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# Officiating Attrition: The Experiences of Former Referees Via a Sport Development Lens

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Officiating attrition: The experiences of former referees via a sport development lens

### Abstract

Referees are key sport personnel who have important responsibilities both on- and off- the field. Organized competition would not survive without referees, yet little is known about what cause referees to discontinue in the role. This research examines the experiences of former referees so that managers may better understand strategies that might encourage more referees to be retained. Fifteen previous basketball referees were interviewed about their refereeing experience. Ten themes emerged that were related to the sport development stages of referee recruitment, referee retention, and referee advancement. The results indicate that issues experienced during the retention phase (Problematic Social Interaction, Training/Mentoring, and Lack of Referee Community) and then at the advancing stage (Lack of Administrator Consideration, Administrator Decision Making, and Sport Policies) are linked to eventual departure from the role. Interestingly, off-court factors were reported as more influential in the decision to leave. Managerial strategies and implications are discussed.

Keywords: referees, officiating, sport development, employee retention, human resource management, qualitative research

Officiating attrition: The experiences of former referees via a sport development lens

The successful development of industries, businesses and organizations is dependent upon the recruitment, retention, and development of key personnel (Barr & Hums, 2009; Chelladurai, 2009). Consequently, the development of the field of human resource management has been an important area of enquiry for scholars (e.g., Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2006; Taylor & McGraw, 2006), a core area in the study of management, as well as an important aspect of practice in the corporate sector. In this regard, the sport industry is no different in that they require various administrative and supportive roles to be appropriately fulfilled and managed in order for the organization to be successful. Thus, it is not surprising that sport management scholars have explored recruitment, retention and development of a range of key personnel in the sport setting by studying variables such as occupational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover (e.g., Chelladurai & Ogasawara, 2003; Dixon & Warner, 2010; Doherty, 1998; Kim & Cunningham, 2005). This growing body of research seemingly overlooks referees and the invaluable role that they play in sustaining sport programs. Considering this oversight, it may not be surprising that globally there is a shortage of referees in many sports. We clearly lack an understanding of referee attrition to make sound decisions about their management (AFL, 2010; Kendall, Knust, Riveiro, & Urrutia, 2009). In fact, the dearth of officials has been labeled a national crisis in U.S sport (American Sport Education Program, 2011; Arehart, 2001). The mere survival of sports is dependent upon strategies to successfully retain individuals in the occupation of refereeing. Yet, little is known about the experiences of referees and how these experiences affect their retention. In an effort to help managers better understand strategies that might encourage more referees to stay in the role, this research examines the experiences of referees who have already left the role.

It is rare to gain insight from individuals who choose to leave organizations due to the logistical difficulties of collecting data. There are often few opportunities (if any) to keep track of those who leave and in some cases, those who leave do not want further contact with the organization (Hirschman, 1970). Consequently, much of the literature that explores occupational commitment and job satisfaction (or lack thereof) whether in a sport or corporate setting, is drawn from those currently employed (e.g., Dixon & Warner, 2010; Nyberg, 2010). This information exploring decisions about leaving an occupation are drawn from self-report measures about current employees' *intentions* to leave rather than actual behavior and reasons for leaving. This raises issues of the validity and reliability of such measures and their ability to provide accurate implications for the recruitment and retention of employees for the future (see Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of referees who resigned in order to learn strategies that would have ultimately led to their retention rather than their departure from the role.

### **Referees**

Unlike most other roles in sport, referees are distinctive in that they have clear on-court (or field) and off-court (or field) responsibilities. Referees are key members of the workforce in the sport setting. From a service perspective, they ensure that competitions are conducted safely and in accordance with sanctioned rules and regulations. Referees are also key members of the on-court competitive play in organized sport. Thus, referees have both on-court and off-court experiences--a somewhat unique phenomenon in the sport workforce. Perhaps due to the duality of their involvement in sport programs, and methodological difficulties in capturing such experiences, referees have been understudied. The scant research on referees has focused primarily on their on-court experiences and the resulting literature has highlighted on-court

experiences of abuse and psychological reactions, which have been assumed to lead to referee turnover (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995; Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990). A common theme from this research line is that on-court experiences resulting in stress and abuse are the basis of self-reported intentions to leave the occupation. For example, the existing referee literature has primarily focused on the assumed innate coping mechanisms of elite level referees in order to determine which traits provide them with the fortitude to continue in the role (e.g., Balch & Scott, 2007; Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, & Brunel, 2009), and to overcome stressors associated with the role (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007; Gencay, 2009). Research has also focused on what innate motivations referees have to continue in the role (Alonso-Arbiol, Arratibel, & Gamez, 2008), while research in the sport science field has used perceptual mapping to identify potential innate bias (Hagemann, Strauss, & Leißing, 2008), personality characteristics (Balch & Scott, 2007), and stress (Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007; Gencay, 2009).

In two recent studies of active referees, however, researchers found that the social experiences, rather than exclusively on-court/field issues, surrounding officiating are highly important for referees' continuing involvement (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Kellett & Warner, 2011). This research revealed that the sense of community referees develop were paramount to their retention and can help referees overcome experiences of abuse. For example, Kellett and Shilbury (2007) found that through the social connectedness with other referees, individuals were able to re-frame the abuse they received in ways that rendered it negligible and thus enabled them to stay in the role.

While this collective body of research provides a starting point for understanding the officiating experience and why people stay in the role, there is an immediate need to clearly understand the reasons why more referees are not retained. That is, the need to understand why

officials *actually* leave the occupation rather than what they report about why they *intend* to leave is of paramount importance (cf. Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

### **Retention of personnel in sport settings**

The sport context in general is somewhat unique in which to consider retention of personnel. In some cases, sport organizations are not-for-profit where the workforce is largely made up of volunteers (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2009; Warner, Newland, & Green, 2011). In other cases, sport organizations are for-profit where the workforce is largely paid employees (e.g., Fink & Smith, 2012; Gladden, Irwin & Sutton, 2001). Retention of personnel in either case has been considered crucial, and some key differences have been identified. For example, researchers have examined volunteer board members and paid executive staff experiences in order to better understand their retention (e.g., Cuskelly, 2004; Zhang, DeMichele & Connaughton, 2004). Volunteer board members prefer a relationship with the paid executives of the organization that is characterized by shared leadership, trust and a genuine relationship in which they feel a part of the organization. In this way, volunteer board members seek an experience where they feel involved in the day-to-day business, which is grounded in sport *per se*, rather than in the strict business dealings of the organization. In other cases, sport organizations are embedded in educational institutions where the workforce may grapple with achieving two competing goals—educating individuals versus producing winning athletes and teams (e.g., Clotfelter, 2011; Tingle & Warner, 2011). In both cases, researchers have found that, for personnel, there is something appealing to being involved with and experiencing in some way, the sport activity itself. Interestingly, Kellett and Fairley's (in press) work on Australian Rules football umpires report that officials viewed the activity as a leisure pursuit

rather than an occupation where the involvement in sport was crucial to their experience and enjoyment of the role.

Ironically, the growing body of research that explores retention of sport employees has been grounded in human resource management approaches adopted largely from corporate business settings (Doherty; 1998; Taylor & McGraw, 2006). In such settings, there is often little interest in understanding the worker's connection to the product of the organization, as in most cases, the product does not typically evoke the passion, emotion, and appeal that sport does.

One might argue that similar to a referee, a coach has both an on- and off-court role. Interestingly, numerous researchers have studied coaches' experiences on variables derived from the corporate setting such as job commitment and satisfaction, as well as turnover (e.g., Dixon & Warner, 2010; Kim & Cunningham, 2005; Yusof, 1998). It has been found that for coaches, the off-court activities in which they must engage with administrators are key to their satisfaction and their reported continued commitment to the role (e.g., Chelladurai & Ogasawara, 2003; Dixon & Warner, 2010). When the off-court environment is described as non-supportive, practicing coaches report this to be a source of their intention to leave.

Clearly, there is a need for some integration in understanding the salient experiences for all personnel in the sport workforce—regardless of what their role might be. What is consistent with the existing research regarding the retention of sport personnel is that the way in which they experience their work environment will impact their ongoing engagement in the activity.

Although it has been noted that we know very little about the experiences of referees in terms of their unique on- and off- court roles and the link to retention, the opposite is true for athletes. There has been a plethora of research exploring the on- and off-court experiences of athletes in a variety of sport settings, and the impact of those experiences on retention (e.g.,



Green, 2005; Lim et al., 2011; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Indeed, much of this research has fuelled a burgeoning area of study in the design and management of pathways and processes to assist in career transition for athletes—known as sport development.

**Sport Development Framework.** Understanding the experience of athletes through a sport development lens has helped scholars to better understand the on- and off- court experiences that aid in attracting and retaining athletes in sport (e.g., Green, 2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou & Green, 2008). Sport development is built on the premise that the ultimate success of sport organizations depends upon the development of holistic pathways and processes to assist in the recruitment, retention, and development of athletes. Unlike human resource management models, sport development models have been grounded in the sport experience and take into account the blend of on- and off-court activities that create the experience.

Creswell (2003) noted that frameworks from various contexts can assist in illuminating meanings and understanding the lived experiences of the populations being studied. Considering the unique nature of the work of referees and that recent work has concluded referees view themselves as athletes (Kellett & Fairley, in press), a sport development framework may also provide a useful lens through which to better understand the experiences of referees. More importantly, this perspective may ultimately lead to the development of managerial strategies that help to better retain referees.

Green (2005) outlined one of the first comprehensive understandings of sport development. She outlined three processes of sport development including: (1) recruitment or attraction of individuals to a sport; (2) retention of individuals in sport; (3) and nurturing of advancing athletes to higher levels of involvement. Sport development involves the identification of sound pathways and processes that form the basis of athlete transition as part of

a broader sport system. In doing so, it takes into account both on- and off- court experiences of athletes. For example, Green suggested that athlete recruitment should be viewed as a process of socialization where individuals will feel encouraged to start and continue in an activity if they sense that they have both on-and off-court support. From a structural perspective, it is recognized that in order to create such experiences, management and coordination is crucial. Green suggested that retention of athletes requires managers to focus on implementing strategies that will provide opportunities to enhance positive experiences, deeper socialization, and commitment to the sport—beyond the on-court setting. For athletes to advance to the next level of commitment (i.e., retention stage) requires that managerial actions link programs and pathways such that athletes can experience smooth transitions through new on- and off-court settings. Clearly, it is recognized by research in sport development that both the on-court and off-court experiences that are created for an athlete have an impact on the likelihood of an individual choosing to remain in the sport, or to leave.

This study extends what we already know about retention of personnel in two important ways. First, unlike previous studies of sport personnel, this study involves collecting information from those who have already left the role (rather than those who report their intentions to leave). By probing both the on and off-court experiences of former referees, the most pertinent information regarding why they took up the role of officiating, why they discontinue in the role, and what might have led to their retention, rather than departure, can be determined (see Hirschman, 1970). Secondly, by recognizing the unique work of referees, their retention may not be best understood by utilizing perspectives grounded in human resource management. To that end, this research takes a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of referees in order to learn more about their retention. The results will clearly help sport managers

better understand the experiences that contribute the most to referee attrition, while concurrently narrowing the gap in existing officiating literature.

### **Method**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach, which “seeks to explicate personal meanings and to uncover hidden as well as explicit meanings in human experience” (Munhall, 2007, p. 218). Consequently, “the goal of phenomenological inquiry goes beyond identifying, appreciating and explaining current and shared meanings. It seeks to critique these meanings” (Crotty, 1998, p. 5). Through allowing for the voice of former referees to be heard, from the emic perspective, we can gather potential meaning, better describe the officiating experience, and ultimately gain a clearer understanding of the experience from referees who dropped out.

### **Participants**

Fifteen former basketball referees from across the U.S. took part in the study. Basketball referees were chosen in particular for this study as a matter of accessing a convenient sample of former referees. First, this sport has a well-structured system of referee management via membership of associations at various levels across sport contexts in most States in the U.S. As such, referees belong to a well-developed social network that stays connected via a range of internet based communication platforms. Second, one of the researchers has extensive experience as an active basketball referee, and his credibility and ability to *speak their language* helped to establish trust with study participants. The participants included five females and ten males, who previously refereed at the high school and/or college level. The average age of the participants was 38 years old with a range of 2-10 years of basketball officiating experience. The majority of the participants (10 of 15) also had experience officiating in at least one other sport (e.g., baseball, soccer, volleyball).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. First, emails were sent to two national electronic officiating list serves asking the recipients for names of former officials that might be willing to participate in a study. The names of former basketball referees were also obtained from one U.S. State association's list of former sports officials. All former officials that were identified received a solicitation email asking them to participate in the study and to provide contact information of other former officials. These two techniques proved to be an excellent way to obtain names of former officials across the U.S. Those who were willing to participate then completed a basic demographic questionnaire and signed a consent form. The primary investigators conducted phone and/or in-person interviews at a convenient time for the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 40-minutes and two hours.

**Instrument**

A semi-structured interview guide based on the previous literature in refereeing (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Rainey, 1995) and in human resource management in sport (e.g., Chelladurai & Ogasawara, 2003; Dixon & Warner, 2010; Yusof, 1998) was developed. The basic elements of recruitment and retention (that are generic to all of the sport and workforce literature) were used to help ensure consistency among the interviews. Further, a panel of five experts in sport management, qualitative research, and organizational behavior reviewed the interview guide for face validity. The semi-structured approach allowed the researchers to start with a broad question from the interview guide (based on recruitment and retention) and then follow the conversation (Munhall, 2007). Sample guiding questions included: "Tell me about why you decided to start officiating?", "Why did you decide not to continue?", and "Is there anything you miss about officiating?"

## Analysis

Interviews were professionally transcribed, and to ensure accuracy of the data, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts. The data were then de-identified (i.e., participants were given pseudonyms) to protect the identity of the participants. In order to enhance validity and reduce potential bias, the research team used investigator triangulation to independently review and code the data with the aid of Nvivo 9 (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Through an ongoing iterative process (Neuman, 2000), the researchers discussed the codes that emerged, and it was noted by all researchers that a complex array of both on- and off-court experiences were discussed as having an impact on the refereeing experience and the ultimate decision to leave. It is for this reason that the sport development framework (Green, 2005) was considered to be valuable in organizing the data, as it provided a relevant lens through which to view the data. Green's model was specifically chosen because this work in particular highlights the importance of on *and* off court factors as well as the transitioning through the three different stages. Phenomenological research, as has been noted:

. . . directs you to areas that you would not have thought of at the beginning of your study. As with all existential material, it shows itself to the researcher . . . 'as it is' within the life-worlds of the participants. 'As it is' for the participants and what is described in the literature at times are very similar and other times very different (Munhall, 2007, p. 190).

In this study, what the referees described was very similar to the stages outlined in Green's sport development framework: recruitment, retention, and nurturing. Thus, the emergent themes were organized accordingly. Lastly, member-checks were then conducted with select officials to ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

## Results

In discussing their experiences, referees described why they started, why they stayed, how they progressed to higher levels, as well as why they left the role. The data were organized into categories that represented the phases of recruitment, retention, and advancement as reported by the referees. Ten on- and off- court themes emerged and were then organized under each of the phases in which they occurred; six themes clearly lead to referee attrition. At the Referee Recruitment stage, it was clear that the former officials in our study had a positive experience. The four themes under this category have been maintained because, although they did not lead to referee attrition, they demonstrate an important part of the refereeing experience. Further, understanding the elements that initially attracted an individual to officiating offers insight into what benefits they were originally seeking. After the recruitment stage, however, it was clear that these elements were overridden when officials transition to the Referee Retention and then the Referee Advancement stages. The themes at each of these two stages represent the factors that led to their departure. The themes are illustrated in Table 1. Both on-court and off-court experiences that were salient at each stage are discussed further.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### Referee recruitment

Referees in this study each recalled why they were drawn to the role of refereeing, and their reasons for taking up the occupation. These included both on-court and off-court elements. More specifically, the on-court factors included *Staying Part of the Game* and *Competition and Challenge*. The off-court factors included *Remuneration* and *Socialization into the Community*. All of these on- and off-court factors worked concurrently to help attract and recruit the

participants to the officiating role. Greater description of these factors and representative quotes follow.

**On-court.**

***Staying Part of the Game.*** A general desire to continue to be involved in and give back to a sport through officiating was defined as *Staying Part of the Game*. This theme was seemingly a fundamental factor in the recruitment of all 15 of the participants. Frank summarized, “I love the sport, so what I basically did was seek different avenues, to be a part of it.” Barry noted, “I thought I was going to really enjoy running up and down on a court in a high school game, kind of being involved with the kids again.” Along with the general desire to continue to be involved, our participants also expressed a desire to give back to the sport that they loved. For example, Walker stated, “I wanted to give back to the sports I loved – loved to watch, loved to participate in. I guess [refereeing] felt important. I felt connected, I felt part of that in-crowd; it’s just a really good feeling.” *Staying Part of the Game* was fundamental at the Recruitment stage.

***Competition and Challenge.*** Participants in this study also viewed refereeing as their opportunity to continue to compete and be challenged through sport. Thus, *Competition and Challenge* described the elements related to the competitive nature of sport and the testing and struggling to refine skills that refereeing provided. Bryce described his experience of competition and challenge this way, “I loved competition. I loved seeing how the teams handled themselves. I loved the thrill of getting to make the calls, and be able to administer the game so that both sides competed fairly.”

These sentiments were echoed by Seth, who stated, “it was just that adrenaline rush, like you were competing again.” The competitive nature of sport along with the challenge involved

in refereeing attracted our participants to the role. Another referee, Walker indicated, “I loved it because it . . . I mean, being a competitor most of my life, it just provided another realm to compete, so I think for competitive people, it was great.” Further describing the *Competition and Challenge* was Alex, who said:

You’ve got the game of basketball and then you’ve got the game of officiating, and I think it’s a big dance, and you got to interact with the coaches. You’ve got to know when to put your foot down. You’ve got to know when to kind of let them rant. They’re going to play with you; they’re going to toy with you; they’re going to try to influence and [manipulate] you; they’re going to try to trick you. I miss all [those] interactions.

#### **Off-Court.**

**Remuneration.** In terms of off-court factors almost all of our participants (14 of 15) mentioned that the financial incentives served somewhat as an initial attractor to the role. Bryce claimed, “I needed a job when I got to college.” Jake explained that he thought refereeing would be, “a fun and easy way to make some money.” Through refereeing, our participants explained that they “enjoyed making money” (Trina) and having “a little extra income” (Jill). However, it was evident that remuneration was not a primary source of motivation. Alex believed that, “even if they [other referees he knew] broke even, I think the huge majority would still do it [officiate].” Further supporting this idea, Barry said, “They [administrators] won’t attract more referees with ‘the almighty dollar.’” He stated, “Tripling game salaries does nothing except invite probably the wrong folks to join the cause [refereeing].” The results suggest that while *Remuneration* may initially attract someone and serve as a tool for recruiting, it was clear that just the “\$6.70 or whatever dollars an hour” (Garrett) was not going to be an important factor in retaining officials.



*Socialization into the Community.* Another off-court factor that aided in the attraction and recruitment of officials was the socialization of prospective officials into the community of officials. Important factors in *Socialization into the Community* were the involvement of a mentor or friend that introduced our participants to officiating and assisted in their integration into the social community that surrounds officiating. Lisa explained, “I kind of grew up in the gym watching [my dad] referee . . . I grew up knowing the right rules . . . I had a really great mentor there.” A few of our participants specifically mentioned a brother (Trina), friends (Alex, Macie), or mentors (Barry, Frank, Jill) who served as a champion to familiarize them with the benefits of officiating and the social protocols in being involved in the officiating community. Macie stated, “A friend of mine was an official and recommended that I look into it . . . and [he] talked about how much fun it was and how great it was.” Walker recalled an official telling him, “‘Hey, when you’re done playing you should look into refereeing basketball.’ He said, ‘It’s a little different, but you get to stay around the game and it’s a lot of fun.’” *Socialization into the Community* and having a champion for our participants to enter into officiating was clearly an off-court factor that served as an attractor and recruiting tool.

The Referee Recruitment stage is vital to understanding referee attrition because it provides the foundation that initiates the experience for individuals. That is, *Enjoyment of Being Part of the Game, Competition and Challenge, Remuneration, and Socialization into the Community* were the positive elements our participants enjoyed and valued about the experience. As our participants progress through the Referee Recruitment stage, they began experiencing difficulties as they transitioned to the Retention stage. Unfortunately though, as described in the next section, the themes found in the Referee Recruitment stage proved to be the exception rather

than the rule. That is, as the referees in our study progressed, the negative aspects of the refereeing experience became more salient and led to dropout.

### **Referee Retention**

After the initial attraction and recruiting to sport, Referee Retention was the next process that was explained by our participants. In this stage, the results demonstrate that the fundamental on-court (*Problematic Social Interaction*) and off-court (*Training/Mentoring* and *Lack of Referee Community*) experiences negatively influenced our participants' experiences and factored into their decision to ultimately leave the role.

#### **On-court.**

***Problematic Social Interactions.*** The negative on-court interactions with the sport community were common occurrences that the former officials discussed in regards to whether they stayed or left the role. In this case, the *Problematic Social Interactions* with coaches, parents, and spectators hampered their retention as an official. When Jake discussed his reasons for not staying in the officiating role he said, "The combination of parents, spectators, and what seemed to be the lack of control of those types of people, you know from a control standpoint . . . it was just time to move on." Garrett noted, "I got to the point where [the abuse] wasn't fun enough for it to be worth my time really." Many participants echoed this point almost verbatim. Stating the issue succinctly, Trina asserted, "No one deserves to be belittled or screamed at."

As former players, many officials anticipated that their prior experience would be advantageous. The transition to officiating, however, was not as seamless as many expected. The psychological components of officiating are indeed unique. Macie recalled, "You've got to detach yourself from the consequences. If you're constantly thinking about the consequences

that's what you're going to focus on, you know you're going to focus on messing up and you're going to mess up."

Many participants reported that with proper training and continuing education, these psychological stressors might have been mitigated. Many officials described, however, that without that proper training or mentoring, they felt unable to handle the on-court abuse and the social interactions with the wider sport community (such as coaches and spectators). As Bryce said, "You've got the coach yelling and screaming at you, barking at you when you know you screwed up, and you've got to be able to handle yourself." As discussed in the next section, proper training, continuing education, nurturing, and mentoring was not available to most referees who participated in this study. Thus, they were less able to handle the situations in which they found themselves, and this ultimately led to them to leaving the refereeing role.

#### **Off-court.**

*Training/Mentoring.* *Training/Mentoring* was identified as an off-court component that negatively impacted Referee Retention. For the referees who dropped out, training was implicated as being problematic in their retention because it centered on knowledge of rules and mechanics and execution of rule enforcement rather than equipping them to deal with the bigger problems they experienced in the role. Training in techniques for interaction or communicating with coaches, players, or spectators was not provided. George highlighted this point:

You knew you had an idea what the rules were, but I don't really think I was prepared enough for what was coming about. I say that not from the standpoint of knowing what to call and all that, but from the standpoint of [dealing with] the fans.

Along with feeling unprepared to deal with the abuse, many participants indicated that they received minimal-to-no training after games or educational follow-up apart from a few

association meetings. Participants in this study described no regular or specific opportunities for continual learning. Many respondents commented that a formal evaluation system and/or being assigned a mentor would have added significantly to their experience. Seth shared his thoughts on how a mentor might have assisted him, and helped facilitate his retention rather than his eventual departure from the role:

It takes a lot of feedback. It takes a lot of interaction, a lot of teaching, a lot of leadership . . . if there isn't any kind of mentoring early on, a lot of conversations, a lot of feedback . . . then it's hard to get all of those [new officials] to reach their capacity. If that [mentoring] had happened to me I might still be officiating right now.

Jake commented:

One of the most important things is the training and continued training. I think a lot of programs really lack in good training, and refresher training. And without that good training you're kind of setting up your officials for failure and therefore we may be losing them as opposed to retaining them. You get that little [training] at the beginning and then they kind of send you out to the wolves. . . . So you kind of get stuck and left hung out to dry. So I think that's a key point to retaining our officials and keeping them strong, is just making sure they're trained well, and continue to train them.

It was evident from the results that the off-court *Training/Mentoring* is vital to Referee Retention. Furthermore, this training needs to specifically address tactics on handling abuse from coaches, players, and fans and needs to be continual throughout transitions in their careers.

***Lack of Referee Community.*** The *Lack of Referee Community* was identified as another off-court factor that impacted Referee Retention. In this instance, the lack of support and lack of feeling of community between referees was detrimental to the experience. Seth stated, "I wasn't

part of that [referee] group.” These sentiments were reinforced by Barry, “I think there is probably a lot of folks that really get excited about being involved, and if they’re not feeling like they’re part of [it], [they] probably get disengaged in a hurry.” The participants described there being different “cliques of the refs” (Macie, Jill) and “no camaraderie” (George). Expressing the lack of community as frustrating Lisa stated:

Chapter meetings are mandatory. There were times that I actually got some really good information out of them, but a lot of times I felt like it was the community of officials who’d been around forever talking about this coach and that coach and half of us had no idea who they were talking about, what they were talking about or why it was funny. So I think that there was a community there, but I just never really got to be a part of it. I don’t know if I ever would have been.

Sam further described his experience, “You want to go where you feel welcome, where you feel included and you’re all working together.” Jill observed, “Officiating can be so stressful when you’re in between the lines or on the court. If you don’t have that community, it makes it all the more difficult to feel like you belong. And that’s a key thing for retention.” It was clear that on-court experiences rendered the referee experience as stressful. If that stress is not mitigated with off-court training and/or a felt sense of community, officials appear less likely to stay involved.

Unlike the Referee Recruitment stage, at the Referee Retention stage our participants highlight the negative aspects of the experience. At this point dropping out of the officiating role became a real possibility for the participants in this study due to *Problematic Social Interaction*, *Lack of Training/Mentoring*, and *Lack of Referee Community*. While attrition was present at this stage, some officials did continue in the role, only to drop out at the next phase.

### **Referee Advancement**

The results demonstrated that the off-court actions of administrators (e.g., coordinators of officials, league organizers) played a key role at the Referee Advancement stage. At this stage, *Lack of Administrator Consideration*, *Administrator Decision-Making*, and *Sport Policies* were key managerial issues that prompted our participants' decision to leave the officiating role.

### **Off-Court.**

***Lack of Administrator Consideration.*** Several of the participants in this study reported a felt lack of understanding and consideration from administrators. For example, George stated:

They [administrators] weren't very supportive. We went in, you did a job there and you never saw them again. Nobody ever called me. After training I never heard from one single, solitary person; no one from the organization reached out.

For a profession with an obvious shortage of individuals willing to take on the role of officiating, it was surprising to hear Alex's thoughts:

They [administrators] pick favorites instead of trying to cultivate and groom everyone. [Some] were cut loose. Not cut loose – they were ignored. You could really see who they focused on and who they talked to and who they gave advice to.

Along with the perceived unwelcoming atmosphere created by administrators, our participants also described gossiping and back-biting (Sam, Seth, Lisa). This seemed to exacerbate their feelings of being misunderstood and not part of the "in-group", which all reflected the *Lack of Administrator Consideration*. Fred appropriately summarized, "I didn't go in expecting everybody to roll a red carpet out for me, but some of the things that I saw [administrators do] were really a turnoff to me."

***Administrator Decision-Making.*** *Administrator Decision-Making* processes were also perceived by referees to be a barrier to their advancement and nurturing. Decisions regarding

referee assignments were reported in many instances to be based on favoritism, politics, and familiarity rather than on merit. This was summed up by Katie, “I think the saying, ‘It’s who you know’ applies to the world of officiating.” It was clear that most of our participants felt that game scheduling of referees was not based on “skills and abilities” (Bryce). “There were some favourites, if you will, that seemed like they got always the best nights, the best shifts - that type of thing,” Jake said. Another former official further noted:

If you don’t have anybody who will give you a chance and see what you can do, whether it’s a camp or clinic or something like that . . . that’s when I started to really lose my desire. Because I didn’t want to have to be doing four straight games and hope that somebody was going to see me and want me to work. (Lisa)

Clearly at the Referee Advancement stage, the off-court *Administrator Decision-Making* had a negative impact on retention.

***Sport Policies.*** Advancement was also hindered when referees relocated to a new state or even tried to advance in a different refereeing context within the same sport (e.g., rec league to high school, high school to college). *Sport Policies* between leagues and states were difficult to navigate for participants in this study. Referees understood that as an “unknown” in a new network of referees (albeit in the same sport), their career advancement would depend on developing new social networks rather than based on their skill and/or experience as a referee. Bryce described how he “literally had to start from scratch on every facet” when he relocated to a new state. Katie described her experience of relocating to a new state in this way, “I was trying to beat the door down and nobody wants to answer it.” Despite his credentials, Barry also found relocation to be troublesome.

I mean you start off -- no matter how much officiating experience you had at previous, back off at the bottom. And so I felt it was very kind of cutthroat, and if you weren't already in [the association] you weren't getting any games.

Further summarizing this issue Katie offered:

I started [officiating] in Ohio and then moved down to Florida for grad school and had to start over and then moved out here to California and had to start over again and I was just tired of it. It'd be nice if there was more of a standard across the states, because I remember even transferring my licence from Ohio to Florida, it was the biggest pain in the butt ever. . . . It's frustrating to work your way up and then completely be dropped to the bottom of the totem pole and especially if you continue to move [for other work related reasons].

The prospect of starting over after a move and navigating the different *Sport Policies* for many referees was too unappealing; consequently, many chose to leave the occupation as a result.

### **Discussion**

Referees are key personnel in the sustainability of organized sport. The results indicate that refereeing is a difficult undertaking where experiences can be negative, and a threat to an individual's ongoing involvement in the activity. Previous literature that has investigated referee turnover and referee intentions to leave (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995; Taylor et al., 1990) suggests that negative on-court experiences have been largely responsible for officials to consider leaving the role. The results of this study confirm earlier studies in which referees report the existence of some negative on-court experiences, however, the results further indicate that it is not the negative on-court experiences that led our participants to actually leave the role. In fact, our results demonstrate that the on-court experiences were especially pertinent to their



recruitment and overall enjoyment of the role. The negative experiences triggered by off-court organizational and managerial issues were ultimately the cause of referees leaving the role in our study.

The results of this study indicate that referees experienced difficulties when they reached a point of transition through the retention and advancement development stages—and this was linked to their eventual departure from the role. A model of referee attrition was developed that identifies the experiences faced by officials in each of the three phases and the exit points from the role (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

As this research has shown, organizational structures and managerial actions are problematic through the retention and advancement stages. It is clear from this model that attrition is implied (i.e., due to the triangular nature of the model) which is consistent with some conceptualizations in sport development (e.g., Green, 2005). That is, for various reasons, it is expected that individuals will leave a sport, and in this case officiating. Interestingly, though, the results of this research demonstrate that managerial actions have caused attrition beyond what might normally be expected.

The results of this investigation indicate all referees had an *Interest in the Sport*. In fact, two-thirds of the referees in this study officiated multiple sports. In this case, it might be argued that these individuals were drawn to the officiating role. They viewed refereeing as their opportunity to continue to compete and be challenged within sport (i.e., *Competition and Challenge*), and also continue to *Staying Part of the Game*. Further, referees in this study were *Socialized into the Community of Officials* by a champion or mentor, which was reported as a positive experience for them. All of these features are supported by previous sport-specific

literature that explores attraction and recruitment of athletes into sport (e.g., Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008; Green, 2005; Roberts & Chick, 1984). Although referees in this study described a host of positive experiences gained from the on-court activities at the recruitment stage, referees in this study dropped out of the role as they progressed.

Despite a growing body of knowledge about attracting and recruiting athletes into sport, there has been limited application of theoretical frameworks or practical implications for referees. The results of this research suggest that recruiting and attracting of referees could be managed somewhat similarly to that of athletes. In particular, the results suggest that for referees, the sport itself was a major attractor to the role, as well as part of the ongoing enjoyment for them throughout the time they were involved in the activity. It seems that the sport itself, and the elements of competition, fun, socialization that are known to be useful in building promotional and organizations strategies for the recruitment of athletes (e.g., Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury & Quick, 2008) are equally as relevant for referees. Currently, one might argue that the nature of the sport itself has been ignored as part of any scholarly investigation of refereeing. Or that the practical application of managerial actions and organizational structures that might support appropriate pathways and processes that we are familiar with in sport development for athletes, have also been ignored for referees (cf., Green, 2005). Not only is the nature of the sport important to referees, but also the notion that referees view the occupation as an extension of athletic careers is vitally important.

Perhaps one element that sets referees apart is the payment they can receive for undertaking the role. Even at the amateur or grass roots levels of many sports, referees are paid. In the case of referees in this research, the amount referees were paid was enough for many of them to consider it as a useful supplement to their regular income. Indeed, the *Remuneration*

received by engaging in refereeing was an *initial* attractor to the role, but became a topic that was less salient in their discussions about the progression of their careers. In essence, it became less important as they progressed; their interest, involvement, and enjoyment in the activity seemed to over-ride remuneration.

Consistent with previous literature, referees in this study reported receiving abuse as part of their game-day interactions with players, coaches, and fans (Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Hardy, 1997; Weinberg & Richardson, 1990). Although the referees in this study did eventually drop out of the role, they persevered for some time despite these *Problematic Social Interactions* at the retention stage. Interestingly, while the abuse was somewhat problematic, more importantly the referees in this study felt unprepared to deal with it. During the Referee Recruitment stage, our participants indicated that they were not trained for the interactions and other administrative requirements such as managing fans or coaches and other elements associated with game-day. For referees in this study, *Training/Mentoring* was focused on gaining knowledge of rules as well as the mechanics and execution of rule enforcement. While referees understood these activities as central to their role, learning about the interpersonal, social, and communication skills needed to effectively manage game-day situations (such as interactions with coaches and players) as part of rule enforcement was not part of their training—which rendered the experience of refereeing stressful for many.

Previous authors who have explored abuse in refereeing (i.e., Kellett & Shilbury, 2007 and Kellett & Warner, 2011) interviewed long-term referees and found that those individuals had learned to deal with abuse through informal communications with their fellow referees. It was the development of a sense of community and interactions within the refereeing community that were found not only to be a source of learning about how to deal with abuse (Kellett & Shilbury,

2007), but also a key in referee retention (Kellett & Warner, 2011). McCole and colleagues (2012) also found this to be a vital factor in the retention of seasonal employees, a classification most referees would fall under. This study has extended those findings; it is clear that the referees who had dropped out of the role felt a *Lack of Referee Community*. Off-court managerial actions and organizational structures to assist in facilitating community, and the development of appropriate skills for the role were lacking for our participants at the Referee Retention stage. Interestingly, this research has shown that it was these off-court experiences (i.e., *Training/Mentoring* and *Lack of Referee Community*) that had the most impact on the basketball referees' decision to leave the occupation at the retention stage.

Perhaps further exacerbating the negative experiences for the referees at the Referee Advancement stage was the reported felt sense of *Lack of Administrator Consideration*, and the questionable *Administrator Decision-Making* and *Sport Policies*. In particular, these managerial actions and organizational structures were also perceived by referees to be a barrier to their advancement. Warner and Dixon (2011) also noted in their study involving athletes that the off-field (i.e., off-court) factors such as these were also more salient than one might expect. This is further supported by previous research on coaches (e.g., Chelladurai & Ogasawara, 2003; Dixon & Warner, 2010; Kim & Cunningham, 2005). Along with an overall feeling of not being supported or appreciated, decisions regarding referee assignments were reported to be based on favoritism, politics, and familiarity rather than on merit. The problem of career advancement was intensified when referees relocated or tried to advance through a different sport organization. It was evident that the prospect of starting over for referees was too unappealing, so for those referees in this study, this was a major factor in them choosing to leave the occupation.

### **Practical Implications**

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 (see Hirschman, 1970 and Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Thus, the results revealed more distinct and sport-specific implications. It is clear that on-court elements are vital to the recruitment of officials. The sport itself and the connection to the broader sport culture can be an attractor for individuals to get involved in refereeing. Further, the activity of refereeing itself was also viewed as enjoyable. However, it could be argued that sport managers are likely not doing enough to highlight these on-court aspects of the sport, and the activity of refereeing itself in their marketing and promotional strategies. Thus, there exists a shortage of officials willing to even enter into the realm of officiating (e.g., Arehart, 2001; "Michigan, Hawaii deal with official shortages," 2007; "No refs, no games," 2002; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2012) as the benefits are not made salient.

This research also has implications for increasing the pool of potential referees by demonstrating where and how to target recruitment strategies. It is clear from this study that all of the referees had a genuine *Staying Part of the Game* and gained some enjoyment from the physical nature of the refereeing role. By more strategically highlighting the benefits of refereeing to existing sport enthusiasts, it is possible that managers may have more success in the recruitment of officials.

Clearly, at the recruitment and then retention stages of referee development, aspects related to the importance of the referee community were highlighted. *Socialization into the Community* (recruitment) and *Lack of Referee Community* (retention) continue to be highlighted in the literature (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Kellett & Warner, 2011) and appear to be imperative to understanding the officiating experience. In an effort to retain more officials, it is essential

that sport managers take note of these findings and do more to intentionally foster community for referees. For example, mentoring programs and creating social spaces for referees after games are simple solutions that sport managers can implement (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Winograd, 2002). This study also highlights the fact that more intentional and continual training, which addresses the requisite communication skills needed to deal with abuse, is needed. Designing such solutions would certainly help alleviate and temper the stress from the problematic social interactions described in this study and is consistent with findings from numerous organizational psychology studies (e.g., Kagan, Kagan, & Watson, 1995; Mays, 1995).

At the Referee Advancement stage, it was evident that off-court factors eventually led the former referees in this study to relinquish their officiating role. Being aware of the impact administrators have on officials is a step in the right direction (see Warner, et al., 2012). The current state of our officiating programs clearly demonstrates a finite number of officials exist. Referees are not a disposable resource. Therefore, more thoughtful *Administrator Consideration* is necessary to maintain an ample and appropriate number of individuals willing and able to fill the role. This research demonstrates that better nurturing of current officials must occur. Along with accomplishing this through more consideration from administration, supervisors of officials must also refine and/or make more transparent their decision-making processes in regards to game scheduling. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that administrators must address officials' perception of how games are scheduled. Finally, sport managers must also consider creating more standardized licensure for referees (e.g., *Sport Policies*). Developing more consistent state-to-state policies regarding the transfer of an official's previous experience would also aid in maintaining more officials in our sport systems.

### **Research Implications**

The distinctiveness of sport management relies heavily on the research questions asked and the approach taken to answering them (Chalip, 2006). This study used a sport development framework to view referees and in doing so revealed sport specific features; thereby, advancing the research on these important sport personnel. In regards to phenomenological research, Munhall (2007) noted:

What is not in the literature is as important as what is in the literature and in many instances more important. The question of the literature reflecting, contrasting, and/or refuting what you have come to find in your analysis and interpretation is of critical importance to the advancement of understanding and our knowledge base (p. 190).

This research demonstrated the benefit of moving beyond the paradigm of studying referees exclusively through a human resource management or psychological lens. By applying a sport-specific theoretical framework of sport development, we now have a more inclusive picture of the referee experience. Rarely do we have the opportunity to seek the views and opinions of individuals that leave sport organizations. Yet these individuals are likely to offer the most relevant information regarding dissatisfaction, which the literature clearly points to as being the most pertinent to address (cf., Dixon & Warner, 2010; Hirschman, 1970; Warner et al., 2011). This research also highlights the importance of seeking to understand the perspective of the too often unheard and unrepresented voice.

This study represents a first step toward the development of the referee attrition model. Exploring the referee experience via the basic elements of recruitment, retention, and nurturing allowed us to identify that attrition is increased by specific managerial actions. Sport development frameworks imply attrition but this research extends that research by pin-pointing

managerial actions that facilitate attrition. Further research is required in order to understand more comprehensively the difficulty of navigating the officiating trajectory and to develop a more refined referee attrition model. From a methodological standpoint, this research contributes to advancing understandings of attrition through allowing those who have already left the role to have a voice. Such perspectives may be important to advancing knowledge across the broader field of sport development. This research included both male and female referees, and our data demonstrated that there are no differences between males and females with regards to their decision to leave. Women, however, continue to be under-represented in officiating and future research should explore the specific experience of female referees. Moreover, future research could examine former game officials from other sports (e.g., hockey or baseball) with the objective of comparing and contrasting their experiences. This would further contribute to the body of critical research on referee recruitment, retention, and advancement. It is also important to note that because this study focused on referees who did *not* persist, the resulting data and attrition model is heavily focused on barriers. While the method is a strength of this study, future research should also consider the views of referees that do indeed persist in an officiating career.

Additionally, this research highlights the importance of better understanding the duality of the referee experience. While referees are clearly *employees*, their on-court and off-court experiences and reasons for pursuing the role are also similar to the experiences of athletes. This similarity needs more study and should not be overlooked. The volunteer management literature also could be a good foundation upon which to build future exploration. Volunteer management research has indicated that unlike paid employees, volunteers view their “work” more in terms of a leisure activity (e.g., Stebbins, 1982; Stebbins & Graham, 2004). This study highlights the idea



that viewing the referee experience through a similar lens could provide important details useful in the early stages of recruiting and attracting officials. In fact, the findings of this study should guide researchers to continue refinement of sport development frameworks as the exclusive use of human resource management and organizational psychology perspectives may lead to missing the true nature of attrition (cf. Chalip, 2006 and Doherty, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

This study of former referees extends the literature by taking a different approach to understanding how sport managers can better implement policies, procedures, and structures that impact the refereeing experiences in an intentional effort to retain more officials. By viewing the phenomenon via a sport development framework, rather than human resource management or psychological/abuse framework, it became evident that referees progress through different development stages similarly to athletes. Further, by exploring the perspectives of referees who had already left the role (rather than to explore *intentions* to leave the role), this research has allowed for specific organizational and managerial actions to be identified at each stage of referee development that have led to eventual discontinuation. It is clear from this research that both on-court and off-court experiences must be considered throughout all phases of referee development. However, off-court experiences become more salient to referees as they develop, and from our research, are fundamental to their retention.

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Table 1

Emergent Themes of the Referee Experience

	<b>Recruitment</b>	<b>Retention</b>	<b>Advancement</b>
On-Court	Staying Part of the Game Competition and Challenge	Problematic Social Interactions	
Off-Court	Remuneration Socialization into the Community	Training/Mentoring Lack of Referee Community	Lack of Administrator Consideration Administrator Decision Making Sport Policies



Figure 1

Referee Attrition Model

