Refereeing as a Post-Athletic Career Option

Abstract

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

*Keywords:* referee, athletic career, referee recruitment, sport official, sport officiating
Refereeing as a Post-Athletic Career Option

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

The referee decline is not limited to the United States; sporting organizations across the globe are having a difficult time recruiting and retaining referees (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Zvosec et al., 2021). Hockey Canada, a national governing body of ice hockey and ice sledge hockey, reported a 33% loss in registered officials each year for the past decade. The Ontario Hockey Federation, a regional branch of Hockey Canada, experienced a 15% decrease in registered officials between 2014 and 2017 (Fowler et al., 2019). Brackenridge et al. (2011) described a 17% loss of active officials between 2008 and 2009 for the English Football Association, the oldest governing body of football in the world.
Several factors, both on- and off-the-court or field, influence a person’s decision to become a referee, as well as a referee’s decision to leave the profession (Warner et al., 2013). A recent survey of over 17,000 officials from more than 15 different sports found five key elements that led referees to begin and continue refereeing: the love of the game, the exercise, the challenge, the participation in a competitive sport, and the hobby aspect (“NASO National Officiating Survey,” 2017). Several researchers have reported similar or identical elements playing a key role in the decision to become a referee (e.g., Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Phillips & Fairley, 2014; Warner et al., 2013; Zvosec et al., 2021). Warner et al. (2013) reported that staying part of the game and competition and challenge were the most salient factors that led former basketball referees to begin refereeing. Among Australian rules football umpires, Phillips and Fairley (2014) found that umpires described umpiring as a great exercise opportunity. Umpires regularly trained to improve their fitness which was beneficial for both umpiring and other sport pursuits outside of umpiring, such as recreational sport participation. Forbes and Livingston (2013) found that the primary motivators for hockey officials were the love of the game and the opportunity for exercise. By better understanding what draws people to refereeing, sport managers can more effectively recruit. Based on these findings, it seems athletes would be well suited for the role; however, we do not know what former athletes think about this career choice. Thus, better understanding athletes’ perceptions of refereeing would build off this extant and important literature base and would dually help to understand barriers to referee recruitment.

**Athlete to Referee?**

Athlete recruitment and retention, like referee recruitment and retention, are important stages of one’s career. The athletic career is limited and unpredictable. Almost every athlete will 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; Erpić 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
colleagues (2021) studied the social identities and motivations of sport officials. Their findings showcased the criticality of “having a connection with sport, mentors serving as gatekeepers to the officiating group, and group membership” (p. 1) in relation to officiating persistence. This suggests that former athletes would be particularly well-suited for officiating considering their inherent connection with sport and social identity as being a member of an important stakeholder group (i.e., athletes) within the sport ecosystem.

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

The transition from being an athlete to being a referee is not instantaneous. There are several steps required before moving from one position to the next, including transforming their definition of the athlete role to include the position of referee and being enticed into refereeing. Every athlete will eventually have to transition out of sport as an athlete; Stier (2007) described this transition as a role exit. The role exit process illustrates four steps in which an individual evaluates their current role, envisions alternative roles, and ultimately decides to leave their
current role; thus, creating an ex-role identity, which is the identity an individual creates after they leave a role, in this case the athlete role. This process of creating an ex-role identity is challenging, distressing and could take weeks or years to form after an athlete resigns from their sport (Bowers, 2011; Cosh et al., 2013). This is also the point, which Cabrita et al. (2014) described the two career paths emerge (i.e., sport-related or sport-unrelated).

**Referee Recruitment**

Given the global decline of referees, it is imperative to understand why anyone, athlete, or non-athlete, would choose to begin officiating. A Furst (1989) study among sport officials determined that an individual actively chooses to become a referee through various experiences, including sport participation and interaction with significant others. In fact, 87% of referees surveyed officiated a sport they previously played. Yet, it is clear not enough athletes are choosing this path. Furst also indicated coaches and peers were the main significant others that influenced recruitment and the top reasons for officiating were interest and enthusiasm in the sport, challenge and excitement, and justice and fair play. Interest and enthusiasm, such as wanting to stay close to the sport, was ranked as the most important reason by 75% of respondents (Furst, 1989). A subsequent study further supported that individuals actively seek to become a referee and that relationships with others, particularly other officials, were major influencers in that decision (Furst, 1991). Warner and colleagues’ (2013) concluded that initial involvement was due to: wanting to stay part of the game, competition and challenge, becoming part of a community, and remuneration. The findings of Furst (1989, 1991) and Warner et al. (2013) have been further supported by the National Association of Sports Officials (“NASO National Officiating Survey,” 2017).
Phillips and Fairley (2014) found that umpiring enhanced lives, while Kellett and Warner (2011) found the sense of community experience within the refereeing community was vital to referees. Phillips and Fairley’s work also emphasized that refereeing did not only increase participants’ physical fitness, but it also helped them establish an ex-role identity of ‘elite athlete.’ Both studies suggest that the sporting atmosphere provides former athletes with a sense of familiarity that promotes not only recruitment, but also retention. At the end of their athletic career, athletes lose sport participation opportunities and a community of teammates. Refereeing can address that by allowing athletes to stay part of the game and by providing a social community (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Phillips & Fairley, 2014).

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

RQ1: What are athletes’ perceptions of officiating environment?

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

Theoretical Framework

Prus’ (1984) Career Contingencies Model provides the theoretical framing for this study. The model details factors that influence how an individual gets involved with a career as well as
why they continue, why they quit, and why they may choose to resume the career after quitting. This Career Contingencies Model occurs through four phases: initial involvement, continuity, disinvolvement, and reinvolvement. The model describes the full cycle of career involvement; however, this study will mainly focus on initial involvement as this stage is a fundamental and important first step to addressing the current referee shortage. Initial involvement entails seeking a career, being recruited to join the career, and the factors that motivate an individual to pursue that career.

The initial involvement process consists of four main stages that can occur independently or simultaneously: seekership, recruitment, closure, and drift. When an individual is attracted to an activity, they are in the stage of seekership. According to Prus (1984), this attraction or seekership is molded by the individual’s frame of reference about the activity coupled with how significant others view the activity. For example, athletes at the end of their athletic career are seeking another hobby or career. Existing knowledge of refereeing may attract them to the profession and support from significant others will positively reinforce that attraction.

Recruitment is how others encourage involvement with an activity. This includes actively trying to get an individual involved, supporting an individual’s decision to get involved, or providing a role for the individual to undertake while involved. Athletes can be recruited by friends or coaches who referee, similar to how athletes are recruited to teams. In the closure stage, the purpose of involvement is to meet a set of goals or obligations; involvement is a need rather than a want. For example, former athletes who want to coach choose refereeing to gain a better understanding of the game. In this case, refereeing is needed to reach the main goal of coaching.

By contrast, drift is activity involvement that stems from the freedom to act; there is no pressure to get involved (Prus, 1984). Revising the previous example, some athletes choose refereeing
simply to learn the rules of play; therefore, refereeing is not a means to gain experience and
advance into coaching. Every involvement choice is different and can include any combination
and order of the four stages: seekership, recruitment, closure, and drift.

Though the Career Contingencies Model did not originate in a sport setting, it has since
been used to study involvement in a variety of sports settings and populations, including sports
officials (Furst, 1991), Masters swimmers (Stevenson, 2002), and the Masters Highland Games
(Bowness, 2019). Furst (1991) used the model to identify how sport officials became initially
involved and why they continued officiating, which is particularly relevant as nearly all officials
begin officiating as a part-time job or avocation and not a full-time career endeavor. Nearly half
of the participants engaged in seekership and over half mentioned being recruited into
officiating. The Career Contingencies Model is an apt theoretical framework for the present
study because it characterizes people as agents whose actions and decisions shape their
involvements (Stevenson, 2002). It also posits that the actions of others combined with previous
experiences also influence whether a person gets involved with a career or activity. Thus,
athletes can become involved with refereeing if they seek it, if they are recruited by it, if they
need to do it to satisfy an objective, or if they want to do for the sake of the activity. Given the
aim of this study (i.e., examine athletes’ perceptions of refereeing), the initial involvement
processes of the Career Contingencies Model provide a foundation to help better understand why
some former athletes choose to referee and why some do not.

Method

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

Procedure

After IRB approval was received, participants were recruited via snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007). Flyers explaining the study were emailed to university club sport teams as well as undergraduate and graduate level classes. Email recipients were encouraged to send the flyer
to any current or former athletes. To accommodate for COVID-19 meeting restrictions, video interviews were conducted via WebEx. WebEx was used to record and transcribe the interviews. Demographic items, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and education level, were collected at the end of the interview. After the interview, the WebEx-generated transcript was reviewed and edited twice by the lead researcher to ensure accuracy.

Participants

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

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

Data Analysis
After the interview transcripts were reviewed and edited twice for accuracy by the lead researcher, two researchers then conducted an inductive thematic analysis with the transcribed data. The inductive thematic analysis involved creating themes from the data, as opposed to predefining themes before conducting the interviews and aligned with the descriptive phenomenology approach (Creswell, 2007; Sundler et al., 2019). Both open coding and axial coding were utilized. Open coding entailed creating code names based on the words and phrases spoken during the interview. Similar open codes were then grouped into axial codes, which denote the overall theme or group of related open codes and 100% intercoder reliability was met on the emergent identified themes (Cascio et al., 2019). See Table 1. The inductive thematic analysis was done by hand by the researchers; no software was used. To ensure trustworthiness the researchers followed the 6-phases of thematic analysis outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). Specifically, trustworthiness was established by researchers with the prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, researcher triangulation, diagramming themes, and member checks. Member checks were conducted with two participants throughout the analysis process. These two participants provide input and feedback on the themes and confirmed the interpretation of the findings were accurate.

**Results**

Four main themes regarding athletes’ perceptions of the officiating environment (i.e., RQ1) and barriers to refereeing (i.e., RQ2) were identified from the data. Specifically, High Stress Environment and Financial Instability emerged regarding athletes’ perceptions of officiating environment. And Time and Lack of Knowledge and Support emerged as the perceived barriers to entry for athletes becoming officials. These themes represent the most salient environmental factors and barriers that prevent and/or discourage the 23 participants from
considering becoming a referee. While not all the data can be included, through an iterative process, the researchers came to an agreement on the inclusion of each quote based on its saliency, representativeness of the theme, and aim to ensure all participants were heard (Dixon, Warner, et al., 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The identified themes related to RQ1 ("What are athletes’ perceptions of officiating environment?") are presented first, and followed by RQ2 results (“What are the perceived referee recruitment barriers for athletes upon ending their athlete careers?").

**Athletes’ Perceptions of Officiating Environment**

**High Stress Environment**

Twenty-one of the 23 participants perceived the officiating environment to be a High Stress Environment. This theme included any stress and/or pressure stemming from elements of the sport environment, including abuse from fans and the negative stigma associated with referees. High Stress Environment was perceived primarily because of fan abuse, which is the verbal mistreatment (e.g., insults, yelling, profanity) and/or physical mistreatment (e.g., pushing, thrown objects, fighting) of a referee, perpetrated by fans, athletes, and coaches. Seventeen participants mentioned referees being yelled at or booed by fans and coaches at sporting events (Jessica, Amanda, Bonnie, Cleo, Dalia, Ethan, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Kathy, Lisa, Noel, Olive, Sonny, Victor, Winston). Quincy noted that in sport “there is a lot of emotion, a lot of hostility…” which can inspire “negative talk between people.” Five participants also mentioned referees being threatened both on the field and off (Bonnie, Isaac, Mary, Victor, Winston). Isaac was particularly concerned that “what you do doesn't just stay on the field, like, it follows you around.” He was worried about being confronted in public and fans expressing their displeasure with his performance as a referee. While Winston explained:
Every referee is going to make a bad call, but if I make one bad call in a crucial game, I'd be getting death threats… I'm not perfect at my job. Nobody's perfect at their job. I make mistakes, but I'm not getting death threats [in my current job].

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

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

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

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

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

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

If the pay isn't worth all the trouble, I'm definitely not going to take a low pay . . . At the heart of it, if I'm not getting paid well, for what this is, then I'm not going to [do it]. If I
feel like the work outweighs the pay and I'm probably not going to do it… And if I don't think that you value my time and energy and what I'm going through at the right amount, I'm not going to want to do the job. (Victor)

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

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

**Time**

All 23 participants listed Time as a barrier to becoming a referee. Time included conflicts with other pursuits, including family responsibilities, career aspirations, and social endeavors.

Winston compared time to a currency, when explaining why he has not considered refereeing. He stated, “If I choose to do something that takes my time, even if I don't get paid for it, there has to be some kind of other value for me. Because for me, my time is the most valuable.” This sentiment was consistent across all participants; the decision to referee must allow adequate time for other priorities. Over half of the participants noted that spending Time with family would impact their choice to begin refereeing (Dalia, Ethan, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Mary, Quincy, Sonny, Victor, Winston, Xavier). As a child, Dalia recounted the strain put on her parents when her father served as a referee.

It became very stressful for my mother when my dad was reffing, because he would be gone on weekends. She's coming off her full-time job during the week to, for the whole weekend, watch two toddlers. And, I mean, you can support a passion as a significant other to a certain degree. But . . . you're gone for [all] that time, and so you miss those moments. The time it takes out of the people who want to support you and the time it takes away from other responsibilities you have. (Dalia)
The Time needed to pursue other career aspirations, whether that be school or a job, were also barriers for participants, particularly when contemplating the hours referees work (Amanda, Dalia, Fiona, Garrett, Hillary, Isaac, Kathy, Lisa, Mary, Paul, Sonny, Uzo). Cleo stated that “if you're working a full-time job, you can probably only do so many night games, like, physically.” Aside from family and career responsibilities, ten participants viewed refereeing as taking Time away from social endeavors, like being with friends, playing a sport, or pursuing another activity (Bonnie, Fiona, Garrett, Isaac, Mary, Noel, Paul, Victor, Winston, Xavier). Isaac believed that his social network would support him if he chose to referee, and that time with his network would be sacrificed to incorporate refereeing. He mentioned that “My network would have to understand: ‘Isaac’s at a game. We're not going to see him on Friday night because he's refereeing a game.’”

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

**Lack of Knowledge and Support**

All 23 participants cited Lack of Knowledge and Support as a barrier to pursuing refereeing as a career or hobby. Lack of Knowledge and Support included being unaware of the referee shortage, the logistics of being a referee (e.g., how to start, what the job entails, how to advance), and lack of role models and others to support the pursuit. Fiona explained, “I think barriers that other people would face is just not knowing that there is a ref shortage. People just
A main barrier is getting started. People aren't going to know, like where do they find the ref classes?” While Mary and Amanda further supported this notion:

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

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

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

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

Further, Lack of Knowledge and Support was characterized by a lack of adequate role models in the refereeing community. That is, participants described both the lack of diversity (race &
gender) and negative encounters regarding potential role models. Twenty participants described negative experiences they have had with referees where the referee was rude, biased, or unable to cope with the high stress of the sport atmosphere.

We were in the championship… and on the final play, our quarterback threw a Hail Mary, and our player got tackled in the endzone before touching the ball. Nobody had touched the ball yet. No flag was called, and it was the last play of the game… It was a very blatant penalty that wasn't called, and it was a very negative experience. (Ethan)

I've had refs who seem to be very intimidated by people getting up in their face, or yelling at them. And I've never had a ref reverse a call, like, nothing like that. But I can see sometimes they can feel the pressure of their surroundings. (Olive)

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

I think the lack of community. [Potential referees] don't have this and they don't know anyone else who refs. [They] don't have the same drive to go and recreate that community somewhere else. So, I think the lack of community, the lack of accountability to other people. (Dalia)
The community aspect was echoed by Isaac. He believes that there is a “weakened sense of community” in today’s “mobile, global society.”

People are not really bound to their own towns. People are moving to a different state and sometimes doing that multiple times… And so, it's hard to build those connections that really make you want to be a part of the community. (Isaac)

Lack of Knowledge and Support was a significant barrier for participants. Thus, it was clear that the participants knew very little about the logistics of being a referee and this, coupled with poor role models and unsupportive social communities, also served as a major barrier.

Discussion

Because athletes are well-suited to take on the referee role, identifying athletes’ perception of the officiating environment (RQ1) and their perceived barriers to becoming referees (RQ2) is vital to addressing the worldwide referee shortage. In doing so, four main themes were identified. A High Stress and Financial Instability environment were identified, while Time and Lack of Knowledge and Support were identified as perceived recruitment barriers. Each of these themes are supported by existing referee literature, and thereby extend our knowledge regarding how sport managers can address the referee shortage, from the athlete’s perceptive, in four important ways.

First, the High Stress Environment outlined by participants must be addressed by sport managers. The sports environment is stressful not only for athletes competing but also for the referees who are officiating (Rainey & Hardy, 1999). Participants described a negative stigma in which referees are viewed as a villain or an adversary. This view of the referee has existed for decades (Phillips & Fairley, 2014; Rainey & Cherilla, 1993; Voigt, 1970). Participants also described incidents that they experienced or witnessed referees who seemingly could not cope
with the responsibility of being a referee, including making split-second decisions or remaining calm when facing verbal or physical mistreatment. The threat and perpetration of verbal and physical abuse also has been documented (Ackery et al., 2012; Fowler et al., 2019). However, there are mixed reports of referee perceptions of abuse. Some referees identified abuse as their reason for leaving refereeing, particularly young referees with little experience (Dell et al., 2016). Contrastingly, other referees asserted that abuse was not a factor that would make them quit refereeing. In fact, these umpires viewed abuse as a normal and expected part of the sport environment. Umpires learned to expect and cope with abuse with help from sport administrators and more experienced umpires (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Thus, it is important for sport managers to ensure that an environment that supports referees is fostered. To decrease the High Stress Environment and curb poor behavior from fans, sport managers should establish behavioral guidelines and post them throughout the sport facility; remind fans that referees are human. Zero tolerance policies for fan abuse should be implemented, as well creating opportunities for sport officials to talk outside of a game with athletes and coaches. At the youth level, referees can serve an important role in the development of an athlete. A referee that patiently explains a rule to a young athlete could be fundamental to overcoming many of the negative perceptions surrounding refereeing. Creating greater communication between referees and athletes/coaches outside the bounds of a game could foster mutual respect, lead to a less hostile environment, and address negative stereotypes early on, as well.

While our findings regarding the athletes’ perception of the High Stress Environment are clearly supported by the previous literature, what was surprising was that this insight came from current and former athletes that choose to participate as athletes in this same high stress environment. It was intriguing that participants viewed the high stress experienced by referees as
seemingly different than the high stress experienced when in the athlete role. Consequently, the findings also point to sport managers better targeting athletes that seem to thrive under pressure and enjoy the high-stakes games and matches more as potential referees. Rather than encouraging all athletes to consider refereeing, sport managers should note that athletes that seem to enjoy high-pressure sporting situations may be more apt to consider the refereeing role. Second, the perceived Financial Instability noted by the participants can be lowered by sport managers. Despite not knowing the compensation of referees, most participants were uninterested and preferred a job in another field with guaranteed better pay. These beliefs coincide with the literature in that pay, or remuneration, is a key factor in recruiting referees (Warner et al., 2013); however, remuneration becomes less important to referees over time (Ridinger, 2015). In addition to compensation, participants mentioned costs associated with becoming a referee. Little empirical research exists regarding initial costs required to become a referee; yet, in a survey of over 19,000 sports officials, 14% listed expensive uniforms or supplies as one of the top two reasons for leaving officiating (Officially Human, 2019). From a practical standpoint, the costs associated with refereeing and realistic compensation expectations should be as transparent as possible. Groups can be incentivized to attend referee trainings via discounts for large parties. Though remuneration is mainly a motivator for beginning referees, compensation can be increased, or incentives offered but overall, this information needs to be more clearly communicated. For example, sport managers could find ways to provide equipment for referees to use or perhaps create a system where they are reimbursed for equipment if they officiate a specific number of games or matches. Overall, though, the results indicated the financial aspects to refereeing need to be more transparent.
Thirdly, Time was a barrier to becoming a referee for all participants. Most intriguing is that the time commitment is so similar to that of an athlete, regardless if refereeing was viewed as career or leisure pursuit. Time was not a barrier that kept the current athletes from their athletic pursuits, yet all the participants viewed it as a barrier to refereeing. Other responsibilities related to family, career aspirations, and social endeavors were prioritized over refereeing. These findings coincide with existing literature concerning work-life balance. Demanding jobs make it harder to balance responsibilities at work and outside of work. Specifically, an inability to maintain work-life balance and workaholism can influence sport employees to quit their jobs (Dixon, Tiell et al., 2008; Graham & Dixon, 2017; Huml et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). In the current study, the roles of athlete and referee were viewed to be separate and distinct. However, Philips and Fairley’s (2014) work contradicts this. Their work supports that not only were the roles of athlete and referee intertwined, but also referees were able to participate in other sports outside of refereeing. Thus, to encourage more athletes to consider refereeing the findings regarding Time need to be addressed by sport managers. Whether professional or amateur, referees have other obligations outside of sport. Allowing for scheduling flexibility will increase the perception that refereeing can accommodate a busy timetable. This could be accomplished through better marketing and public relations efforts or by providing a better schedule system that gives autonomy and flexibility to referees. Lastly, the Lack of Knowledge and Support identified by all participants as a barrier to refereeing also can be addressed in a similar manner. Dixon, Warner, and Bruening’s (2008) work with coaches highlighted early parental socialization, wherein parents teach their children the values and norms associated with a given environment. This socialization helped normalize the sport experience and led the coaches in that study to pursue a coaching career. It is clear from
the findings of this study that early parental socialization regarding the referee role would be
important to referee recruitment, as well. It is also evident that support and a sense of community
are important factors when retaining referees and other seasonal employees. Similar to athletes
(Warner et al., 2013; Warner & Dixon, 2011), a sense of community among seasonal workers
(McCole, 2015; McCole et al., 2012) and officials is important to their retention (Forbes &
Livingston, 2013; Kim et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2013). It is well understood from previous
findings that referees craved to be a part of the referee community, and not being welcomed into
the community led to disengagement from the role (Kellett & Warner, 2011). The current
findings support that this notion is also important at the initial involvement phase as the athletes
noted that this Lack of Knowledge and Support was a major reason why they never considered
pursuing the refereeing role. These findings further support that greater marketing and public
relations resources, and efforts are needed to begin to address the current referee shortage.
Informational booths can be stationed at tournaments or events with a large athlete presence,
given that athletes are a prime demographic for addressing the referee shortage. A shortage that
most of the participants did not even know existed. Formal or informal recruiting sessions will
combat the Lack of Knowledge and Support by spreading awareness about the referee shortage,
explaining the path to becoming a referee, and how to advance within the position. Thus, it is
important for sport managers to find a better way to highlight this shortage. Whether this occurs
through initial parental meetings for youth sport, required coaching training, or routine public
service announcements at events, sport managers must find ways to promote sport officiating
more broadly.

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

There is a clear breakdown within sport organizations as the athletes should be more transparently engaging in seekership and recruitment stages of becoming a referee, as the environment and barriers are similar if not the same for athletes. Thus, it is vital that sport organizations begin to reframe refereeing as an extension of one’s athletic career. A finding supported by this research and previous research on referees (Jacobs et al., 2019; Phillips & Fairley, 2014). Regardless of whether the initial involvement was at seekership, recruitment,
closure, or drift stage, the result demonstrated that the perceived environment (i.e., High Stress Environment, Financial Instability) and barriers (i.e., Time, and Lack of Knowledge and Support) all served as obstacles for athletes and led to them not considering or being involved in refereeing. While Furst (1991) used the Career Contingency Model to identify how sport officials became initially involved, this current work added to that work by demonstrating why athletes are not becoming involved.

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

**Conclusion**

Understanding athletes’ perceptions of the officiating environment and the barriers to referee recruitment influences how and who is recruited to be a referee. This is particularly relevant considering there are officiating shortages across most all sports, both nationally and internationally (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger, Kim, et al., 2017; Zvosec et al., 2021). As an athlete’s identity shifts once their “playing days” are over, post-athletic career paths may either be sport-related or sport-unrelated (Cabrita et al., 2013). For the
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segment of retiring and retired athletes who are interested in maintaining some sport-related identity, officiating may be particularly attractive as a means to stay attached to sport (Zvosec et al., 2021). The four key themes addressed in this study, High Stress Environment, Financial Instability, Time, and Lack of Knowledge and Support can be mitigated by interventions from sport managers and organizations. In particular, it is reasonable and practical for officiating organizations to have more formalized recruiting and mentorship of officials specifically targeting current and graduating athletes. Considering the array of researchers that have indicated that the key factors associating with officiating persistence is early-career mentorship and feelings of group membership, more formalized mentoring of former athletes would be efficient for enhancing the likelihood of officiating persistence. Addressing the aforementioned officiating environment and barriers to entry will help lessen the obstacles for athletes considering becoming a referee, can potentially help to retain athletes longer in our sport systems, and most importantly, help to address the declining referee population. Our sport systems are dependent upon referees, and it is vital that sport managers continue to better understand why more athletes do not consider or attempt to pursue refereeing.

Lastly, future researchers could work to address some of the limitations of this study. Specifically, future researchers should consider addressing the phenomena explored in this study in a more varied global environment, especially considering that officiating shortages are a global, and not isolated, problem. The sample in this study was diverse, but future research should continue to explore how refereeing can be more inclusive and diverse. Researchers should consider the role that race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class play in both perceptions of the refereeing environment and barriers. Further, while this study endeavored to examine the barriers athletes may face in relation to becoming an official and existing research
has highlighted the importance of recruitment and mentorship of young officials, more specific strategies for how to operationalize the recruitment and mentorship of officials is paramount.

Given that the Career Contingencies Model notes the importance of (a) one’s previous life experience and (b) the impact of others encouraging involvement in a career, activity, or avocation, the Career Contingencies Model proves a viable foundation to contextualize how athletes represent a large, viable cohort of future sport officials. Finally, researchers should continue to find ways that the athletes’ voice can be heard, so that we can advance and address issues within sport. We can no longer overlook our most important asset within our sport systems, the participants. In summation, this work highlights how better understanding the athletes’ perceptions and experiences can address a pressing issue within sport, and the global referee shortage can be more strategically managed.
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