

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES IN THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF SPORTS OFFICIALS



A report prepared for the
Australian Sports Commission
Project Manager: Mr. Gary Evans



Griffith Business School
Department of Tourism, Leisure,
Hotel and Sport Management
Graham Cuskelly, PhD
Russell Hoye, PhD
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*Graham Cuskelly
Russell Hoye
Griffith University
Brisbane Queensland
January, 2004*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) commissioned Griffith University to complete a study of recruitment and retention issues in sports officiating throughout Australia.

Telephone or face-to-face interviews were conducted with representatives of five National and ten State Sporting Organisations across five sports, namely Australian rules football, basketball, gymnastics, netball and rugby league. The sports were selected by the ASC to be broadly representative of officiating domains (e.g., court and field sports, male and female dominated sports; game management and judging/scoring, inner and outer metropolitan and regional centres). A total of 142 practicing and recently exited sports officials attended seventeen focus groups in a number of capital cities and regional centres throughout Australia.

It was concluded that:

- There is a significant problem in the retention of officials, particularly inexperienced officials at the grass roots level of sport.
- Incomplete data makes it difficult to document the exact nature and extent of the retention problem.
- NSOs and SSOs have little influence in the recruitment and retention of sports officials at grass roots levels.
- The resources devoted by NSOs and SSOs to sports officiating are disproportionately low in comparison to coach and player development.
- Compared to metropolitan officials rural / regional officials incur significantly higher time and money costs in officiating
- The facilities and resources available to sports officials at the grass roots level are inadequate.
- There is poor integration of sports officials within the operation of sport governing organisations.
- There are significant shortcomings in the training provided for sports officials to deal with abuse and conflict situations.
- The feedback provided to practicing officials at the grass roots level is generally inadequate.
- There is an underlying assumption that all sports officials are seeking career advancement.
- The skills and abilities of sports officials' coordinators is a key determinant in the recruitment, development and retention of sports officials.

The key recommendations of the study were that:

- Sports should attempt to build a stronger and more positive public image for sports officiating.
- Sports should adopt a tough stance on abuse that moves beyond the banter of the game.
- Sports at all levels should be encouraged to increase their recognition of officials.
- Sports at all levels should shift from stand-alone to integrated structures in relation to sports officiating.
- Clearer and more transparent career paths should be developed and communicated.
- NSOs and SSOs should be encouraged to develop and implement reliable systems to monitor the recruitment and retention of sports officials.
- Performance evaluation systems and resources should be reviewed to ensure that officials at all levels receive regular and appropriate feedback on their performance.
- NSOs and SSOs should be encouraged to appoint officials' coordinators at association level.
- Sports should consider adopting more flexible approaches to the rostering of officials.
- Sports should develop opportunities for experienced officials to ease into retirement.
- There should be formal recognition of prior learning to enable experienced officials to make the transition from sports official to officials' coach or coordinator.
- Training for officials should be designed to include hands-on conflict resolution sessions and coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of abuse.
- Coach and player education should include modules on working with sport officials to minimise incidents of abuse.
- Training and accreditation opportunities for rural and regional officials should be provided in locations other than major metropolitan centres.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2001) revealed that the number of sports officials¹ has declined 26% since 1997. However, the reasons for this decline are unclear. Australian Sports Commission (ASC) research (2002) and anecdotal evidence suggest that harassment and abuse of officials by players, coaches and spectators may be one of the reasons that the number of sports officials is declining. An ASC (2002) survey found that 78% of respondents had witnessed abuse of sports officials and 83% were of the opinion that not enough was being done to reduce or eliminate such abuse.

In response to these problems, during 2002, the ASC conducted a series of forums called “A fair go for officials”. Some sporting organisations have also responded to declining numbers of sports officials by developing and implementing their own programs. A prominent example is the AFL Queensland’s education program entitled “We’re not playing for sheep stations”. Abuse and harassment may not be the only reasons that the number of sports officials is declining. Other reasons may include lack of support from sport organisations, lack of clear career paths for sports officials or other organisational, cultural and social issues.

The issue of sports official recruitment and retention is of concern within the context of the Backing Australia’s Sporting Ability (BASA) Sport Policy (2002). Under a More Active Australia a goal is “a significant increase in the number of people participating in sport right across Australia”. In order for more people to participate in organised sport it is necessary to increase the capacity of the sport system. Recruitment and retention of sports officials is a vital component in the achievement of increased levels of participation in organised sport.

Recruitment is defined as the successful initial placement of a sports official for the first time, either in a voluntary or paid capacity. New or recent recruits or first year officials refers to sports officials who have completed up to one full season of officiating. Retention is defined as successfully retaining the services of an official from one season to the next. The retention rate is the number of sports officials who continue to officiate in a subsequent season divided by the number of sports officials eligible to continue officiating in that season, measured annually and expressed as a percentage.

¹ Sport(s) official(s) is a broad term used in this report to include all persons who, by whatever designation, officiate on technical aspects at a sporting event e.g. umpires, referees, judges, or scorer.

The opposite of retention is attrition. The terms attrition and turnover are used interchangeably in this report. Attrition or turnover rates include sports officials who retire from the role and those who withdraw their services as a sports official due to any number of reasons that may include injury, work or family commitments, or lack of selection. Some officials are retained by their sport by transferring to different roles, such as coaching or mentoring officials. However, when they cease officiating they should be counted in the attrition statistics.

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) commissioned Griffith University to complete a study of recruitment and retention issues in sports officiating throughout Australia. The study specifically examined the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of national and state sporting organisations about the nature, extent, and cause of the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials?
2. What are the perceptions of current and recently exited sports officials about the nature, extent, and cause of the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials?
3. What are the areas of common concern and differences between the perceptions of sports officials and sports organisations with respect to the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials?
4. What strategies are perceived as being required by sports organisations and officials in addressing problems in the recruitment and retention of sports officials?

The following sections outline the method used to investigate these questions, the findings of the study, conclusions and recommendations.

METHOD

This section of the report outlines the methods used in the study, including the sample, the design of the interview schedules, the interview and focus group procedures, the ways in which the data were analysed and limitations of the study procedures.

Sample

A sample of five National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) and ten State Sporting Organisations (SSOs) across five sports were selected by the ASC to be broadly representative of officiating domains (e.g., court and field sports, male and female dominated sports; inner and outer metropolitan and regional centres). The NSOs were the Australian Football League (AFL), Australian Rugby League (ARL), Basketball Australia (Basketball), Gymnastics Australia (Gymnastics), and Netball Australia (Netball). The SSOs were the AFL (WA and Victoria), ARL (NSW and Queensland), Basketball (WA and Victoria), Gymnastics (NSW and SA), and Netball (Queensland and ACT).

Within each of the states the following groups of sports officials² were selected to participate in focus groups on the advice of the relevant SSO:

1. Western Australian Football League (WAFL);
2. Peel Australian Football League, Mandurah, WA;
3. Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) Umpires Association, Melbourne, Vic;
4. Southwest Division Queensland Rugby League, Toowoomba, Qld;
5. Brisbane Division Rugby League Referees' Association, Brisbane, Qld;
6. Canterbury-Bankstown Rugby League Referees' Association, Bankstown, NSW;
7. Penrith District Rugby League Referees' Association, Penrith, NSW;
8. Wanneroo Basketball Association, Joondalup, WA;
9. Bendigo Basketball Association, Bendigo, Vic;
10. Basketball Victoria, Melbourne, Vic;
11. Epping YMCA Gymnastics, Epping, NSW;
12. Lakeside Gymnastics Club, Newcastle, NSW;
13. South Australia Gymnastics Association, Adelaide, SA;
14. Jimboomba Netball Association, Jimboomba, Qld;

² Groups of sports officials is a collective term used in this report to refer to organisational units that are constitutionally part of, or separate to, the sporting organisation in which they officiate. For example, the referees in the Wanneroo Basketball Association are a sub group of the association. In contrast, referees in the Brisbane Division Rugby League Referees' Association are members of a body constituted separately to the Brisbane Division of Queensland Rugby League.

15. Toowoomba Netball Association, Toowoomba, Qld;
16. Pine Rivers Netball Association, Brisbane, Qld;
17. ACT Netball Association, Canberra, ACT.

A total of 142 practicing and recently exited sports officials attended seventeen focus groups in a number of capital cities and regional centres throughout Australia.

NSO and SSO interview questions

To gather the insights of NSO and SSO senior officers³ about recruitment and retention issues for sports officials interview schedules were developed in consultation with staff at the ASC (see Appendix 1). The interview schedules were designed to elicit information about how officiating operates in each sport and current strategies employed to recruit and retain officials. Data were collected on the perceptions of NSO and SSO senior officers about problems associated with the recruitment and retention of officials. The interviewees were also asked to identify examples of documented good practice from within their sports.

Focus group interview questions

The focus group interview questions were designed to gather the views of practicing and some recently exited sports officials about the nature, extent, and cause of the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of officials (see Appendix 2). The focus group interviews also explored potential solutions to the problems of recruiting and retaining officials.

Procedures

Prior to the initiation of the data collection process, Mr. Gary Evans (ASC Year of the Official Project Officer) made contact with each of the NSOs selected to participate. A letter was distributed via email by the ASC to each NSO to explain the purpose and nature of the project, to inform senior officers of the procedures of the study, and to seek their cooperation.

The data collection process was initiated when one of the Griffith University primary researchers⁴ made telephone contact with the NSO. During that initial contact an interview time was scheduled that was convenient to the interviewee. Each of the telephone interviews were conducted at the agreed times by the primary researcher. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes duration. Notes were taken and later word-processed. At the

³ Senior Officer refers to the individual with responsibility for the management and development of officiating within the particular sport. In most cases this was a full time paid employee of the NSO or SSO.

⁴ Primary researcher is a term used to describe the specified personnel contracted to undertake the study (i.e. Associate Professor Graham Cuskelly and Dr. Russell Hoye).

conclusion of the NSO interviews, contact details for the relevant SSOs were gathered. A procedure similar to the NSO interviews was used to gather data from the SSO senior officers. At the conclusion of the SSO interview, contact details for inner and outer metropolitan and regional groups of officials were gathered.

The focus group interview procedure was initiated when contact was made with the groups of sports officials. The purpose of the study and its procedures were explained to the sports officials contact person. A mutually agreed date, time and location were established for each focus group. The sports officials' contact person was asked to provide the names and contact details of up to 20 officials. The officials recruited for the focus group interviews were representative of a range of experience levels, qualifications, gender, and included, where possible, recently exited officials.

At the commencement of each focus group, the researchers introduced themselves and explained the purpose and procedures of the focus group. The focus group participants were asked to read and sign an ethical clearance/informed consent form. One researcher acted as the group facilitator, and the other researcher took detailed notes. Each focus group was also audio-taped as a backup to the interview notes. At the conclusion of each focus group, the participants' names were entered into a random draw of rewards for participation. Shortly after each focus group, the notes were word-processed. The notes for each focus group interview were used to probe emergent themes in subsequent focus groups.

Analysis of data

Prior to analysis responses to each of the questions from each NSO/SSO interview were transcribed as statements into appropriate cells of a spreadsheet. Similarly, the detailed notes taken from each focus group interview were transcribed as statements into appropriate cells of the same spreadsheet. These data have not been included in the report in order to protect the anonymity of the NSO/SSO interviewees and focus group participants and their organisations. However, the data will be held on file at Griffith University for a period of five years from the date of this report. The data analysis employed qualitative procedures aimed at uncovering themes in the perceptions of NSO/SSO representatives regarding the nature and extent of the recruitment and retention problem amongst sports officials. The underlying themes emerged after several phases of response coding.

Statements were coded firstly using an open (or initial meaning code) and secondly an axial (or categorisation of open codes) coding scheme recommended by Miles and Huberman (1984). Where statements had several identifiable points they were duplicated and coded with appropriate separate codes. Thus statements could have several codes and the number of codes

would tend to be more than the number of subjects. The coding procedures retained the essential meaning of the information provided about problems and issues within particular sports, but constant comparison with other statements and previously used codes ensured a reduction of the variety and details of descriptions. A check of the reliability of coding was conducted using two coders independently analysing the same set of statements. It showed a high degree of consistency between coders choice of codes for statements.

Limitations

This study does not claim to present views that are fully representative (in a statistical sense) of the views of officials in all sports. All care was taken by the primary researchers to ensure the data collection and analysis were not dominated by any particular individuals within focus groups by actively seeking the views of all participants.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in a number of sections that broadly chronicle the structures, systems and processes established to recruit, support and develop, and retain sports officials. Because the purpose of this research was to identify issues and problems across the sport system, within the limitations of researching five major sports, specific sports are rarely discussed, except to highlight examples of good practice. Reporting findings in this way also serves to protect the anonymity of respondent organisations and individuals and avoids getting bogged down with issues and problems that are of concern only to a particular sport or a particular association.

It became evident during the study that the identification of talented officials and their subsequent development and appointment to higher level and elite competition was a point of considerable debate and internal politicking within sport organisations. There is not much consensus about which officials should be promoted to elite levels of competition and as a result matters of internal politics within particular sport organisations are not addressed in this report.

Nature and extent of the recruitment and retention problem

A key research question was the nature and extent of the recruitment and retention problem amongst sports officials. Findings in relation to the extent of the problem are presented in this section. The nature of the problem entails a more detailed analysis, the findings of which are presented in a number of separate sections below.

Most sports have zero to minimal quantifiable data on the extent of the problem or whether there are trends in increasing or decreasing turnover. Most sports, however, do have accurate data on the numbers of elite level sports officials (i.e. state, national or international standard). While most sports have records of the number of people completing formal accreditation or training programs, many NSOs and SSOs acknowledged that they are guessing and working on assumptions in relation to truly knowing the exact number of officials who are actively officiating each week, how many are recruited, or how many cease officiating on either a national or state basis.

It was evident across all sports that there was a constant challenge to supply an adequate number of qualified and experienced officials for the number of games and competitions over a season, particularly at the grass roots level. Further, the majority of sport participants did not appreciate the enormity of the task.

The workload of current officials is often very high. For example, a basketball association has to fulfil over 300 appointments per week, using a pool of 60 referees. Consequently, referees are officiating on average five times per week, often late at night and throughout weekends. Many are officiating much more than five times per week for their association. The workload increases when carnivals or high school games are added to the roster for some officials.

The difficulty of “selling a positive image” of sports officiating, particularly to adults, was a consistent theme raised by both NSO/SSO representatives and focus group participants. The media tends to portray sports officiating negatively, with constant analysis and comment focussing on errors made by high profile officials rather than highlighting the essential role played by officials in all levels of sport.

The abuse of officials by players, coaches, spectators, and in some instances by other officials, was also seen as an increasing trend, particularly in junior sport ranks. The fact that abuse occurs was seen as a deterrent to adults taking on officiating roles. However, those people who did choose to start officiating did so in the knowledge that abuse exists. The level and type of abuse delivered toward females in male dominated sports was perceived as being particularly offensive and often of a personal nature.

Organisational structures and systems in sports officiating

A wide range of organisational structures and systems exist to facilitate sports officiating. In broad terms, organisational structures vary along a continuum from officials being an integral part of their respective association (integrated model) to officials being members of an entity that is incorporated separately to the “parent” association (stand alone model).

The integrated model has some or all of the following characteristics:

- A membership system in which sports officials are members of the association with the same rights and responsibilities as other members such as players, coaches and administrators;
- The sports officials having direct representation on the board or management committee of their association;
- The association manages the recruitment, training and accreditation, evaluation and grading, promotion and payment of officials.

The stand-alone model has some or all of the following characteristics:

- An entity which has a governance structure that is constitutionally independent of the “parent” association usually without an established position on the board or management committee of the “parent” association;

- A contractual type of arrangement to provide officials to the competitions and leagues of the “parent” association;
- The officials’ association manages the recruitment, training and accreditation, evaluation and grading, promotion and payment of officials.

Integrated and stand-alone models were found to exist side by side within some SSOs. In some cases this was a distinguishing feature between rural and metropolitan systems.

Where officials were organised in separate organisations, officials were perceived as a “necessary evil” in sport and not critical to quality sporting experiences. There was also a general lack of recognition of the role of officials, even by the sport itself in these instances.

Strategic planning at NSO and SSO level

Most sports include in their strategic plans, aims and objectives covering officiating issues such as recruitment, retention strategies and/or targets; training and accreditation of officials; talent identification and development of future generation of elite level officials, and career pathways.

Key Performance Areas (KPA) within these plans typically document targets for the recruitment and retention of sports officials. However, as discussed earlier, the poor quality of data for sports official numbers below elite level available to NSOs and SSOs prevents these targets being utilised in a meaningful and strategic way.

The links between NSO and SSO strategic and development plans, and links to local associations are often inefficient due to bottlenecks and communication problems particularly with stand alone associations of officials not being integrated into the parent association.

Most NSO and SSO efforts in managing officials focus on providing training and accreditation resources and systems (e.g. re-accreditation at same level and training / accreditation at higher levels), disseminating information to locally based organisers of groups of sports officials (e.g. through sports officials’ newsletters), and providing formal recognition systems for high level officials (e.g. official of the year awards at state and national levels).

Entering the ranks: Issues in the recruitment of sports officials

There are generally two broad categories of recruits; junior officials, some as young as 12-13 years old, who are recruited to fill the ranks for junior sport officiating, and adults who are frequently following their children's involvement in sport.

Financial rewards were widely considered an effective initial incentive to attract junior officials into sport. However, money was not regarded by many officials as a factor in long-term commitment and does not seem to entice or motivate adults to take-up officiating.

Word of mouth is most widely used and perceived as the most effective method of recruiting new officials. Some SSOs and local associations have developed good links with public and private schools to run Level 0 officiating courses which are often linked to the certificate courses within the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Framework.

Good practice

Bendigo Basketball Association is a Registered Training Organisation, which enabled them to run a pilot traineeship program aimed at training young people to work in the sports industry. The training manager runs Certificate II courses in sports administration (including officiating) as part of the process of recruiting new officials.

Many focus groups and some NSOs and SSOs reported high rates of attrition soon after people commenced officiating. Some associations reported first year attrition rates up to 60%, although most organisations could only rely on anecdotal evidence. Most entities do not systematically collect or maintain data to specifically monitor recruitment and retention rates amongst officials. Some of this data is available indirectly, through reports of the number of officials being accredited for the first time, re-accrediting, or attempting or achieving higher levels of accreditation.

Good practice

Football Victoria (AFL) has a system of routinely collecting recruitment and retention data amongst its umpires. For the past six years they have been able to report trends at the State level by providing accurate figures on the number of umpires recruited and the number not returning on an annual basis. In order to improve retention rates, Football Victoria's Umpiring Development Managers have produced an umpire retention strategies booklet for metropolitan, rural and regional umpires' associations.

High attrition rates amongst first year officials were attributed to a number of reasons:

- finding that they are not suited to the role of officiating;
- the realities of facing up to abuse from players, coaches or spectators;
- pressure to perform with a high level of proficiency from day one;
- unrealistic expectations amongst young officials of rapid advancement to elite levels within a few years; or
- the realisation that a high level of commitment is required to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to be an effective official and to move along the officiating career path.

There were generally two early exit points for new officials. The first of these is when an official realises the training requirements for the position. The second exit point comes after an initial experience of officiating where they have been exposed to abuse or becoming uncomfortable with the pressure of making decisions. This may be particularly so for younger officials who may not possess the conflict management “life skills” to handle an officiating role.

Most of the NSOs and SSOs interviewed employ a professional staff member at the National and State office levels in roles with titles such as Umpiring Manager or Referees Development Officer. In most instances the coordination and development of officiating is the sole or primary focus of the person in this role. In comparison with the level of investment in player and coach development, this was perceived to be inadequate by the majority of focus group participants and some senior staff within NSOs and SSOs. For example, in one sport, there are eight coaching development officers and one officiating development officer at national level.

The skills and personal attributes of the individuals filling coordinator positions at the local association level are critical to successful recruitment and orientation of individuals to officiating. In rare circumstances this is a paid position, although the pay is frequently well short of the hours put into such roles. In many instances, coordinators are granted an annual honorarium to offset some of the costs associated with phone calls and use of their private vehicle. Generally, the number one problem for officials' coordinators is filling rosters on a week-to-week basis to ensure that all scheduled games and competitions have adequate numbers of appropriately qualified officials. Some local associations use a club level system to handle officiating in games for young junior players. In effect, the home club is required to provide officials rather than relying on the association to appoint officials.

Mentor and buddy systems and other organisational support mechanisms are used to varying degrees at all levels of officiating. These support systems are critical for first year officials as they develop the skills and confidence needed to become a competent official.

Providing feedback to officials on their performance was seen as a crucial element in maintaining motivation and satisfaction amongst officials, especially in their first few months of officiating. How feedback is given and the need for consistency in the type and quality of feedback were considered important in meeting the needs of individual officials.

Opportunities to get to know other officials, and getting known and accepted into the organisation were seen as vital in developing a sense of camaraderie amongst sports officials. Some organisations realised the importance of family support in the continuing participation of junior officials. They run welcoming and orientation functions for officials and their family members as well as providing transport to venues and support during difficult periods sometimes associated with facing up to abuse.

Good practice

In Victoria, the Sunbury Basketball Association supports its referees by firstly providing a dedicated stadium floor manager to supervise referees. They also provide an after hours help line for referees who need to discuss incidents of abuse or performance if the stadium manager cannot fix issues on the spot. Providing this support has assisted in retaining referees in the system.

The getting of wisdom: Training and accreditation

There were differences between the five sports in terms of the quantity of training and formal accreditation required to achieve a minimum level of competency as a sports official. However, all sports expected new officials to pay for training courses, equipment, and uniforms. Most officials incurred financial costs to become accredited and to acquire the equipment needed to officiate, before receiving any payment in their role as an official.

Across all sports there were increasing expectations placed on officials in terms of the amount and standard of technical knowledge required. This tended to act as a barrier to entry and advancement, particularly for younger officials. The impetus for these increased expectations appeared to come from a desire for sports to increase the standard of officiating and playing / participation standards within the sport at all levels.

Irrespective of the level of sports officiating, players, coaches and spectators have high expectations of the knowledge and ability of sports officials to interpret and apply the rules. There is generally no allowance for those individuals who are learning to officiate. Increasingly, the performance of officials is being scrutinised by coaches and spectators via the use of technology such as video cameras. In particular, junior sport is perceived to be taken far too seriously especially by coaches and some spectators/parents, who pressure officials through verbal abuse during and after games.

Training and education for sports officials' focuses on acquiring the knowledge and skills to interpret and apply the rules. There is little emphasis on the development of conflict management and communication skills. The issue of sports officials having to deal with abuse and managing conflict was a consistent message from all the focus groups, yet most officials received little or no training in this area. They are expected to learn how to deal with conflict and abuse as they learn the complex task of how to officiate.

The fork in the road: Moving beyond the entry level of sports officiating

An underlying assumption by sport organisations is that sports officials seek progression up the ranks. Consequently the structures and programs supporting sports officials are established for career advancement. However, large proportions of officials are not career orientated and are satisfied with officiating only at local or junior sport levels. There is an assumption within the sport system that all sports officials have a desire to undertake further training, invest more time and energy in skill development and to remain within the system.

Career paths for sports officials are often obscure, especially for entry-level officials with career aspirations. While the NSO or SSO office may have a very clearly defined pathway, these may not be communicated via local level coordinators with consistency or accuracy to entry-level officials. Furthermore, entry-level officials may not be ready for messages about career pathways when they first take up officiating.

Regularity, quality and consistency of performance feedback are an ongoing concern for most sports officials. However, such feedback is a particularly prevalent issue for those interested in advancing their career as a sports official. The degree to which feedback systems were formalised in sports varied, as did the ability of local (particularly rural) associations to access appropriately trained and experienced people to act as evaluators.

Concerns were expressed about the high levels of commitment required to move up the officiating career ladder. For example State level officials in one sport are required to commit to a minimum of 85% competition rounds in order to be considered for appointments to State league games. This results in officials having few breaks during the competitive season, and reluctance on the part of officials to request time off for fear it will adversely affect their career advancement. Furthermore, of the 15% of weekends they chose not to be rostered, officials are frequently called upon to cover for other officials who become unavailable.

It was also evident that some officials, particularly those who had recently quit, were suffering “burn out”. Feelings of being over committed or being “fast-tracked” into talent development squads without the required psychological maturity as a person or as a sports official to withstand the pressures of officiating in higher level competitions, were expressed by some sports officials.

While financial rewards may have been an initial incentive for some younger officials to become officials, as individuals progressed to officiate in higher-level competitions, their motivation focuses on long-term career development, aspirations to officiate at higher levels, and officiating the “perfect” game.

There were discrepancies between the experiences of rural / regional and metropolitan based sports officials seeking to advance their officiating careers. Officials in rural or regional areas are often required to travel to metropolitan areas to upgrade and to retain accreditation levels. There appears to be an implicit assumption that rural / regional sport is of an inferior standard and not appropriate for the development of officials beyond entry levels. Also it is administratively simple to program performance development opportunities centrally. As a result there are few allowances for rural or regional officials to access advancement opportunities locally. Effectively, rural and regional officials have to either move to or frequently travel to a metropolitan centre in order to advance their career. This can act as a career ceiling for rural or regional officials or impose additional costs not felt by metropolitan officials and not recognised by NSOs or SSOs.

There were also perceptions of bias, favouritism and a lack of transparency in the processes used to select and promote sports officials. For some officials, there is a certain level of frustration that progression and appointments are politically motivated. Perceived lack of transparency of the selection system sometimes drives talented officials out of their sport.

The right tools for the job: Resource issues

The resources for sports officiating at all levels, National, State and local are perceived to be inadequate. At a national and state level there is a tendency to place a low priority on the development of sports officials in comparison to developing players and coaches. This is most evident in the proportionately higher numbers of development staff allocated to developing coaches and players in comparison to the development staff working with officials.

At a local level, the direct costs of officiating – uniforms, equipment, rule books, training courses – are for the most part borne by individual sports officials from the moment they enter the system. Some organisations do subsidise these costs through fundraising or through some direct funding from a parent association, but this is an exception rather than the norm.

There was an overwhelming view that the facilities for officials are inadequate at most venues, particularly at the grass roots level. A lack of appropriate facilities means that male and female officials have to share change facilities. There is a lack of secure spaces for officials to store their belongings while they are officiating, and there are no places to officials to rest between games without mingling with players, coaches and spectators. A number of officials reported that their personal items were either damaged or stolen while they were officiating.

There is generally a lack of senior and experienced officials to mentor or evaluate the performance of younger officials and to support new officials. It is difficult to find and recruit senior officials into these roles as most retire from officiating to move out of sport. Retiring officials leave their sport because they feel as though they have done their time. Frequently cited reasons for retiring from sport officiating included putting more time into family, personal and working lives. In addition, as experienced officials progress to higher-level duties at State, National or International levels, there is reluctance to return to lower levels whether as an official or an official's mentor or coach.

Sport system support: Tribunals, funding, attitudes

The systems supporting officials in areas of tribunals, funding and general attitudes to cooperation vary between and within sports, but the following issues were common across all sports.

As discussed earlier, the skills and personal attributes of the individuals filling coordinator positions at the local association level are critical to successful recruitment and orientation of individuals to sports officiating. Officials' coordinators are often the first port of call for new and developing officials seeking a more comprehensive support mechanism. The ability of local level coordinators to provide adequate support is affected by a number of wider issues within sport. These include the extent to which individual officials feel they are "backed up" by tribunal decisions when officials report incidents of serious abuse or harassment.

The level of cooperation, integration and support that exists between parent associations managing competitions and the officials group (whether integrated or stand alone) varies widely, and affects the level of "connectedness" officials feel with the sport and the extent to which they feel they are generally supported by the sporting community. For example, there is a high level of variability in the extent to which abuse of officials is addressed by sports. Some sports organisations apply hefty sanctions such as season-long up to life-long suspensions and have zero tolerance policies. Other sports accept that abuse and harassment is a part of the game and that it ought to be tolerated by sports officials.

Good practice

The Penrith District Rugby League Referees' Association works closely with the junior rugby league competition tribunals to enforce a zero tolerance policy of abuse toward officials with automatic suspensions for certain offences. They are generally working to reduce abuse from players, coaches and officials through close cooperation and communication with the competition league of the needs of officials. The league also prohibits the sale of alcohol at finals until all games have been completed.

In reality, NSOs and SSOs can provide leadership and resources to facilitate recruitment and retention of sports officials but they do not have the resources to strongly influence localised recruitment and retention strategies. Consequently there are large gaps between national and state level officiating plans and what actually happens on the ground.

There are variable levels of recognition and formal rewards for officials, especially at lower levels of systems. Allied to this is a general lack of recognition of the support of family and balancing work commitments to participate as officials above the grass roots level of sport.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate problems and issues in the recruitment and retention of sports officials throughout Australia. It was concluded that:

- There is a significant problem in the retention of officials, particularly inexperienced officials at the grass roots level of sport.
- Incomplete data makes it difficult to document the exact nature and extent of the retention problem.
- NSOs and SSOs have little influence in the recruitment and retention of sports officials at grass roots levels.
- The resources devoted by NSOs and SSOs to sports officiating are disproportionately low in comparison to coach and player development.
- Compared to metropolitan officials rural / regional officials incur significantly higher time and money costs in officiating
- The facilities and resources available to sports officials at the grass roots level are inadequate.
- There is poor integration of sports officials within the operation of sport governing organisations.
- There are significant shortcomings in the training provided for sports officials to deal with abuse and conflict situations.
- The feedback provided to practicing officials at the grass roots level is generally inadequate.
- There is an underlying assumption that all sports officials are seeking career advancement.
- The skills and abilities of sports officials' coordinators is a key determinant in the recruitment, development and retention of sports officials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this report suggest that in order to address problems in the recruitment and retention of sports officials a number of strategies ought to be implemented. These are:

- Sports should attempt to build a stronger and more positive public image for sports officiating.
- Sports should consider the adoption of a tougher stance on abuse that moves beyond the usual banter of the competition through actions such as:
 - More actively managing the intent of “codes of conduct” designed to control the behaviour of players, coaches and spectators with respect to their relationships with and treatment of officials.
 - Zero tolerance policies with mandatory suspension guidelines for tribunals.
 - The application of consistent and enforceable sanctions.
 - The implementation of a de-accreditation policy for coaches who repeatedly abuse officials.
 - Mounting test cases in civil courts where repeat offenders are called to account.
- Sports at all levels should be encouraged to increase their recognition of officials through such things as:
 - Providing adequate resources for officials including separate and secure rooms and storage space at all venues.
 - Reducing or eliminating out of pocket expenses associated with training, accreditation and equipment for officials.
 - Recognition that officials are integral to positive sport experiences for players, coaches and spectators at all levels of sport.
 - Formal recognition schemes for sports officials at all levels including regular opportunities for officials to mix formally and informally with coaches, players and administrators.
- Sports at all levels should shift from stand-alone to integrated structures in relation to sports officiating.
- Clearer and more transparent career paths should be developed and communicated for officials who have interests and aspirations to officiate at high levels.
- NSOs and SSOs should be encouraged to develop and implement reliable systems to monitor the recruitment and retention of sports officials at all levels.
- Performance evaluation systems and resources should be reviewed and where necessary revamped to ensure that officials at all levels receive regular and appropriate feedback on their performance.

- NSOs and SSOs should be encouraged to appoint officials' coordinators at association level.
- Sports should consider adopting more flexible approaches to the rostering of officials to enable elite level officials to have time off during seasons.
- Sports should develop opportunities for experienced officials to ease into retirement through roles as mentors, coaches, evaluators and part time officiating.
- There should be formal recognition of current competencies and prior learning to enable experienced officials to make the transition from sports official to officials' coach or coordinator.
- Training for officials should be designed to include hands-on conflict resolution sessions and coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of abuse and harassment.
- Coach and player education should include modules on working with sport officials to minimise incidents of abuse.
- Training and accreditation opportunities for rural and regional officials should be provided in locations other than major metropolitan centres.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1
Focus group consent form
Focus group running sheet
NSO interview schedule
SSO interview schedule



**Research Project: Recruiting and retaining sports officials - 2003
Consent Form**

Aim of the Research Project

This project aims to identify the perceptions of current and recently exited sports officials about the nature, extent, and cause of the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials. The focus group interview is designed to gather important information about your opinions on the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials.

What have you been asked to do?

You have been asked to participate in a voluntary focus group interview that will take about 2 hours to complete which asks you questions concerning recruitment and retention of sports officials. With your permission the focus group interview will be recorded purely to ensure accuracy of the data.

Confidentiality

All data collected will be confidential and no individual or organisation will be identified in any published material without your written consent.

Consent statement

I have read the consent form. I agree to participate in the Griffith University Research Project entitled “recruiting and retaining sports officials” and give my consent freely. I understand that the project will be carried out as described in the consent form, a copy of which I have retained. I realise that whether or not I decide to participate is my decision and will not affect me in any way. I also realise that I can withdraw from the project at any time and that I do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing. I have had all questions answered to my satisfaction.

Signatures:

.....
Participant (print name) Participant (signature) Date

.....
Researcher (print name) Researcher (signature) Date

Research team contact details:
Associate Professor Graham Cuskelly
Dr. Russell Hoye
School of Leisure Studies
Griffith University Q 4111
PH: 07 3875 5663.

ASC Sports Officials Project
Focus group running sheet and prompt questions

The aim of the focus is to gather data on the perceptions of current and recently exited sports officials about the nature, extent, and cause of the problems associated with the recruitment and retention of sports officials.

Checklist:

- Venue details
- Convenor contact details
- Door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Notebooks
- Recorder and tapes
- Consent forms for participants to sign (and copies to keep)
- Catering – food and drinks
- Shopping vouchers and chocolates (audit forms to sign)

Format:

5 mins	Welcome – sign consent forms, offer refreshments Purpose of project and focus group
10 mins	Introductions from each group member – name, brief description of experience and qualifications in officiating
20 mins	What is the general nature of the recruitment problem? Eg: lack of new recruits, high turnover of existing officials?
20 mins	What is the general nature of the retention problem? Eg: levels of officiating, certain age groups, types of officials?
20 mins	What is the extent of the problem? Eg: geographic areas, age levels, and competition levels?
20 mins	What are the causes of the problem? Eg: societal issues, individual pressures, crowds, and organisations?
15 mins	What can organisations and the sport do to support officials?
5 mins	Wrap up, thanks for attending, draw vouchers & distribute chocolates

Other notes:

Personal investments – time, money, sacrifices

Social constraints – why please others, why not quit?

Involvement alternatives – what other things have you sacrificed?

Enjoyment – what do you enjoy about the role?

Involvement opportunities – what would you miss if you quit?



Recruitment and retention of officials in sport NSO interview schedule

1. How is officiating in your sport currently organised and managed (eg., national, state, regional or club basis)? Is there a national strategy?
2. Do you have current or historical data on the numbers of officials? How would you describe the quality, reliability and currency of the national database?
3. Is there data available about the levels of accreditation of officials? Have any trends been identified?
4. What about recruitment or retention data--is this data collected by the national office? Does your office monitor trends in recruitment and retention?
5. How would you describe the current situation in relation to the recruitment and retention of officials in your sport?
6. Are you aware of any problems in the recruitment and retention of officials?
7. How would you describe the nature of the problem? And, how extensive do you think the problem is?
8. What, in your view, are the causes of the problem?
9. Getting more into the **recruitment of officials**, is there a national **recruitment** strategy in your sport? Can you give me an overview of these strategies?
10. Are you aware of any 'best practice' examples in the **recruitment** of officials?
11. Getting more into the **retention of officials**, is there a national **retention** strategy in your sport? Can you give me an overview of these strategies?
12. Are you aware of any 'best practice' examples in the **retention** of officials?
13. In terms of liaising with the States, to what extent do the State Associations conform or comply with the national office strategies?
14. Are the management practices uniform or consistent between the States?
15. Can you provide me with the contact details of the best person to talk to in _____ state offices about officiating?

Documentation to request

- Data on numbers of officials
- Accreditation scheme/systems documentation
- Accreditation requirements at each level
- Reviews or surveys conducted
- Promotional material targeted to officials



Recruitment and retention of officials in sport SSO interview schedule

1. How is officiating in your sport currently organised and managed at the state level (eg., regional or club basis)? Is there a state-level strategy or plan? Does this strategy tie into a national strategy or plan for officiating?
2. Do you have current or historical data on the numbers of officials in your state? If so, how would you describe the quality, reliability and currency of the officials' database?
3. Is there data available about the levels of accreditation of officials? Have any state-wide trends been identified?
4. What about recruitment or retention data--is this data collected by the state office? Does your office monitor trends in recruitment and retention?
5. How would you describe the current situation in relation to the recruitment and retention of officials in your sport at the state level?
6. Are you aware of any problems in the recruitment and retention of officials?
7. How would you describe the nature of the problem? And, how extensive do you think the problem is?
8. What, in your view, are the causes of the problem(s)?
9. Getting more into the **recruitment of officials**, is there a **recruitment** strategy or plan at the state level in your sport? Can you give me a brief overview of the main features of these strategies?
10. Getting more into the **retention of officials**, is there a **retention** strategy or plan at the state level in your sport? Can you give me a brief overview of the main features of these strategies?
11. Are you aware of any 'best practice' examples in the **recruitment/retention** of officials in your state?
12. To what extent does the state association conform or comply with the national office strategies? To what extent do you think the district or regional associations comply with the plans of the state association?
13. Are the management practices uniform or consistent between regions or districts in your state?
14. Can you provide me with the contact details for (**specify --- metro / outer metro / regional assoc**) so the research team can set-up focus groups?

Documentation to request

- Data on numbers of officials / accredited at each level
- Accreditation scheme/systems documentation (if supplementary to National office documents)
- Accreditation requirements at each level (if different from National level)
- Reviews or surveys of officiating conducted by the State office
- Promotional material targeted to officials (if different from National level)

Appendix 2

NSO/SSO Interview and Focus Group Data

The following appendix provides indicative comments from the NSO and SSO interviews, and the focus group interviews for each of the eight themes presented in the findings of the report. The data is presented in this way to protect the anonymity of respondents and their respective organisations.

Nature and extent of the recruitment and retention problem

NSO and SSO comments

- No data beyond registered umpires
- At the elite level there are no problems with respect, coaching, facilities, committee, media scrutiny compared to the opposite at the lower levels of the game
- No trends identified, data incomplete
- There is no problem at the elite level, but at the state champs, state trials and club level the problem is huge.
- No data at national level – therefore no trends identified
- No time or \$s to undertake systematic data collection.

Focus group interview comments

- Plenty of younger people willing to try refereeing
- A lack of qualified and experienced referees for adult level domestic competition
- Lot of turnover soon after recruitment because of abuse at junior level by spectators and high expectations of young umpires to know the rules at a high level
- Image of umpiring is poor except at elite level, low respect at community levels, poor marketing
- A significant problem at community level
- Always concerned about low numbers especially at the start of the season
- Stigma of being a referee – why would you do it?
- A lot of parental abuse at junior levels
- Media has created a negative image of referees
- Never have enough badged or unbadged umpires

Organisational structures and systems in sports officiating

NSO and SSO comments

- Needs a whole of game approach where the culture of sport needs to change to foster enjoyment and bring the umpires into the game and not be seen as separate

Focus group interview comments

- Association administrators are not supportive of referees
- Personal connections important because clubs do not recruit, done by the officials' association which is a less prominent entity
- Work cooperatively between league division board and referees' association
- Umpires are treated as the other clubs – seen as the 9th club therefore is not an us and them
- Referee coordinators taken for granted by league / division
- Lack of interaction between grass roots clubs and state level associations
- Relationships between judges good but coaches are increasingly becoming abusive

- Referees are an afterthought, little if any consultation about start times, payment, travel requirements, etc
- Certain culture in associations, linked to stadiums and associations chasing turnover of dollars and that safety of officials is not a high priority
- Lack of consultation with umpires groups when competitions are changed, eg adding u/19 grade but don't tell umpires until 2 weeks prior

Strategic planning at NSO and SSO level

NSO and SSO comments

- The NSO thinks they have control over refereeing but there is no control mechanism to get SSOs and lower associations to adopt national initiatives
- Most new ideas are designed at a national level with little consultation with local or community level stakeholders – hence a low adoption rate by these associations
- No national strategy, all locally driven and dependent on the quality and resources available to a local officials' coordinator – if they are keen they assist people move up the accreditation scheme and invest time and money in training
- Also depends on the attitude of the local association as to whether refereeing is a cost or an investment in the game
- There is no national “control” of the officials just support via the state governing bodies and the clubs to deliver that support
- Umpire recruitment and retention is identified in state development plan
- Referees / refereeing integral section of national development plan

Focus group interview comments

- National level has forgotten about the grassroots
- No place for feedback on draft changes in the sport via SSO and NSO level
- Programs becoming too complex at the lower levels of the sport
- Focus of NSO and SSO is players and coaches, rather than referees who are expected to pay their way all the time
- When funding cuts are made, often it is referee funding that gets cut first

Issues in the recruitment of sports officials

NSO and SSO comments

- Referees are not seen as participants in the sport, treated as afterthoughts, there are no awards nights, no facilities in venue, no communication for referees
- Abuse is systemic in the sport
- Recruiting strategies all left to local associations
- Most officials get involved as their children participate in sport. Sports is now less associated with being a ‘member’ of a club for a lifetime, to being more transient, where the child may try a wide variety of sports. Clubs having to invest financially in training officials loose out as seasonally they have to recruit and maintain accreditations.
- This problem is wide spread at the lower levels of our sport. Officials who officiate at higher levels have often long been removed from having a child participate in the sport. At this level it is the intrinsic rewards that maintain

their association. At the lower levels we need to make it as easy as possible for participation.

Focus group interview comments

- Transition from junior to senior football is a critical time, as junior umpires have not made connections with senior umpires so they feel isolated
- Culture of abuse from parents and coaches, lack of knowledge of the rules by media and spectators
- Juniors sometimes referee a single game, get abused and leave
- Young female referees tend to be singled out for more specific abuse from male spectators
- Money is a motivation for younger umpires but not for the older umpires
- Sheer volume of judging to be done in a weekend restricts feedback
- Umpires doing it for money tend to drop out very quickly, whereas ones there for the sport tend to stay on and contribute to developing a strong culture within the organisation

Training and accreditation

NSO and SSO comments

- Retention affects quality, at present there has been a focus on the coaching model with a national curriculum where people advance through the levels of umpiring and do not return to lower leagues
- Need for conflict resolution training and support at local level
- Local associations have education programs that produce many good referees but it comes down to them providing recognition and payment
- Recruitment and retention of officials is more difficult when the official has to make the commitment to become a technical member, This entails the payment of fees, maintenance of accreditation, commitment often to club documentation that this person is taking on an official role in the club. Some state committees require a 3 day course to become further accredited, this is unrealistic
- The focus of training should shift from a culture of “testing” to one of mentoring and updating.

Focus group interview comments

- Younger referees lack confidence, rapport and life skills if refereeing above their competency level, which makes it hard to manage abuse from players, coaches and spectators
- Lack of honest evaluative feedback provided through formal evaluation processes – verbal feedback may not match written feedback
- Lack of consistent and regular evaluation
- Lack of mentoring beyond very junior levels of refereeing
- Mentoring and feedback needs much more detailed work, as evaluators rarely watch more than a few minutes of a single game
- Constant demands to re accredit, having to travel to metropolitan areas to do that, which can be a 24 hour day for travel, course, exam, and assessment
- Lack of recognition that good games do exist in the country for referee grading so referees could save travelling to metropolitan areas

Moving beyond the entry level of sports officiating

NSO and SSO comments

- Burn out issue is a significant concern
- Career paths for talented referees quite well established.
- Some younger referees “fast tracked” if they show potential – some handle rapid rise but many don’t handle the pressures and exit the system – difficult to know until younger refs are put into the situation

Focus group interview comments

- Lack of clear advice for career development pathways for younger referees
- Formal and regular evaluation needed that provides constructive feedback (formative) rather than a test of competency
- Lack of regular evaluation and feedback on performance – not fair treatment for career progression as lack of evaluation (unanswered question if not given a go at a higher level)
- Risk of losing good umpires who do not make grade when failing to progress up the career path – lost to game rather than return to lower ranks
- Less than one in ten referees “career” orientated
- Higher umpires leave to never come back to assist the clubs, which acts as a disincentive for the clubs to push individuals up
- Referees have no life during the league season – talented referees committed almost all weekend – particularly those that are career oriented and training twice per week
- Some new referees have unrealistically high expectations about making it to big games within a couple years and get frustrated and leave
- Some referees looking for accelerated path to elite level
- Blockages to the career path for country umpires exist – need to travel for courses and being assessed at higher level competition grades, travel, time and costs are high on top of umpiring each weekend, this is holding back umpire development at that level to act as mentors for younger umps
- Tendency to push young umpires to hard and too early
- Dealing with conflict is not a prominent part of official training
- Feedback on judging performance is needed but not much is provided
- Pressure to get to international level is enormous
- Burnout an issue with higher referee who cannot afford to have a week off for fear of being overlooked, sense of relief once the season is over

Resource issues

NSO and SSO comments

- Large difference in support for registered umpires versus club level umpires who are not trained or supported to a great level
- Main problem is NSO looks after elite referees and lower grades are left to fend for themselves

Focus group interview comments

- Longer career umpires not well utilised for mentoring roles – felt the need for a complete break from game so reluctant to assist
- Lack of qualified observers and umpire coaches

- Need to find strategies to retain experienced umpires as umpire coaches and observers
- Need to appoint a paid recruitment officer for umpiring
- Barrier – up to \$150 in uniform set-up costs for new referees
- Poor facilities provided for referees at most grounds – leads to low morale – particularly a problem when male / female referees have to share facilities
- Like to see more frequent visits from metropolitan areas to the country, feel not well supported by SSO and NSO levels in officiating
- Judging coordinator should be able to nurture people and guide them through the system
- Far too many dollars go into player development and coach development instead of referee development
- Costs – referees buy own uniform and equipment, season fee, etc, plus travel and accommodation for referees – so it can cost referees to officiate at tournaments (time and dollars)

Sport system support: tribunals, funding, attitudes

NSO and SSO comments

- The support for umpires below elite level is dependent on the resources of the umpire coordinator, the skills and experience of the umpire coordinator and the relationship with the competition leagues they are servicing
- There needs to be more flexibility in providing feedback, offering weeks off during the season, a better process for transition into and out of senior levels to retain juniors as well as older experienced umpires to go back to lower levels
- Rostering needs to be managed better to select referees on their ability, communication needs to be improved, support person at courtside needs to be available at the time an incident occurs, and media focus needs to be managed to highlight positive stories not just when officials make mistakes

Focus group interview comments

- Lack of recognition for involvement and effort by the associations for grass roots level refereeing
- The association pressure referees to do more than they are able
- Inadequate tribunal outcomes or suspensions for charged players, so officials have a lack of confidence in tribunals
- Inconsistent tribunal outcomes or suspensions for charged players, with lack of set penalties, particularly in relation to verbal or physical abuse so frustration in tribunals – umpires made to feel the villain when reporting players
- Social support provides sense of cohesion amongst referees – necessary condition for retention
- Codes of conduct not well applied by clubs and leagues
- Zero tolerance of junior football with automatic suspension, working to reduce abuse from players, coaches and officials –strong support from judiciary
- Need for improved recognition schemes of the volunteer effort
- Feel there is no recognition from the state association, some district associations present trophies and recognise umpires and do badge achievement awards as formal recognition.■

