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# Play on! Towards an understanding of sports officials' entry to officiating and talent development

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary paper discusses key considerations for researchers and practitioners to build our understanding of effective sport officials' recruitment practices. The identification, development and retention of sport officials is a key management agenda for sporting organisations, with low officiating numbers often reported in different sports, worldwide. While there has been a strong (and worthwhile) research focus on understanding attrition factors of officials and their experiences while in the talent development environment, there is limited understanding of how officials are identified and recruited. The recruitment is a crucial period that has implications on developmental trajectories and potential officiating talent that enter the sport system. Greater understanding of officials' entry to officiating, including their motivations, sampling pools, specialisation age and other early experiences requires more investigation to provide evidence-based recommendations for key officiating stakeholders in the sport industry. To understand officials' sport entry and initial pathway progression we can draw on concepts from athlete research and potentially adapt them to the realities of officiating communities. This commentary aims to provide context related to the recruitment of sports officials and inform targeted research into effective recruitment strategies and optimal early developmental climates for sports officials.

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Umpire; referee; recruitment; participation; pathways; talent identification

## Introduction

Sport officials' (i.e. referees, umpires, judges) talent identification and development represents a key management agenda for sport organisations. From an academic perspective, the term talent identification and development can be defined as the process of detecting and selecting individuals with the potential for peak performance, and then providing a suitable

learning environment for them to nurture their skills (Güllich & Larkin, 2023; Höner et al., 2023). Ensuring a competent and skilful pool of officials relies on effective identification, recruitment, training curriculum and performance monitoring to help cultivate talent (Livingston et al., 2020). This is often challenged by attrition at early phases of their development (e.g. Cuskelly & Hoyer, 2013; Mojtahedi et al.,

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2022), and the fact educational provisions and performance enhancement strategies remain less advanced and financially supported, compared with athlete programmes (Cunningham et al., 2022). Webb et al. (2023) reported that English football referees perceive a lack of transparent pathways for career advancement, and organisational support such as limited mentors impedes talent development. It is unknown if this is similar for officials in other sports and international regions. Further, in cases where officials perceive limited organisational support, there is potential for an impact on their motivation, commitment, self-efficacy, self-directed learning and skill development (Livingston et al., 2017). To better understand the talent development processes of sport officials, while contributing to the quantity and quality of sporting officials, more knowledge is required about how they enter the sport system, and are supported, monitored and retained.

Previous sporting experiences can influence the available talent pool of potential officials, and can be an inherent challenge for sporting organisations to navigate when identifying and recruiting potentially talented sports officials. To conceptualise this, MacMahon et al. (2015) proposed a developmental framework for officials, adapted from athlete research (FTEM), in which after foundational levels characterised by active lifestyle and sport participation officiating offers, the demonstration and confirmation of talent potential occur with increased performance-emphasis and intentions for pathway advancement. Not all officials may strive for expertise levels as MacMahon et al. (2015) identified, while maintaining casual roles but holding potential. Further, an identified lack of “big data” collection and criteria monitoring related to developmental indicators can create challenges in how talent at various levels are evaluated and supported (Livingston et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of domain-specific practices and individual differences, while environmental

factors can inform how these are represented within sports officials’ development.

Recruitment (leading to retention and advancement) of officials is a crucial period for managing and developing a sometimes-disenfranchised sport official workforce (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2017). Webb et al. (2023) recommended governing sport and refereeing bodies need to evolve to meet the requirements of officials in the initial stage of their recruitment and development pathway introduction, with foundation skill development. This is important as many early officiating experiences are often accompanied by frequent amounts of abuse that deter interest in the role (Mojtahedi et al., 2022; Radziszewski et al., 2023). In addition to the recruitment process, talent development of sport officials often centres on attributes and skills officials bring to the performance context (Kittel et al., 2019), but what is generally lacking in the research is to what extent is talent predicted and explained by more macro developmental processes (Cunningham et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2023). Once the official is recruited, organisations should monitor individuals’ responses to diverse practice opportunities, and how progression through the levels of skilled performance is mediated by skill development and competitive performance. Further, understanding how previous sporting knowledge and experiences (i.e. athlete; spectator; administrator; coach) may transfer to officiating might be important for targeted recruitment processes (Ollis et al., 2006). For example, athletes deselected from talent development programmes may have personal attributes and skills that would make them successful in the officiating domain, representing an avenue to increase the potential officiating talent pool (Neely & Dugdale, 2022). Such evidence would assist in understanding the officiating recruitment process, as much of the current research focusses on individuals leaving the pathway (Livingston et al., 2017; Rullang et al., 2017), rather than entering.

### ***How do officials enter the sport system and why?***

While athletes and officials interact within the same sporting context, there are key differences in how each population begins their sport development journey. For athletes, the initial stage of their athletic career is characterised by playing the sport and developing an affinity with the game through fun, engaging, unstructured activities (Wall & Côté, 2007). This provides the foundation for progression to more structured development programmes, such as local competition, and potentially identification and selection into competitive talent development programmes. During this process, there is generally a relatively large talent pool (i.e. more participants than development pathway positions), with selection into talent development pathways based on sport-specific key performance indicators (Johnston et al., 2018; Larkin & O'Connor, 2017). While individuals may strive to reach these levels, the decisions associated with progression within talent development pathways are with coaches and selectors, characterised by identifying potential talent. In contrast, for sports officials, initial sampling and specialisation stages of officiating may not necessarily be related to fun, engagement, and unstructured activities, but rather a conscious individual decision to become an official, and then they begin to officiate competitive games (Hancock et al., 2015; Loghmani et al., 2021). Consequently, from an officiating talent development perspective, the first stage of the process is not talent identification based, like an athlete pathway, but rather officiating organisations building their own talent pools through a recruitment process. This recruitment process often targets individuals who have at some level participated (i.e. junior; socially; amateur; professional), or have a personal interest in a certain sport, making a conscious decision and sometimes “strategic adaptation” (Delorme et al., 2013) to transfer to become an official,

either during or following their athletic career. Often, this decision may be for monetary compensation (Bernal et al., 2012), but there are potentially a wide array of motivations for potential officials to enter the sport officiating development system (e.g. “giving back”, love for the game, social interaction), with also one motivation reported as the presence of role models (Wicker & Frick, 2016). While it should be noted that initial recruitment of officials may differ depending on the sport and geographical location, this topic of factors predicting entry is a key avenue of research, as how potential officiating talent across different sports are recruited can lead to targeted recruitment strategies for sporting organisations.

### ***Understanding officials' motivations to enter and develop their talents***

There is a need to understand officials' motivations entering the pathway, given the motivation between officials and players may differ. Research on basketball officials has suggested there are both intrinsic (excitement, challenge) and extrinsic (money) motivations to entering officiating (Bernal et al., 2012). Given there are not many paid jobs available for young adolescents (e.g. 13–14 years old), the incentive of money could be a key attractor for individuals to enter officiating, which is not an immediate incentive early in playing. As a result, more investigation is required to determine these inherent differences between intrinsic and extrinsic means of motivation between playing and officiating. Including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation sources, Hancock et al. (2015) also consider social and sport-related factors that motivate officials' entry to sport and continuation. Females' motivations to begin officiating have been linked to basic needs of feeling competent, having opportunity for choice, personal volition to pursue goals, and feeling care and trust from within officiating communities (Sunde et al., 2023) and barriers and support levels they experience

on entry and development (Baxter et al., 2023). It is vital to develop more understanding of officials' motivations when commencing, plus how this may shift during later stages of their developmental trajectories. Illustrating tenure-based motivation distinctions, early career rugby referees demonstrate higher extrinsic motivation and continuing extrinsic motivation which is predictive of greater intentions to continue compared to their more seasoned official counterparts (Ali et al., 2023). Continuing education, mentorship, remuneration (Li & Li, 2023) and perceived organisational support also influence officials' early motivations (Ali et al., 2023). One such consideration for sport officiating organisations is to consider how characteristics of officials can be stable, malleable and unstable influencing development factors (Livingston et al., 2020). The characteristics of officiating specific to the type of official (e.g. interactor, monitor, reactor) will differ, and it is important for managers of officials to differentiate based on these task aspects that can and cannot be changed to recruit officials.

Once the individual has decided to become an official, specific officiating skill development is obtained through officiating competitive matches, via the process of "deliberate experience" (Ollis et al., 2006). It has been postulated that the best practice environment for sports officials is the competitive game environment (MacMahon et al., 2007), as this generally provides the only opportunity for officials to refine and develop their skills. Therefore, in-game performance alongside more traditional "deliberate practice" approaches, can develop key self-regulatory capabilities needed for effective sports officiating. This is in direct contrast to athlete populations, whereby skills can be developed within games conducted in training and then applied to the game context. Therefore, while athlete development models may provide some context to understand sports official development and motivation to improve, certain developmental activities

associated with athlete development, such as deliberate play, may not directly transfer to a sports officiating population.

### ***Transferring lessons from the athlete world to sport officiating***

When considering athlete development, while there have been several developmental frameworks proposed (Bruner et al., 2009), there have generally been two overarching frameworks; "Deliberate Practice" (Ericsson et al., 1993) and "Deliberate Play" (Côté & Erickson, 2015). The Deliberate Practice framework suggests the need for extensive periods of purposeful practice, with no immediate personal rewards such as enjoyment, for the attainment of skill development and eventually expertise (Ericsson et al., 1993) and has been explored in sport officials (Catteeuw et al., 2009; MacMahon et al., 2007; McEwan et al., 2023). A general assumption was to attain elite performance levels, individuals need to invest approximately 10,000 h of deliberate practice in domain-specific activities (Ericsson, 1996) while evidence in sport officials finds this level of investment unevicenced and amounting closer to 5000 deliberate practice hours over a 20-year career (Catteeuw et al., 2009). Contemporary expertise literature suggests the 10,000 h rule oversimplifies the complexity of skill acquisition, inevitably neglecting the quality of practice, effective coaching, individual learning differences, basic abilities and talent capacities, and the role of contextual factors (Hambrick et al., 2020).

For athletes, much of this time is invested in the development of physical, technical and tactical skills, through activities such as on-field training; individual skill training and other simulated practices (Baker & Young, 2014) whereas for officials, actually officiating games is considered a more relevant training activity (MacMahon et al., 2007) and technical discussions and physical fitness sometimes are overemphasized over a need for more decision-making,

psychological and game management skills training opportunities (McEwan et al., 2022). Further, compared to an athletic population, sport official practice environments at grassroots and amateur levels are not particularly “practice-rich”, and other strategies may be needed for developing talent. The inherent development needs, relevant deliberate training practices, and fit of expertise development perspective in sport officials differentiates their talent development environment compared to athletes. Therefore, leaning on such athletic research may not provide a clear indication of developmental pathways and processes involved in officiating expertise development.

In contrast to the Deliberate Practice framework, the Deliberate Play framework proposes skill development is characterised by early and informal sporting participation, typified by playful intrinsically motivating activities, which provide immediate gratification and are specifically designed to maximise fun and enjoyment, such as backyard or street games (Côté et al., 2003; 2007). These activities are generally individually-led and are often modified versions of the competitive game, played with flexible and age-appropriate rules, and regulated by participants themselves (Ford et al., 2015). The proposed benefits of these types of activities for skill development are they enable participants to experience a variety of contexts to be creative and experiment with their actions and decisions without competition pressures (Côté, 1999). Through this type of engagement, skill development is acquired via the inherent enjoyment of activities, which may then stimulate the individual’s motivation to potentially invest in domain-specific deliberate practice (Côté, 1999; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2008).

While there is strong evidence to support the Deliberate Play framework from an athlete perspective (Côté et al., 2003; 2007), within a sporting official’s development context, there are limited to no opportunities for deliberate play. For example, there are no reported examples

or even general observations of sports officials’ officiating “pick-up” games with their peers. Conversely, researchers and practitioners should consider exploring environments that foster intrinsic enjoyment in the early stages of officiating, similar to deliberate play in athletes (e.g. potentially involving young officials in athlete/team training sessions to experiment and test officiating skills). While speculative, this could boost officiating numbers, as officials being recruited can experience more enjoyable activities in early stages of training, than officiating competitive games where abuse can be highly prevalent.

### ***Towards a new research agenda***

Talent development is rarely studied in sport officials (Webb et al., 2023), with few studies exploring the initial motivations and recruitment practices to engage potential officials. This is a vital stage that needs greater exploration in the literature, given there has been a strong focus on attrition. If organisations can maximise the quality and quantity of officials entering the pathway, it is proposed that this will also limit the impacts of attrition. We suggest a reconceptualisation of talent recruitment and identification of sports officials, with the aim to better describe and understand officials’ sport entry and initial pathway progression as a critical period. For example, sport practitioners can use a constraints-led approach to recruitment and early talent development (Livingston et al., 2020). What are age-specific constraints on recruitment? What are motivational constraints based on age, sport and geography? How do opportunities for deliberate practice and play constrain skill development, self-efficacy and interest in the role during critical entry periods? Practitioners should consider the importance of “Deliberate Play”-like activities more in the early stages of officiating, to promote intrinsic enjoyment and promote self-exploration of officiating skill. This would assist in understanding how

to target recruitment of sports officials through emphasising sport engagement, sources of motivation, goal orientations and attributes predicting talent. These sources of motivation are vital to understand, in order to provide evidence-based recommendations for key stakeholders to effectively recruit officials. While the athlete domain can provide a foundation, specifically with intrinsically enjoyable experiences, there is scope for an officiating-specific model of recruitment and talent development. To summarise, it is anticipated this commentary will “recruit” researchers and practitioners in the common goal of boosting officiating numbers through evidence-based recruitment practices, subsequently influencing expanding available officiating talent in the sport system.

### Disclosure statement

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