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# An examination of how voluntary international netball officials view and experience well-being

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## ABSTRACT

**Research aim:** The purpose of this research was to explore the views and experiences of international volunteer netball officials about their well-being and its contributing factors.

**Research methods:** A qualitative methodology, involving semi-structured interviews, was used. Fourteen participants (10 females and 4 males) occupying different official and official coach roles at the highest qualification tier were interviewed from across all five global netball regions. A thematic analysis was used to inductively code interviews to investigate well-being perspectives and influencing factors.

**Results and findings:** Five main themes were found to most affect netball officials' well-being: (i) structured support: uneven or absent; (ii) juggling and prioritising; (iii) feedback: private praise, public criticism and feeling undervalued; (iv) the mentally prepared official; and (v) being a successful "brand". General findings showed a perceived stigma around revealing well-being issues, the need for further organisational resources and support and unfairness that might contribute to the well-being of officials in high-performance sport.

**Implications:** The findings suggest a greater focus on individualised and peer-based support mechanisms, other education to enhance well-being literacy and the need for explanation and improvements to be made to processes surrounding the progression pathway.

**Research contribution:** The research provides new insights that contribute to the current lack of knowledge about well-being in volunteer sport official populations and uniquely studies this in a high-performance, international sport setting.

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## KEYWORDS

sport official; umpire; mental health; volunteer; support

## Introduction

Sport officials play an essential role in the regulation of organised sport. Key expectations and responsibilities of the sport official include the application of the rules, maintaining social order and facilitating safe and fair sport

(Russell et al., 2019). Globally, a substantial proportion of the sports officiating community is represented by a volunteer workforce (Livingston et al., 2020) from the grassroots to the very top international level. Because of this, there is an increasingly crucial need to provide these

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officials with relevant support mechanisms and training opportunities for skill development, and ensuring their well-being is protected (Gorczyński & Webb, 2022; Webb et al., 2019). While the causes and consequences of poor well-being and mental health have been explored more broadly outside the sport context (e.g., Huppert, 2009; Misselbrook, 2014) the current evidence base within the sports officiating community has only more recently received attention. There is growing research evidence that sport officials' positive well-being is associated with their commitment (Downward et al., 2024) and in turn performance and engagement (Carson et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022) in their role. This study intentionally focused on aspects of netball sport officials' well-being in relation to their experiences in a volunteer capacity within an international sporting context. For example, in the 2023 Netball World Cup played in South Africa where sixteen international-level teams were represented across the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe and Oceania netball regions, the twenty-three officials appointed to games, were only afforded travel, accommodation and subsistence for their contributions. This context creates an environment where the officials are making considerable sacrifices to attend and perform at their best with minimal financial remuneration, a situation that potentially could have a big impact upon their well-being.

### ***Symptoms and occurrence of poor well-being and mental health in sport officials***

Evidence from different sport contexts has grown concerning the symptoms, prevalence and consequences of poor well-being and mental health for officials.

### ***Mental health indicators and their prevalence***

Common mental health disorders (CMD) experienced by sport officials that affect their well-

being include reports of distress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and substance abuse (Brick et al., 2022; El Bakry, 2013; Gouttebauge et al., 2017; Lima et al., 2022). Such symptoms are prevalent in officials of different expertise levels, ranging from amateur (El Bakry, 2013; Lima et al., 2022) to professional levels (Gouttebauge et al., 2017). Soccer is often the main sporting context studied; however, this has extended to Gaelic games (Brick et al., 2022) and other team-based (e.g., basketball; Karaçam et al., 2023) and individual sports (e.g., athletics, boxing; Carson et al., 2020). In terms of pervasiveness, up to 16% of professional soccer referees report anxiety or depressive symptoms, and a further 14% and 29% reported sleep disturbances and an eating disorder, respectively (Gouttebauge et al., 2017), while another study in Europe found 35% reported depression, 24% anxiety and 41% stress (Lima et al., 2023). Only one study has identified the severity of CMD symptoms showing a 16.9% prevalence of mild-to-moderate anxiety and a 4.8% prevalence of mild depression in male adult soccer referees (El Bakry, 2013). Cultural differences might also explain some discrepancies among study findings with researchers having debated the consistency in the types of measures used to gather such data (Gorczyński & Webb, 2022; Lima et al., 2023). There are some indications that the prevalence of CMD in professional football referees equates to that of the general population (Gouttebauge et al., 2017) while elite athletes have shown higher occurrences of alcohol misuse (19%) and anxiety/depression (34%) (Gouttebauge et al., 2019). Yet, differences in measures, age, genders and approaches to sampling, make comparison across studies problematic and firm conclusions hard to establish.

### ***Dimensions of well-being***

Only recently have aspects of sport officials' well-being been a focus of research (Carson et al., 2020; Downward et al., 2024; Kim et al.,

2022) as the terms mental health and well-being are often used interchangeably. Initial research into aspects of sport officials' well-being tended to focus on elite levels and surveyed the prevalence of clinical indicators of mental ill-health (e.g., anxiety and depression symptoms, sleep deprivation, drug and alcohol use; see El Bakry, 2013; Gouttebarga et al., 2017). While sport official studies in this area tend to focus on the mental health construct, concepts of well-being are not well clarified in definition and study focus (where mental health can be viewed as a state of well-being; Schultze-Lutter et al., 2016). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines well-being as a state in which an individual can realise their potential, cope with normal stresses, work productively and contribute to their community (Huppert, 2009). Well-being is considered a multidimensional concept that has several facets: autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1989). Lundqvist (2011) identified well-being in sport to include elements central to more global and sport-related well-being. This dual-continuum model considers *hedonic* (i.e., one's subjective well-being, or overall satisfaction) versus *eudemonic* distinctions (i.e., psychological well-being or social well-being). Other buffering factors of well-being can consider sport officials' resilience (Livingston et al., 2020) and life satisfaction (Wicker & Downward, 2020), particularly in volunteering roles.

### ***Demographic influences on well-being***

Drawing on these dimensions of well-being, Carson et al. (2020) found that Australian sport officials' positive well-being was associated with certain demographic indicators. Negative emotional well-being-related symptoms were found for younger sport officials, as well as those not in committed personal relationships and those with less officiating experience and educational attainment levels.

However, older males (over 50 years old), with greater officiating experience and in committed personal relationships showed more positive emotional symptoms. Lima et al.'s (2022) survey of Turkish referees in elite football corroborates these findings. Younger officials experienced higher self-reported stress, anxiety, and depression. However, for these referees, there was a concentration again on mental health indicators. Other studies have explored the experience and construction of the mental health of female officials. Tingle et al. (2022) interviewed female basketball referees operating from high school to elite levels across the United States about their well-being. Gendered aggression was shown to negatively impact female basketball referees, and they found that participants felt that mental health issues are stigmatised and that more resources and support are needed (Tingle et al., 2022). While these negative factors were identified, it is also suggested that "officiating can be cathartic" (Tingle et al., 2022, p. 1). Importantly, these studies help to extend Gorczyński and Webb's (2022) recommendation for further information on officials' demographic characteristics and social and environmental factors that contribute to understanding aspects of well-being and mental health.

### ***Influences on sport official well-being and the role of organisational support***

The retention of officials continues to be a sport management problem, explaining that officials leave sport due to abusive experiences (Mojtahedi et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2020), their attitudes about the organisational support they receive (Livingston & Forbes, 2016) and whether they feel recognised or respected by sport stakeholders for their contributions (Hancock et al., 2015). Evidence from soccer refereeing demonstrates that 60% of referees claim to receive verbal abuse every couple of games and 19% of these same referees have received some form of physical abuse (Webb et al., 2017).

Sport officials' susceptibility to verbal abuse has been identified as one primary potential cause of distress that impacts their well-being and mental health (Brick et al., 2022). Abuse is found to predict intentions to quit and well-being in sport officials; however, the relationship between abuse and well-being remains unclear as those who do not intend to quit still can experience reduced well-being (Downward et al., 2024). Although Brick et al. (2022) have importantly identified a direct link between abuse and general well-being and mental health among Gaelic games officials, this relationship needs to be further substantiated. For example, emotional regulation (which may help officials reappraise abuse, or reduce its effects) is an individual difference associated with better well-being in officials (Karaçam et al., 2023). Identifying the role well-being plays in sport officials' retention and intention to continue should be a primary organisational focus to mitigate these challenges.

While dealing with physical and non-physical abuse is one aspect of the officiating experience that sport associations attempt to reduce, other elements of the volunteer experience can potentially exacerbate negative well-being and need further investigation. There are numerous documented stressors and challenges in sport officiating that have been identified by research (Hancock et al., 2021) that can potentially impact well-being. Fear of failure (e.g., making incorrect decisions or other performance mistakes; Anshel et al., 2013; Johansen & Haugen, 2013; Radziszewski et al., 2023), interpersonal conflict with players and coaches (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Voight, 2009), lack of recognition from others (Voight, 2009), time pressure and work-life quality between officiating, family and occupation (Kim & Yip, 2018; Stewart et al., 2004), career progression and others' expectations (Thatcher, 2005), and travel demands (Warner et al., 2013) are some acknowledged stressors sport officials can experience. Along with general life stressors, the array of stressors that sport officials experience in their role can

have overall compounding effects on their well-being.

Designing and implementing positive and healthy work environments has become a crucial organisational goal which can lead to a shifting interest towards well-being in the sport management. For example, placing enhanced values on an employee's professional development helps emphasise authenticity in their work which influences productivity and commitment through improved performance and well-being (Luthans, 2002). In the work sector, employees, who are more actively engaged in their work, display more positive job-related attitudes and well-being (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2015). Sense of community, intrinsic motivation, and experiences of authenticity as a volunteer sport official were identified as important contributors to role engagement and increased well-being (Livingston et al., 2020). The more that sports officials are actively engaged in their volunteering improves self-actualisation and flourishing in their role and function (Kim et al., 2022). Being allowed to express autonomy in their role is an important determinant of the well-being levels in sports officials (Carson et al., 2020). For volunteer officials of major sporting event operations (such as international netball competitions, for example), engagement is vital in the hosting of fair and unbiased games as well as antecedents of positive well-being (Kim et al., 2022). Better knowledge of sport officials' actual lived experiences could help inform the strategic design of professional support that recognises their well-being and mental-ill health burdens on workplace functioning (and its individual, social, and environmental predictors; Gorczynski & Webb, 2022).

### ***Research context: volunteerism and well-being in international netball officiating***

Despite building recent investigations into sport official well-being (Carson et al., 2020; Downward et al., 2024; Karaçam et al., 2023; Kim

et al., 2022), there is often a focus on male-dominated sport environments. It is unclear if similar challenges are present for officials operating in a female-dominated environment and if volunteers' experiences are consistent. There is often also a focus on participating officials from one geographical area (e.g., Carson et al., 2020; Lima et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2019). The international sport context represents one unique operational environment for volunteers in the sport official role. To ensure well-organised and executed international competitions occur, these events rely on a range of volunteer official roles that constitute an important human resource. Sampling a diverse selection of match officials across the globe and in a variety of roles could provide a broad insight into their experiences of well-being as volunteer participants.

### **Purpose**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of well-being in voluntary, international netball officials'<sup>1</sup> participatory engagements. Following a review of current evidence-based research, we proposed two research questions based on this general aim:

RQ1: What are the experiences of well-being for volunteer netball officials in the context of the international competition environment?

RQ2: What factors of the international competition environment are associated with netball officials' well-being?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Following ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee and approval from the

World Netball Chief Executive Officer emails were sent to all voluntary international netball officials requesting their participation in a study on well-being for netball officials. Potential participants were informed of the aims and rationale for the study and were asked without coercion, if they wished to take part in the study and that only grouped results would be reported. Participants were informed that there would be no repercussions should they choose to decline, accept or withdraw from the study. All participants voluntarily provided informed consent after having been informed that their data would be anonymised early in the analysis process and erased should they wish to withdraw from the study during the interview.

To avoid selection bias (Pollock, 2020) the eighty-one international netball officials were given equal opportunity to participate, with twenty-three volunteering to be interviewed. A purposive sampling approach (Campbell et al., 2020) was taken within this group, to provide a balanced cross-section of netball officials, within a range of roles, all regions and also with a range of years of experience to provide a heterogenous group representative of the total population. To avoid any selection or unconscious bias made by the first author (CB) the process was overseen by the second author (see Pollock, 2020). This resulted in fourteen participants (females = 10, males = 4), all over the age of 35 who provided their consent to participate, representing 17% of the World Netball Officiating population. This included six umpires with the highest qualification, two were eligible to officiate teams with a world ranking of 6 or lower, four top-level umpire coaches and one who was working towards the top international testing panel level, who were all former international

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<sup>1</sup>IUA = International Umpire Awardee who umpires international netball matches of teams with any world ranking; ITID = International Talent Identified Umpire who umpires international netball matches between teams world ranked 6 or lower; ITP = IUA Testing Panel who is an umpire coach who attends international netball matches of teams of any world ranking; ITP Cadet = IUA Testing Panel Cadet who is an umpire coach working towards ITP; OC = Officiating Coordinator who assists in the administration of ITP appointments to international netball matches.

**Table 1.** Demographics of the fourteen participants who were selected for interview.

Pseudonym	Time officiating in a WN role	Current WN officiating role	Time in WN roles and WN region they are located
Jessica	3 years 3 months	IUA	3 years 8 months as an ITID and 7 months as an IUA, based in the Europe region
Naomi	11 months	ITID	11 months as an ITID, based in the Europe region
Grace	3 months	ITID	3 months as an ITID, based in the Africa region
Karen	10 years 8 months	ITP	5 years 5 months as an ITID, 3 years 6 months as an IUA, 1 year 6 months as an ITP Cadet, 3 months as ITP, based in the Africa region
Richard	9 years 8 months	IUA	6 years 2 months as an ITID, 3 years 6 months as an IUA, based in the Americas region
Georgina	9 years 3 months	IUA	3 years as an ITID, 6 years 3 months as an IUA, based in the Asia region
Linda	10 years 9 months	ITP	4 years 8 months as an IUA, 6 years 1 month as an ITP, based in the Oceania region
Paul	10 years 8 months	IUA	6 years as an ITID, 4 years and 8 months as an IUA, based in the Africa region
Carole	7 years 9 months	ITP Cadet	4 years 2 months as an IUA based in the Europe region and 3 years 7 months as an ITP Cadet based in the Asia region
Harry	3 years 2 months	OC	3 years 2 months as an OC based in the Oceania region and was previously an international referee in another sport for 6 years
Derick	9 years 8 months	IUA	6 years 2 months as an ITID, 3 years 6 months as an IUA. based in the Americas region
Diana	20 years 9 months	IUA	20 years 9 months as an IUA, based in the Asia region
Mary	18 years 2 months	ITP	7 years as an IUA, 11 years and 2 months as an ITP, based in the Americas region
Sandra	16 years	ITP	3 years and 10 months as an IUA 12 years and 2 months as an ITP, based in the Europe region

Notes: IUA = International Umpire Awardee who umpires international netball matches of teams with any world ranking; ITID = International Talent Identified Umpire who umpires international netball matches between teams world ranked 6 or lower; ITP = IUA Testing Panel who is an umpire coach who attends international netball matches of teams of any world ranking; ITP Cadet = IUA Testing Panel Cadet who is an umpire coach working towards ITP; OC = Officiating Coordinator who assists in the administration of ITP appointments to international netball matches.

umpires, and an officiating co-ordinator who assists in appointing umpire coaches to international matches (see Table 1).

### Research design

To gather the interviewees' lived experiences we adopted a phenomenological constructivism approach allowing the participants to tell their stories (Robson, 2011). On this basis, we recognised that the ideas presented have been socially constructed, situational and based on one's reality and truth (Mayan, 2009). Interviews were conducted by the first author, who is the International Officiating Manager at World Netball, via Zoom to allow for expressions and body language and audible comments (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

The participants were asked to discuss topics concerning: (i) demographic information, including their background and training; (ii) their knowledge of well-being<sup>2</sup> (e.g., how and where any knowledge was developed, and what it means to them, as a precursor to evoking conversations around their subjective experiences); (iii) their *perceptions* of well-being; (e.g., how have they developed); (iv) their *experiences* of well-being (e.g., sources of happiness, and any stigma or barriers related to well-being), as well as how they maintained their well-being (cf. Webb et al., 2021). The semi-structured interview guide used to cover these topics was adapted from Webb et al. (2021) and Tingle et al. (2022) to reflect its use with voluntary international netball officials and used the term well-being rather than

<sup>2</sup>This definition was provided, if needed, and only after they had explored their own knowledge of well-being. World Health Organisation defines well-being as, "a state in which an individual can realise their own potential, cope with normal stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community".



mental health to prevent any potential negative connotations to the term, and also to encapsulate a broader perspective (see Elraz, 2018). An additional question about the impact of COVID-19 was also added to see if this has impacted their ability to perform and operate as they usually would as elite officials (Webb, 2021).

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were held over two months and lasted between 36 and 87 min ( $M = 53.29$ ,  $SD = 12.45$ ) and were recorded for verbatim transcription using an online transcription tool (Otter.ai, 2022). Transcriptions were checked carefully for accuracy and where necessary edited manually to correct any voice recognition mistakes. Pseudonyms were applied to each transcript to protect anonymity and a copy of their transcribed interview was sent to each participant for them to check over and make any clarifications, additions, or changes they felt appropriate (see Pollock, 2020). This took a month to complete and resulted in minor changes to two participants' data.

Data familiarisation included listening to the fourteen interviews multiple times, reading the transcripts actively, analytically, and critically, unpicking any assumptions, and writing familiarisation notes (Braun et al., 2021). Recursive phases of reflexive thematic analysis were applied to the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) with a free online tool (QDA Miner Lite, 2022) used to collate the text as it was coded. Systematic data coding was then completed inclusively, comprehensively, and systematically with multiple sweeps of coding, to determine a level of patterned response or meaning (Braun et al., 2021). Initial themes were generated using an active and interpretative process. They were reviewed, developed, refined, defined and named, with important facets of themes captured and highlighted, to structure and organise the themes (Braun et al., 2021). Then the most vivid and

compelling illustrations from the transcripts were also identified, alongside a five-month audit trail of this process held between the first and second authors.

Although reflexive thematic analysis identifies the authors' subjectivity as being an important analytic resource (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021b) confirmation bias (Pollock, 2020), was avoided first by using an interview guide, second by paraphrasing responses back to the participants throughout the interviews and third by providing an opportunity to independently check and change their interview transcripts via member checking (Birt et al., 2016). This along with the use of the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021a) also allowed for the representation of the viewpoint of the participants as it was intended (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and could represent the thoughts of the majority and allow for generalisation. Response bias and social desirability bias (Yüksel, 2017) were also managed by allocating pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and by restricting access to the recorded interviews and transcripts.

Trustworthiness was established by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985, 1986) framework for determining the rigour or trustworthiness of analysis in qualitative research. For confirmability, an audit trail was conducted (see Stenfors et al., 2020) for self-critical reflexivity in the evolution of themes emerging from the data. The thematic structure was the result of the iterative processes of shuttling through the established phases of analysis. The first two authors familiarised themselves with the source interviews through repeated reading and re-reading. Initial codes (phase 2) were generated independently and discussed to avoid researchers' preconceptions or biases in the interpretation of the data. To aid the process, an audit trail of these discussions was maintained, and regularly reflected upon to assist the first author and second author as part of a self-reflexive journey as a researcher, and transparency in their engagement with the data (see Tracy, 2010).



## Results

Analysis of the fourteen interviews generated five independent themes: (i) structured support: uneven or absent; (ii) juggling and prioritising; (iii) feedback: private praise, public criticism and feeling under-valued; (iv) the mentally prepared official; and (v) being a successful “brand”.

### ***Theme 1: structured support: uneven or absent***

Officials are passionate and intrinsically motivated by netball and the role that they fulfil, finding value in the friendships and opportunities that officiating brings. However, across all roles, participants experienced a feeling that structured support was weak or absent. As Georgina noted, “Definitely, we are not sufficiently supported. So, we felt that we are not being taken care of.” Participants reported that they were generally left to manage themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, or get support from other friends, family, or through their workplace or national associations. This was one of the strongest messages that came through from all the officials.

Participants in Europe referred to informal buddy support operating at the national level, which was seen as being helpful. However, umpires and umpire coaches referred to the perceived expectation that they should be personally resilient, with no idea where they could seek support if they needed it. Participants suggested that an individual needs assessment with expert support, without stigma and with clear signposting for those requiring it would be a positive development. Naomi explained,

I think what the isolating bit about that is that you can't talk to your peer groups because somebody might have one thing, and you might have something they haven't so it kind of does divide you a little bit so all those support networks I spoke about in the beginning, all of a sudden they're not there anymore.

And Karen revealed,

I can remember my husband picking me up one day at the airport, and you know, without wanting to sound like a weak person, I was crying yet again. And he said to me, “You know what, this is your sport. This is your recreation. And although you're passionate about it, and you're doing it at the elite level, you should not feel like this when you come back”.

Analysis of the interviews indicated that support was either absent or inconsistent for all aspects of the officials' preparation, development and performance. There appeared to be pockets of spontaneous and peer support around the role or specific events, but many, like Mary, suggested that “nobody seems to focus on the welfare or you know the well-being”, and Karen indicated that “I often felt that there wasn't enough assistance in terms of mental well-being and physical well-being”.

Such comments cast light on the quality, access, and availability of appropriate support for these volunteer officials.

### ***Theme 2: juggling and prioritising***

Officials at this level are autonomously managing a wide range of demands both within and out of netball; balancing, prioritising, and compartmentalising all aspects of their roles and responsibilities. This can be extremely demanding and when linked with poor support structures the opportunity for sharing good practice is limited. Officials find their ways to cope, function, and thrive, rather than sharing and adopting good existing solutions.

This again applied to all roles where several methods for maintaining well-being were discussed. Maintaining physical activity featured prominently in several accounts, as well as relaxing and social interactions. Linda stated,

One thing I've learned over the years is to be very good at compartmentalising what I'm doing so when I'm overseas on an international netball tour, that's what I do. I don't

think about school, and I don't think about the family. I mean, I bring them but you know, I don't give them my headspace.

And Naomi mentioned,

It's again trying to get that balance right between the amount of time you're away and planning time with the family and holidays and things, and netball should be a part of your life as our head of officiating says, and maybe not all encompassing. You need to get that balance right, but that's still quite a difficult choice to make because you don't want to exclude yourself from opportunities, but equally you still have family and your work to balance as well.

The management of netball-life balance proved a challenge for umpires and umpire coaches alike. As unpaid volunteers, participants consistently noted that the commitment required to excel in their officiating role was a constant and dynamic challenge to their overall sense of well-being.

### ***Theme 3: feedback: private praise, public criticism and feeling undervalued***

Participants perceived themselves to be unfairly treated and undervalued and their well-being needs were either poorly acknowledged or ignored. However, there was a level of pragmatism in responses too. Karen recognises that "there just isn't the platform to recognise a volunteer [umpire] as an elite athlete".

The emotional consequences of stress and sadness experienced by officials were discussed by several of those interviewed, in particular by those with greater international officiating experience and those based in the Americas and Africa. Georgina stated, "you are asked to officiate and be an umpire, but you're not recognised in that role and the importance of that". Carole explained, "you're not sure or it's not clear why you're not as good as others or why you're not given opportunities".

At this level, it is also assumed that officials are technically competent. Participants

indicated that dealing with criticism, the pressure to perform and the uncertainty around progression and selection are essential skills requiring well-developed self-regulation skills. Grace identified, "the risk is that sharing some of your feelings about yourself or what you're feeling about, well-being wise, could be taken in a way that you don't want it to be, which could be not having invites, for example" and Sandra, "umpires in particular, are not paid for what they do internationally at all, and they don't do it to get slated worldwide on Twitter and Facebook"

There were differences in perceptions around the experience of pressure, with some officials recognising that with pressure also came the opportunity for positive emotions; for example, Linda stated "I love the umpiring. And I love netball. And I love the people", and Grace explained, "it's a feeling of being satisfied, content, ecstatic, at the same time".

Umpires and their coaches recognised the demands upon officials and how social media heightens the pressure that they are under, with such immediate and public scrutiny after perceived poor umpiring performances. This is balanced against the support of the volunteer community and the positive psychological benefits that the voluntary role affords.

### ***Theme 4: the mentally prepared official***

The role of mental preparation for officials is often neglected and is left to them to work out strategies to manage that themselves. Georgina mentioned, "in order to have this pressure to be ready, you have to spend your own personal time and money and energy to prepare to be ready for international games". Of all the factors contributing to mental preparation, confidence was reported to be the most vital. Diana stated,

...and that's been something which I've needed to have faith and believe in my own performance and know that I'm not being sidelined, because of it. And that's really,

really challenging because it does become a self-fulfilling prophecy, then because you lose your confidence. And when you do actually get the opportunity, you put so much pressure on yourself to be out there and perform that surprise, surprise, you don't perform very well.

Umpires in particular felt that opportunities to officiate at a high level or internationally were lacking which contributed to low levels of confidence. This was further magnified by the lack of opportunities due to the global pandemic. Paul explained,

...getting more challenging matches is the challenge as well. I guess it's the mental mind that is always thinking what's wrong and, like, why? There's a lot of that negative part that is always thinking about for example, after COVID, like the season is ongoing now so you'll be thinking, how am I going to umpire a game when I'm not prepared for it.

### ***Theme 5: being a successful "brand"***

There is an oft-cited observation about officials that when they do a good job they are not noticed (Livingston et al., 2020). This received some support in the interviews; however; there is a good deal more to this – the nuance is that effective officials also serve to lead, nurture and inspire others, in addition to delivering their performance. Derick expressed, "I always like to draw myself as a reference, because I have a saying you know that I usually say to myself, I dig wells for others to drink" and Harry expressed, "that's my key motivation in life, to be honest, is to contribute to other people's success, and to be a part of something".

Due to the increasing scrutiny of all match officials through social media, these officials showed insights into how the direction of these posts can lead to a "branding" that can serve to build a positive or negative public image. For example, Linda noted,

I worry a little bit about the mental well-being because of the pressure that especially elite players, umpires, and officials are under and

the scrutiny with social media and radio, live replays and all those sorts of things. I worry more about perhaps the mental wellness of officials in sport or in play, to a certain degree.

And Georgina who had reconsidered her engagement with social media, "you scroll the social media, and you're like, 'oh, all the negative?' so that probably is one that affected my own well-being. So, after a while, I started to stay off social media".

Officials acknowledged the significance of their work and referred to the bigger picture of officiating, recognising their role in supporting the game.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences and perceptions of well-being in a group of voluntary international netball officials. The intention was also to develop insight into the factors associated with their experiences of well-being. The findings show similar trends evidenced by previous research about the well-being challenges that other officials experience, particularly balancing volunteerism-personal demands, feeling mentally unprepared, and new insight into netball officials' public scrutiny and the need to manage a favourable image for the sport's brand. The environmental factors associated with the officials' experiences of well-being included quality of resources and social support provided, recognition for one's contributions and other feedback mechanisms, and feeling like they must be resilient with insufficient understanding of how to demonstrate that.

As such, the results of this study clearly emphasise the multi-dimensional nature of well-being (Ryff, 1989) for netball officials, with an emphasis towards eudemonic sources (Lundqvist, 2011). The officials identified a need for autonomy, personal growth and striving as a volunteer, and positive relations with others, highlighting psychological and social components to their well-being. This was

further embedded within other findings that emphasised the influence of satisfaction in their sport role and appraisal of one's resilience levels and ability to negotiate their volunteer-life balance. Social media has been linked to negative effects of hedonic well-being (Valkenburg, 2022), which was also echoed by these netball officials when engaging with public opinion. There also appears to be an increasing pressure from social media that needs further exploration as it can have detrimental effects on their well-being if not considered (Johansen & Haugen, 2013; Rainey, 1995; Thatcher, 2005).

There continues to be a stigma surrounding well-being issues which often means that issues are not addressed, compounding the problems that they experience (Elraz, 2018; Tingle et al., 2022). This is in part due to a tendency to hide well-being issues and the appraisal of challenging situations (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) that contribute to voluntary officials' resilience and ability to cope with experiences during and after matches (Tingle et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2021). The impact on their well-being on having to manage the technical advice and the uncertainty around what comes next on their own, after matches also corroborate previous findings (Johansen & Haugen, 2013; Rainey, 1995; Thatcher, 2005; Webb et al., 2021). As anticipated, COVID-19 has impacted opportunities (Webb, 2021), with poor access to training at a suitable level, infrequent opportunities at international competitions, and limited incentives utilising their resources (Livingston et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2013). Similar to other officials, this group do their utmost to stay involved, with commitment and dedication shown by their choice to continue officiating to maintain, as well as drive up the standards of officiating, at an elite level (Downward et al., 2024; Livingston et al., 2020; Thatcher, 2005; Warner et al., 2013).

A new finding has come from this study which relates to the perceived unfairness in the way they are treated as officials, which has negative impacts on their well-being. This

group also showed a passion for netball and their desire to show resilience was revealed (Livingston et al., 2020). The lack of support and understanding of how to provide that support was consistent with the literature as it is already a known issue for sports officials (Gorczyński & Webb, 2022; Tingle et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2021), with a focus on the need to feel connected and supported in officiating already identified as a way that could enhance match officials' well-being (Livingston et al., 2020; Ryff, 1989). It seems that in netball as in other sports the officials have to utilise their resources to plan and effectively manage all their responsibilities (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Tingle et al., 2014; Voight, 2009), while the importance of their role is not recognised (Hancock et al., 2015; Livingston et al., 2017). The very nature of officiating seems to be intrinsically motivating which leads to feelings of positive well-being; however, officials need to be treated fairly to experience these feelings. Officials' perceptions of justice can be related to this, including how resources are allocated or distributed by sport organisations (i.e., compensation and match assignments) and the procedural and informational processes used when communicating decisions to officials (Kim, 2017).

There was a strong desire to be role models, to be successful, and to help others within officiating, with their well-being enhanced by the motivation that the pressure from officiating can bring, which were known to be reasons why they would choose to volunteer (Livingston et al., 2020; Thatcher, 2005). This shows that voluntary international netball officials having purpose in life and the autonomy to work towards, and reach goals, could enhance their well-being (Carson et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Ryff, 1989).

Interestingly, the emotional strain of gendered aggression towards female match officials exists in soccer (Tingle et al., 2022), but was not highlighted in this study. The netball environment, where females dominate

playing, coaching and officiating roles, did not elicit many of the challenges that have previously been encountered by this group, such as sexual objectification (Marfell, 2019; McLachlan, 2016), physical appearance comments, and dismissive coaches (see Tingle et al., 2022) and questions over their ability to officiate (see Forbes et al., 2015). This is reflective of the need for context as an important lens through which female match officials' well-being should be investigated in future, so that our understanding can augment mental health investigations on sport officials that often draw on self-reported clinical symptoms such as CMD.

It is appropriate, however, to recognise several potential limitations of this study. These voluntary international netball officials are a small, unique subset of the officiating population, with characteristics (e.g., predominantly female volunteers) that may not be aligned with the general population of sports officials. This brings to question the external validity of the findings and how these findings can be used to build a more complete picture of the female officiating population. It must also be acknowledged that while steps were taken to ensure consent was truly informed, the potential for participants to provide "guarded" statements about their well-being may have had some influence on the findings. To mitigate any fears participants may have experienced repercussions of speaking negatively, data were anonymised as early in the process as possible. We would encourage the use of focus groups to encourage snowballing of ideas, increase sample size and break down any stigma associated with mental well-being.

### **Recommendations for practice**

Despite these limitations, this study has provided the platform upon which policy change could be built, by focusing on relationships and recognition of accomplishments as has previously been proposed (Webb et al., 2021). For

example, an individualised support approach through a peer-based system, such as buddies, could be introduced to help strengthen and build mutual support networks within this officiating community. Clarity of progression criteria around the development pathway, together with more explicit promotion of successes in officiating, may also be beneficial, alongside more effective monitoring of new policies to measure the effects on officials' well-being.

There are indications that little direct provision to support officials' well-being exists within sport organisations (Webb et al., 2020). Officials identify there are often few mechanisms for support and educational courses that local organisations provide about mental health information or training (Webb et al., 2021). This suggests a greater need for mental health literacy, sport association engagement and policy change from governing bodies given the unique challenges officials face. Gorczynski and Webb (2022) delivered a call for a clearer research agenda into sport official mental health to improve the delivery of evidence-based interventions. These recommendations illustrated sport organisations' role in: (i) helping sport officials be more alert to mental health symptoms and disorders; (ii) developing and piloting interventions; and (iii) applying broad evaluative measures of intervention impact and disseminating this knowledge effectively. When sport organisations provide knowledge to athletes through access to support and literacy campaigns, athletes' intentions to seek such support services and personal management knowledge increase (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). For officials, this emphasises that if proper education and recognition of well-being are made transparent, officials can feel better informed and have their well-being protected by their officiating organisations (Gorczynski & Webb, 2022). To better inform sport management practices, understanding how the operational conditions for the volunteer sport official workforce can

help or hinder their work engagement and well-being needs further exploration.

Future research that could impact practice within this context would be useful to extend the current findings by examining, the following questions:

- (1) If support processes need to be tailored to the different roles involved in officiating to be more effective?
- (2) What specific support mechanisms can help with external criticism, such as social media?
- (3) Would support systems be better administered internationally, nationally or on a more local or even informal basis?
- (4) Are officials provided with appropriate information to understand the processes of progression and are officials provided with sufficient opportunities to officiate at a high level or internationally?

This study adds to the limited investigations into the well-being of sports officials, and we hope it encourages further research of this nature to assist officiating managers in recruiting, training, supporting and retaining match officials.

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