or a job, were
390 also barriers for participants, particularly when contemplating the hours referees work (Amanda,
391 Dalia, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Kathy, Lisa, Mary, Paul, Sonny, Uzo). Cleo stated that “if
392 you're working a full-time job, you can probably only do so many night games, like, physically.”
393 Aside from family and career responsibilities, ten participants viewed refereeing as taking Time
394 away from social endeavors, like being with friends, playing a sport, or pursuing another activity
395 (Bonnie, Fiona, Garrett, Isaac, Mary, Noel, Paul, Victor, Winston, Xavier). Isaac believed that
396 his social network would support him if he chose to referee, and that time with his network
397 would be sacrificed to incorporate refereeing. He mentioned that “My network would have to
398 understand: ‘Isaac’s at a game. We're not going to see him on Friday night because he's
399 refereeing a game.’”

400 Sport participation was another Time-related social endeavor mentioned. Five
401 participants believed that they or others had to stop playing their sport before they could start
402 refereeing (Fiona, Mary, Noel, Paul, Winston). Noel indicated her husband has not pursued
403 refereeing “because he doesn't want to give up playing the sport.” Overall, it was clear that Time
404 with family and pursuing other career or social endeavors, including sport participation, served
405 as a barrier for athletes to consider entering officiating.

406 ***Lack of Knowledge and Support***

407 All 23 participants cited Lack of Knowledge and Support as a barrier to pursuing
408 refereeing as a career or hobby. Lack of Knowledge and Support included being unaware of the
409 referee shortage, the logistics of being a referee (e.g., how to start, what the job entails, how to
410 advance), and lack of role models and others to support the pursuit. Fiona explained, “I think
411 barriers that other people would face is just not knowing that there is a ref shortage. People just

412 don't know. . . a main barrier is getting started. People aren't going to know, like where do they
413 find the ref classes?" While Mary and Amanda further supported this notion:

414 I think there's a lack of knowledge or, like, opportunity. I don't think anyone really talks
415 about being a referee. Like, being an athlete, everyone's, "Yes, go, try sport.", but no
416 one's really like prepping you to be a referee. No one really talks about preparing you to
417 be a referee or like how to become [a referee]. So, I think it's just like, lack of knowledge
418 on how to be the referee. (Mary)

419 No one ever talks about being a referee as, like, a career path, if that's even an option.
420 Maybe I'm just not all that involved in sports career conversations, but I've never heard
421 about anybody being like "Hmm, I want to be a referee." So, I guess that the people that
422 would be most interested in those positions would be coming from sports related
423 communities, but even in those, I don't know that it's even talked about as much.

424 (Amanda)

425 Several other participants (n = 11) echoed this Lack of Knowledge and Support, and specifically
426 noted that there is not a clear path for advancing as a referee (Cleo, Dalia, Fiona, Hillary, Kathy,
427 Paul, Quincy, Ross, Uzo, Victor, Winston).

428 Yeah, I think there is [a path]; I don't know what it is. Maybe it depends by sport or
429 maybe depends by league or country. But every industry has their own path. I bet the
430 refereeing industry has its own path to climb the ladder. . . Some people want to be
431 referees and they have to follow some specific steps, so there's definitely a path. I don't
432 know what it is. It should be a path or, at least, I hope so. (Quincy)

433 Further, Lack of Knowledge and Support was characterized by a lack of adequate role models in
434 the refereeing community. That is, participants described both the lack of diversity (race &

435 gender) and negative encounters regarding potential role models. Twenty participants described
436 negative experiences they have had with referees where the referee was rude, biased, or unable to
437 cope with the high stress of the sport atmosphere.

438 We were in the championship... and on the final play, our quarterback threw a Hail
439 Mary, and our player got tackled in the endzone before touching the ball. Nobody had
440 touched the ball yet. No flag was called, and it was the last play of the game... It was a
441 very blatant penalty that wasn't called, and it was a very negative experience. (Ethan)
442 I've had refs who seem to be very intimidated by people getting up in their face, or
443 yelling at them. And I've never had a ref reverse a call, like, nothing like that. But I can
444 see sometimes they can feel the pressure of their surroundings. (Olive)

445 Lack of strong role models impacted perceptions of and interest in refereeing, especially related
446 to race and gender. Additionally, participants did not feel supported by their own communities or
447 the referee community. Uzo, Ross, and Fiona felt that their own family and friends would not
448 support them if they became a referee. Their families preferred that they choose a more lucrative
449 and sustainable income, particularly in the field of their college degree. Within the referee
450 community, Dalia emphasized the importance of relationships with other referees. For Dalia,
451 having friends that are also referees would provide a sense of obligation to become a referee
452 herself. She explained this barrier:

453 I think the lack of community. [Potential referees] don't have this and they don't know
454 anyone else who refs. [They] don't have the same drive to go and recreate that
455 community somewhere else. So, I think the lack of community, the lack of accountability
456 to other people. (Dalia)

480 with the responsibility of being a referee, including making split-second decisions or remaining
481 calm when facing verbal or physical mistreatment. The threat and perpetration of verbal and
482 physical abuse also has been documented (Ackery et al., 2012; Fowler et al., 2019). However,
483 there are mixed reports of referee perceptions of abuse. Some referees identified abuse as their
484 reason for leaving refereeing, particularly young referees with little experience (Dell et al.,
485 2016). Contrastingly, other referees asserted that abuse was not a factor that would make them
486 quit refereeing. In fact, these umpires viewed abuse as a normal and expected part of the sport
487 environment. Umpires learned to expect and cope with abuse with help from sport administrators
488 and more experienced umpires (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Thus, it is important for sport
489 managers to ensure that an environment that supports referees is fostered. To decrease the High
490 Stress Environment and curb poor behavior from fans, sport managers should establish
491 behavioral guidelines and post them throughout the sport facility; remind fans that referees are
492 human. Zero tolerance policies for fan abuse should be implemented, as well creating
493 opportunities for sport officials to talk outside of a game with athletes and coaches. At the youth
494 level, referees can serve an important role in the development of an athlete. A referee that
495 patiently explains a rule to a young athlete could be fundamental to overcoming many of the
496 negative perceptions surrounding refereeing. Creating greater communication between referees
497 and athletes/coaches outside the bounds of a game could foster mutual respect, lead to a less
498 hostile environment, and address negative stereotypes early on, as well.

499 While our findings regarding the athletes' perception of the High Stress Environment are
500 clearly supported by the previous literature, what was surprising was that this insight came from
501 current and former athletes that choose to participate as athletes in this same high stress
502 environment. It was intriguing that participants viewed the high stress experienced by referees as

503 seemingly different than the high stress experienced when in the athlete role. Consequently, the
504 findings also point to sport managers better targeting athletes that seem to thrive under pressure
505 and enjoy the high-stakes games and matches more as potential referees. Rather than
506 encouraging all athletes to consider refereeing, sport managers should note that athletes that
507 seem to enjoy high-pressure sporting situations may be more apt to consider the refereeing role.

508 Second, the perceived Financial Instability noted by the participants can be lowered by
509 sport managers. Despite not knowing the compensation of referees, most participants were
510 uninterested and preferred a job in another field with guaranteed better pay. These beliefs
511 coincide with the literature in that pay, or remuneration, is a key factor in recruiting referees
512 (Warner et al., 2013); however, remuneration becomes less important to referees over time
513 (Ridinger, 2015). In addition to compensation, participants mentioned costs associated with
514 becoming a referee. Little empirical research exists regarding initial costs required to become a
515 referee; yet, in a survey of over 19,000 sports officials, 14% listed expensive uniforms or
516 supplies as one of the top two reasons for leaving officiating (Officially Human, 2019). From a
517 practical standpoint, the costs associated with refereeing and realistic compensation expectations
518 should be as transparent as possible. Groups can be incentivized to attend referee trainings via
519 discounts for large parties. Though remuneration is mainly a motivator for beginning referees,
520 compensation can be increased, or incentives offered but overall, this information needs to be
521 more clearly communicated. For example, sport managers could find ways to provide equipment
522 for referees to use or perhaps create a system where they are reimbursed for equipment if they
523 officiate a specific number of games or matches. Overall, though, the results indicated the
524 financial aspects to refereeing need to be more transparent.

525 Thirdly, Time was a barrier to becoming a referee for all participants. Most intriguing is
526 that the time commitment is so similar to that of an being athlete, regardless if refereeing was
527 viewed as career or leisure pursuit. Time was not a barrier that kept the current athletes from
528 their athletic pursuits, yet all the participants viewed it as a barrier to refereeing. Other
529 responsibilities related to family, career aspirations, and social endeavors were prioritized over
530 refereeing. These findings coincide with existing literature concerning work-life balance.
531 Demanding jobs make it harder to balance responsibilities at work and outside of work.
532 Specifically, an inability to maintain work-life balance and workaholism can influence sport
533 employees to quit their jobs (Dixon, Tiell, et al., 2008; Graham & Dixon, 2017; Huml et al.,
534 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). In the current study, the roles of athlete and referee were viewed to be
535 separate and distinct. However, Philips and Fairley's (2014) work contradicts this. Their work
536 supports that not only were the roles of athlete and referee intertwined, but also referees were
537 able to participate in other sports outside of refereeing. Thus, to encourage more athletes to
538 consider refereeing the findings regarding Time need to be addressed by sport managers.
539 Whether professional or amateur, referees have other obligations outside of sport. Allowing for
540 scheduling flexibility will increase the perception that refereeing can accommodate a busy
541 timetable. This could be accomplished through better marketing and public relations efforts or by
542 providing a better schedule system that gives autonomy and flexibility to referees.

543 Lastly, the Lack of Knowledge and Support identified by all participants as a barrier to
544 refereeing also can be addressed in a similar manner. Dixon, Warner, and Bruening's (2008)
545 work with coaches highlighted early parental socialization, wherein parents teach their children
546 the values and norms associated with a given environment. This socialization helped normalize
547 the sport experience and led the coaches in that study to pursue a coaching career. It is clear from

548 the findings of this study that early parental socialization regarding the referee role would be
549 important to referee recruitment, as well. It is also evident that support and a sense of community
550 are important factors when retaining referees and other seasonal employees. Similar to athletes
551 (Warner et al., 2013; Warner & Dixon, 2011), a sense of community among seasonal workers
552 (McCole, 2015; McCole et al., 2012) and officials is important to their retention (Forbes &
553 Livingston, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2013). It is well understood from previous
554 findings that referees craved to be a part of the referee community, and not being welcomed into
555 the community led to disengagement from the role (Kellett & Warner, 2011). The current
556 findings support that this notion is also important at the initial involvement phase as the athletes
557 noted that this Lack of Knowledge and Support was a major reason why they never considered
558 pursuing the refereeing role. These findings further support that greater marketing and public
559 relations resources, and efforts are needed to begin to address the current referee shortage.
560 Informational booths can be stationed at tournaments or events with a large athlete presence,
561 given that athletes are a prime demographic for addressing the referee shortage. A shortage that
562 most of the participants did not even know existed. Formal or informal recruiting sessions will
563 combat the Lack of Knowledge and Support by spreading awareness about the referee shortage,
564 explaining the path to becoming a referee, and how to advance within the position. Thus, it is
565 important for sport managers to find a better way to highlight this shortage. Whether this occurs
566 through initial parental meetings for youth sport, required coaching training, or routine public
567 service announcements at events, sport managers must find ways to promote sport officiating
568 more broadly.

569 **Theoretical Contribution**

570 As well as the practical implications gleaned from the results, this study also contributes
571 to theory. From a Career Contingency Model framework (Prus, 1984), it is evident that an
572 athlete's perception of refereeing influences his or her decision to consider becoming a referee at
573 the initial involvement stage (i.e., seekership, recruitment, drift, closure). Unlike the sport
574 officials in Furst's (1991) study where almost half of the participants engaged in seekership and
575 over half mentioned being recruited into officiating, the current and former athletes in this study
576 did not engage in seekership or experience recruitment related to sport officiating. Rather,
577 seekership, or the frame of reference about the activity (i.e., refereeing) combined with how
578 others viewed referees, yielded a negative picture that detracted from athletes exploring
579 officiating. Specifically, results indicated, at what should be the seekership stage, athletes
580 perceived referees were operating in a high stress and financially instable environment. Most
581 interesting is that the participants were all current and former athletes that actively choose to
582 participate and freely spend their resources without compensation in this same sport
583 environment. Even if the participants experienced more positive perceptions of the environment
584 at the seekership stage, the recruitment of athletes was non-existent for the participants in this
585 study. Rather, at what should have been the recruitment stage, the participants expressed Time
586 and Lack of Knowledge and Support as barriers to becoming a referee.

587 There is a clear breakdown within sport organizations as the athletes should be more
588 transparently engaging in seekership and recruitment stages of becoming a referee, as the
589 environment and barriers are similar if not the same for athletes. Thus, it is vital that sport
590 organizations begin to reframe refereeing as an extension of one's athletic career. A finding
591 supported by this research and previous research on referees (Jacobs et al., 2019; Phillips &
592 Fairley, 2014). Regardless of whether the initial involvement was at seekership, recruitment,

593 closure, or drift stage, the result demonstrated that the perceived environment (i.e., High Stress
594 Environment, Financial Instability) and barriers (i.e., Time, and Lack of Knowledge and
595 Support) all served as obstacles for athletes and led to them not considering or being involved in
596 refereeing. While Furst (1991) used the Career Contingency Model to identify how sport
597 officials became initially involved, this current work added to that work by demonstrating why
598 athletes are *not* becoming involved.

599 From a theoretical standpoint, understanding why athletes are not becoming referees is
600 important for sport managers and researchers to consider. Warner et al., (2013) and Tingle et al.
601 (2014) have been two of the few scholars that considered the perspective from *former* referees.
602 That is, those that departed the role were interviewed to learn about retention strategies.
603 “Through assessing former referees’ actual behaviors and reasons for leaving rather than current
604 referees’ intentions, the factors identified are clear and more difficult to refute” (Warner et al.,
605 2013, p. 325). Athletes are distinctly primed for becoming referees, yet the global referee
606 shortage indicates this transition or shift is not happening often enough. Thus, theoretical insight
607 can be gleaned by this work demonstrating it important to both understand why people get
608 involved, and why, despite being primed for a role, they do not become involved.

609 **Conclusion**

610 Understanding athletes’ perceptions of the officiating environment and the barriers to
611 referee recruitment influences how and who is recruited to be a referee. This is particularly
612 relevant considering there are officiating shortages across most all sports, both nationally and
613 internationally (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017;
614 Zvosec et al., 2021). As an athlete’s identity shifts once their “playing days” are over, post-
615 athletic career paths may either be sport-related or sport-unrelated (Cabrita et al., 2013). For the

616 segment of retiring and retired athletes who are interested in maintaining some sport-related
617 identity, officiating may be particularly attractive as a means to stay attached to sport (Zvosec et
618 al., 2021). The four key themes addressed in this study, High Stress Environment, Financial
619 Instability, Time, and Lack of Knowledge and Support can be mitigated by interventions from
620 sport managers and organizations. In particular, it is reasonable and practical for officiating
621 organizations to have more formalized recruiting and mentorship of officials specifically
622 targeting current and graduating athletes. Considering the array of researchers that have indicated
623 that the key factors associating with officiating persistence is early-career mentorship and
624 feelings of group membership, more formalized mentoring of former athletes would be efficient
625 for enhancing the likelihood of officiating persistence. Addressing the aforementioned officiating
626 environment and barriers to entry will help lessen the obstacles for athletes considering
627 becoming a referee, can potentially help to retain athletes longer in our sport systems, and most
628 importantly, help to address the declining referee population. Our sport systems are dependent
629 upon referees, and it is vital that sport managers continue to better understand why more athletes
630 do not consider or attempt to pursue refereeing.

631 Lastly, future researchers could work to address some of the limitations of this study.
632 Specifically, future researchers should consider addressing the phenomena explored in this study
633 in a more varied global environment, especially considering that officiating shortages are a
634 global, and not isolated, problem. The sample in this study was diverse, but future research
635 should continue to explore how refereeing can be more inclusive and diverse. Researchers should
636 consider the role that race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class play in both
637 perceptions of the refereeing environment and barriers. Further, while this study endeavored to
638 examine the barriers athletes may face in relation to becoming an official and existing research

639 has highlighted the importance of recruitment and mentorship of young officials, more specific
640 strategies for how to operationalize the recruitment and mentorship of officials is paramount.
641 Given that the Career Contingencies Model notes the importance of (a) one's previous life
642 experience and (b) the impact of others encouraging involvement in a career, activity, or
643 avocation, the Career Contingencies Model proves a viable foundation to contextualize how
644 athletes represent a large, viable cohort of future sport officials. Finally, researchers should
645 continue to find ways that the athletes' voice can be heard, so that we can advance and address
646 issues within sport. We can no longer overlook our most important asset within our sport
647 systems, the participants. In summation, this work highlights how better understanding the
648 athletes' perceptions and experiences can address a pressing issue within sport, and the global
649 referee shortage can be more strategically managed.

650

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