Retaining early career referees in Australian rugby

A research project in partnership with the Australian Rugby Union

2009
Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary:
Retaining early career referees in Australian rugby

Griffith University, in collaboration with the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), was successful in attracting funding for a three year research program from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project scheme. The project was entitled “Development of a predictive model for the retention of sports officials”.

The research consisted of a pilot study and pre/postseason online surveys and postseason interviews with early career referees (ECRs). A total of 242 ECRs were invited to be involved in the main study as a member of either a treatment or a non-treatment group. Of the 242 ECRs contacted 144 responded and 142 provided useable data for the preseason survey. In between the two survey periods an intervention program was undertaken with the treatment group in an effort to influence the ECRs’ perceptions of the organisational support they received from their Referees’ Association. Of the 142 ECRs who completed the preseason survey 102 provided useable data for the postseason survey. Twelve ECRs were interviewed postseason.

It was concluded from the results of this research project that:

- Individuals become initially involved in refereeing rugby for altruistic and social reasons. However, especially for those studying full-time, payment makes it more likely they will continue.
- ECRs are more likely to be attracted to refereeing rugby and retained if they have a previous connection to the game.
- If rugby is assumed to be similar to many other competitive sports there is a high risk of turnover amongst referees, possibly as high as 30% or more annually.
- ECRs, defined as those with less than five years experience post-accreditation, are likely to have lower retention rates than those with more years experience.
- The sport of rugby is generally doing an excellent job in assuring the safety of ECRs in the refereeing environment.
- The factors explaining intention to continue refereeing operate through more complex socio-cognitive processes than were described by the Sports Officials Retention Model developed for this study.
- There was less observed change in commitment factors than in the stress factors during the course of the season surveyed. Commitment to refereeing for ECRs is predominantly a function of enjoyment and opportunities for involvement in rugby only available through refereeing.
- Organisational support strategies are more effective at minimising the negative impact of the stressors of officiating on intention to continue than enhancing the commitment levels of referees.
- Organisational support strategies for ECRs need to be carefully designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated in order to facilitate ECRs’ enjoyment of their role and their involvement in rugby.
The development and delivery of appropriate levels and types of organisational support is likely to be effective in reducing the stressors of officiating experienced by ECRs.

The key recommendations of the study were that:

- The ARU explores the establishment of a KPI for referee retention rates and monitors rates at a National and State Union level. The feasibility of benchmarking referee retention rates against selected international unions and possibly other football codes in Australia should be investigated.
- The ARU documents case studies of best practice in the provision of organisational support to referees in sub-elite rugby and promulgates these practices to all member Unions at least annually.
- The ARU and member unions investigate the costs and benefits of establishing standards for accredited referees for all levels of the game with regard to: minimum pay, flexibility in referee appointment rosters, refereeing performance feedback and mentoring particularly for ECRs.
- The ARU consider further research which focuses on more objective measures of stress amongst all referees (eg., physiological and psychological recordings of referees’ stress in-situ) and test the efficacy of programs designed to reduce stressors amongst referees.
- Member Unions and their sub-Unions and clubs be strongly encouraged to maintain the high standards they have achieved in controlling the game environment (eg., ground marshals, separating the playing area from spectators, supporters and coaches) to ensure that ECRs continue to report negligible levels of fear of being physically harmed.
- The ARU and Member Unions give consideration to the development and implementation of mentoring and organisational support programs. Priority in these programs should be given to less experienced and younger referees in particular.
- Prior to or soon after commencing their refereeing, ECRs be provided with practical training designed to build resilience and coping strategies for handling the inevitable stressors associated with refereeing. These stressors include inadequate recognition and interpersonal conflicts and amongst those who were not receiving the intervention program, performance concerns and time pressure (balancing the demands of refereeing, on and off the field, with work and family commitments).
- The development and implementation of policies related to appointment and feedback linked to advancement designed to ensure that referees remain confident in their ability through appointment to games which match and appropriately extend their knowledge and skills as they gain more practical experience as a referee.
- Out of pocket expenses incurred in the course of refereeing rugby be further investigated and strategies developed to ensure that referees are reimbursed or sponsored for items such as accreditation and training, uniforms and equipment, transport and travel.
- The nature and reasons for the high proportion of referees’ time being devoted to off-field activities be examined. Consideration should be given to rolling some off-field time activities into networking or socialising opportunities for ECRs. This would serve two purposes: Saving time and decreasing feelings of isolation amongst ECRs; avoiding
referees with many commitments over and above their on-field role searching for alternative ways to be involved in rugby other than refereeing.

- The ARU and Member Unions examine the feasibility of using increasingly widely adopted information and communication technology strategies (e.g., email, social networking sites and instant messaging capabilities from websites) to supplement the training and recognition of referees as well as for more efficient dissemination and collection of information and reports to, from and between referees.

Intention to continue refereeing is best predicted by ECR’s predisposition towards refereeing but is also subject to a wide range of personal and organisational factors many of which are beyond the reach of sport organisations. However, strategies that enhance ECRs enjoyment of and opportunities for involvement in refereeing and rugby generally will positively influence referees’ decisions to continue in their role. At the same time, strategies that mitigate the negative influence of social constraints, the attractiveness of activities other than refereeing rugby and perceived lack of recognition or ‘career’ progress will reduce the impact of factors that tend to reinforce referees’ decisions to quit.
Referees and organised sport participation

Participation in sport plays a significant part in Australian life. Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2007) indicates that the number of Australians participating in organised sport or physical activity rose from approximately 4.05 million people, or 27% of the population aged 15 years and over in 2002 to 4.4 million people, or 28% of the population aged 15 years and over in 2006. In terms of junior sport participation, in 2000 1.56 million or 59.4% of children aged between 5 and 14 years participated in organised sport. This figure rose to 1.69 million or 63.5% in 2005.

Government is well aware of the significant benefits that flow from active participation in sport within communities and have designed sport policies accordingly, to wit, “the fundamental building blocks of Australian sports are the 26,000 local sporting clubs that have played a key role in communities for more than 100 years. Grassroots sporting clubs provide better health outcomes for Australians of all ages” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Additionally, “community participation in sport spans a number of central objectives: developing basic skills and healthy disciplines in young children; contributing directly and significantly to better health and prevention of chronic disease across all segments of the community; and promoting a more inclusive and engaged community.” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008b)

Sporting groups are a vital part of the social fabric of local communities, giving individuals an opportunity to come together and compete in sport in an organised, positive environment. Sports officials provide a context for this competition, facilitate the engagement of individual participants and enhance the process of fair play (Grunska, 2002). Therefore, sports officials facilitate involvement in physical activity and the resultant health benefits. Many of the skills learned by becoming a sports official contribute significantly to Australian society and its economy. More than 300,000 currently active sports officials and many thousands more people who no longer officiate have received training that is as applicable to industry as it is to the sporting field. Sports officials learn to make decisions under pressure; manage and resolve interpersonal conflict; understand, interpret and apply rules in an equitable manner; and develop skills in managing stress and their own emotions (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2004). The term sports official “includes all persons who, by whatever designation, officiate on technical aspects at a sporting event [example] referee, umpire, judge. An official controls the actual play of a competition by applying the rules and laws of the sport to make judgements on rule...
infringement, performance, time or score. . . . [and] . . . have a key role to play in ensuring the spirit of the game/event is observed by all.” (ASC, 2004).

Declining numbers of officials

Data collected by the ABS (2005) on the number of active officials within the Australian sport system revealed a decline of 21.2% from 1993 to 2004, from 425,800 active officials to 335,400. North American and United Kingdom sporting bodies have reported similar trends. According to Deacon, McClelland and Smart (2001) 30% of officials in the Canadian Hockey Association quit each year, as do two thirds of first-year soccer officials in the province of Manitoba. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Sport Officials (Sabaini, 2001) in the US, 85% of high school sports administrators reported a decline in the number of sports officiating registrations in their state.

Research conducted by Barclays Bank in the UK as part of their Spaces for Sports funding program revealed only 1% of 18-34 year olds surveyed were in the process of being accredited, or planned to become accredited as sports officials in the near future. If this lack of uptake were to continue then it would leave sporting clubs with a shortfall of only one official for every 100 male sport participants. Additionally, Barclays found that only 9% of those surveyed would ever consider becoming a sports official.

The issue of sports official recruitment and retention has been cited as an area of concern within the context of the former government’s sport policy, Backing Australia’s Sporting Ability (BASA) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). A key aim of this policy was “a significant increase in the number of people participating in sport right across Australia”. For this increased participation to occur it is necessary to increase the capacity of the Australian sport system as a whole which in turn raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of the sports system in circumstances where the number of officials is declining. Increasing the capacity of the officiating aspect of the sport system to cope with higher levels of participation in organised sport can only be achieved through three possible strategies:

- Recruitment—attracting more people to take up sports officiating;
- Increased productivity—increasing the workload of current sports officials by allocating more games per official per week; or
- Retention—increasing the average career length of current sports officials by reducing turnover rates.
In Australia this rapid decrease in the total number of sports officials has emerged as a cause for concern in both the sport industry and in government and led to the Commonwealth Government to declare 2003 as the “Year of the Official”.

The focus of this research is the retention of early-career sports officials (referees) through a study of factors that might explain the intention of officials to continue officiating. Research commissioned for the Year of the Official by the ASC revealed that retention is particularly problematic amongst less experienced early-career referees (henceforth in this report referred to as ECRs) (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2004). Therefore, this research investigated those ECRs who have been involved as rugby referees for less than five years from their date of initial accreditation.

Previously published research in the area of sports official retention has adopted one of two dominant approaches – measuring the stressors of officiating and the commitment level of officials. This research adopts both of these approaches and examines how they interrelate and are possibly influenced by the presence of organisational support in the prediction of behavioural intentions to continue refereeing (see Figure 1). The conceptualisation of each variable in the study and how they have been developed through existing scholarly literature appear are explained in detail in Appendix 1.

Figure 1: Sports Officials Retention Model

Griffith University ● La Trobe University ● Cuskelly, Smith & Hoye

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A study of Australian Rugby Referees

Griffith University, in collaboration with the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), was successful in attracting funding for a three year research program from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project scheme. The project was entitled “Development of a predictive model for the retention of sports officials”. The project aims were to:

- Develop and test a predictive model for the stay or leave behavioural intentions (retention) of sports officials;
- Identify organisational strategies that facilitate the retention of sport officials; and
- Determine the relative effectiveness of organisational strategies that facilitate the retention of sport officials.

The project was completed in four major phases outlined in Table 1 below. The results of Phase 3 (main study) are the focus of this report. This phase sought to refine the instruments and strategies developed in the pilot study (phase 2) and to address the research questions using a sample of ECRs from NSW, VIC, WA and ACT. The research methods appear in Appendix 2 of this report and the results summarised in the following sections.

Table 1 Overview of the major project phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1 (Knowledge acquisition)</th>
<th>Knowledge acquisition for organisational support intervention strategies. Focus group interviews. Validation organisational support intervention strategies with practising officials.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 (Pilot study)</td>
<td>Develop, refine questionnaire. Sample selection for pilot test of questionnaire. Data analysis and progress report. Consultation with rugby development staff to document intervention strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 (Main study)</td>
<td>Sample selection and assignment of treatment and non-treatment groups. Recruitment and orientation of project support volunteers (mentors). Pre-test administration of questionnaire. Implementation of intervention strategies. Post-test administration of questionnaire. In-depth interviews with selected rugby referees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4 (Reporting)</td>
<td>Data analysis. Write up and submission of PhD thesis. Dissemination of research findings. Final report to industry partner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

The results of the quantitative (survey based) and a qualitative (in-depth interview based) phases of the study are reported in this section. Data from the RRR-Q survey are analysed to describe the characteristics of the early career referees, their experience levels, reasons for becoming a referee, time and financial outlays associated with refereeing. Following the descriptive reporting is an analysis of the pre to postseason survey scores for stress, commitment, perceived organisational support and intention to stay between the treatment and non-treatment groups. The final section reports analyses of predictors of intention to continue refereeing. Where relevant the results from the qualitative (in-depth interviews) are reported in conjunction with the survey results. Pseudonyms have been used so as not to reveal the identity of interview respondents. Tables referred to in the in the reporting of results appear in Appendix 3.

The mean age of respondents to the RRR-Q was 30 years (standard deviation SD = 13.8 years) and ranged from 13 to 69 years. The respondents were predominantly male (93.1%) and the majority of respondents were either employed full time (50.3%) or engaged in full time study (44.8%). Highest numbers of respondents reported attaining a high school education (44.8%), bachelor’s degree (16.8%) or a TAFE Certificate qualification (11.2%).

Competition levels, accreditation and pathways to becoming a referee

The levels at which the respondents had refereed are summarised in Table 3. The majority of respondents refereed junior club rugby (72.5% treatment group and 87.3% non-treatment group) and schools rugby (62.3% and 69%). About one-third of those surveyed refereed modified junior rugby (27.5% and 39.4%). The higher percentage of referees involved with juniors and school rugby than other levels is likely to be associated with the level of accreditation and relatively low levels of experience of ECRs in the sample, making their skill and experience level more appropriate to junior levels of rugby than the colts or the senior rugby game. The majority of referees held Level 1 accreditation with far fewer accredited at Level 2 or higher (see Table 4). The survey was targeted towards ECRs, so it is not surprising that 85% of the respondents had achieved their initial accreditation since 2004 (see Table 5). However, the fact that 30.4% of the treatment group held a Level 2 or higher accreditation is encouraging from the point of view that it shows a good proportion of ECRS
are being encouraged to pursue higher levels and be regularly assessed and re-graded.

To understand the pathways of ECRs into refereeing rugby the survey respondents were asked a series of questions about their reasons for refereeing, their involvement in other sports as a referee or official and their involvement in other aspects of the game of rugby (e.g., playing or coaching). Respondents cited a number of reasons for their initial involvement as a rugby referee (see Table 6). To contribute to the community (48.6%), because of school connections (23.6%) and because of family (21.5%) were highly rated responses. Many respondents (47.9%) cited “other” reasons for their initial involvement. Typical of these answers were, “I was unable to play because of an injury but still wanted to be involved”, “To give something back”, “I loved playing rugby so I thought I’d give it a go”, “Keep fit, meet people, stay involved with the game”, and, “To learn more about rugby”.

More than one in five rugby referees surveyed (21.5%) reported involvement as a referee or official in another sport prior to becoming a rugby referee (table not shown). Respondents reported involvement in a wide array of sports officiating roles, with team sports such as soccer, touch football and cricket cited most frequently. Involvement in the game of rugby in roles other than refereeing provides insights into how and why individuals may make the transition to refereeing. These results are displayed in Table 7. Every respondent to the survey reported that they had been either a player, coach, team manager or touch judge prior to their current involvement as a referee. Approximately one in three ECRs (35.9%) were still involved as players. Close to half the respondents were touch judges (45.8%) prior to refereeing and most referees continued to fill the touch judge role (77.5%) concurrently with refereeing. About one third of the respondents were coaches (35.9%) prior to involvement as referees and more than one in five referees were still coaching (21.8%). Few referees are currently committee members (14.8%) and fewer were team managers (4.9%).

**Time involved and financial outlays**

Two items in the RRR-Q collected data on the number of games refereed per week and the average time spent on refereeing and related activities both on and off the rugby pitch. The median number of games refereed per week was two and the median time spent refereeing was 100 minutes per week. The average number of games refereed per week ranged from less than one to nine games. The vast majority of referees (96.5%) controlled between one and three games per week. There were no significant differences between the treatment and non-treatment groups in the mean number of

“My boyfriend the year before had actually done refereeing ... he was very into it and I went and watched him ... that was probably the first time it actually clicked ... you could actually referee, like it wasn't just some weird people.”
games refereed per week. It was important for the design of the study that there were no significant differences between the groups on their demographic and behavioural characteristics as a way of demonstrating that the groups were generally equivalent to one another.

In refereeing related off-field activities respondents reported spending a median was 34 hours per month (mean = 46.8 hours) doing off-field activities related to refereeing. Most off-field time was spent in training to maintain or develop fitness for refereeing (median = 14 hours / month) and watching other games to observe different styles of refereeing (median = 8). When time spent refereeing (approximately six hours per month) is added to off-field refereeing commitments, ECRs are spending a median total of approximately 40 hours per month (10 hours per week) on refereeing and related tasks. It is notable that every hour of actual refereeing ECRs are spending on average (median) almost eight hours in off-field activities related to refereeing.

The median dollars per year outlay for refereeing was $400 (see Table 9). The highest costs were petrol (median = $200 per year), which is likely to have risen sharply since the 2007 pre-season survey was completed, and equipment and uniforms (median $115 per year). Mean scores for the treatment and non-treatment groups are also displayed. The high standard deviation for the items measured indicate that highly varied costs were reported by the ECRs surveyed. Some referees reported spending more than $2000 per year on the costs associated with rugby refereeing. In contrast, a median of $3 expended on fitness training indicates that approximately half of the ECRs surveyed spent nothing on fitness training. There was a significant but weak positive relationship between training time and expenditure ($r = 0.2; p < .05) indicating that referees who train for more hours per month were also likely to spend more on fitness training (not displayed on table). This, however, is not a cause and effect relationship. It does not mean that referees who do not spend money on training are less likely to train to maintain or develop their fitness; it simply reflects the fact that a large proportion of referees reported incurred no fitness training costs.

### Stressors of officiating

Table 10 shows the mean scores for Stressors of Officiating for both treatment and non-treatment groups. Of note from this descriptive analysis are the comparatively high scores for “lack of recognition” and “interpersonal conflicts”. Low scores across the board may be due to a reticence of ECRs to report that they are stressed by refereeing, however the consistency with which “lack of recognition” and “interpersonal conflicts”

"When you move up it does get a lot more stressful because you get the people yelling from the sidelines, coaches get angry, the players get angry and it’s very ... lots of anger."
were reported as stressors identifies them as areas that ought to be addressed in developing retention strategies for all ECRs.

One of the benefits of a pre and post-test research design is that data from the two survey periods can be compared statistically for both within group change scores and between group differences. Within group change scores are calculated by subtracting each respondent’s pre-season score from their post-season score for each of the stress factors. A positive number indicates that a stress factor score has increased over the course of the rugby season. Between group differences in mean scores for the treatment and non-treatment groups test for mean differences for either pre or post-test scores.

Results of the within group differences analyses are summarised in Table 11. Both the treatment and the non-treatment groups reported a reduction in their “fear of physical harm” stress scores. This indicated that this source of stress, while not a major concern at the start of the season, had become significantly less of a concern to ECRs over the course of the season surveyed. This change suggests that the “controls” that rugby administrators and rugby clubs have in place to handle threatening behaviour directed towards referees appear to be working very well, at least from the perspective of ECRs. There were no significant changes in the scores for the treatment group for any of their stress scores other than “fear of physical harm”, which decreased significantly during the season. However, there were significant increases in two stress change scores for the non-treatment group. These were an increase in the officiating stressors labelled “performance concerns” and “time pressures”. The treatment group who were subject to the intervention strategy designed to increase perceived organisational support did not appear to experience the increased stress levels observed in the non-treatment group. There were no significant differences between the treatment and non-treatment groups on any of the stress factors for both the pre and post-season surveys (table not shown). However, there was a significant difference in the performance concerns change score between the treatment and non-treatment group (see Table 11 with “**” item). This reinforced the finding that the non-treatment group became increasingly concerned about their refereeing performance than did the treatment group who were exposed to organisational support strategies. The results show that the non-treatment group performance concerns stressor increased by +0.20 whereas the treatment group performance concerns stressor decreased slightly (-0.06).

High and low scoring individual scale items for Stressors of Officiating are presented in Tables 12a (high mean) and 12b (low mean). Drilling down to the individual items which were...
rated highly provides a more detailed understanding of the stressors reported by ECRs. The ECRs were consistently (pre and post-season survey) most stressed by having a “bad” game as a referee and dealing with protests from players or coaches with limited knowledge of the laws of the game. Amongst the other highly rated items “conflict between refereeing and family / social demands” is the only stressor which is either difficult to train referees for or cannot be controlled by the actions or rugby administrators. For all other highly rated stressors, ECRs can either be trained (eg., coping strategies for the times when referees have a “bad” game or make “bad” calls during a game) or rugby administrators can take appropriate action (eg., train coaches or players in the laws of the game and how to approach referees as well as providing better recognition of good refereeing).

Based on mean scores (see Table 12b), ECRs were least stressed about their personal security as a referee. This is indicative that while refereeing is stressful for ECRs in terms of individual performance the referees were not highly concerned about the refereeing environment - they did not report feeling threatened or a fear of being verbally or physically harmed by players, coaches or spectators. Further, there was a tendency for mean scores to decrease over the course of the rugby season suggesting that ECRs became less stressed about the rugby refereeing environment as the season progressed.

The in-depth interviews asked ECRs what they found to be the biggest sources of stress before, during and after a game. Participants were probed further about how the stressors they perceived might link with those surveyed the RRR-Q.

Before the game stressors ranged from almost a lack of stress reported by Dave from the treatment group through to concerns about negative attitudes towards referees in general and female referees in particular. Most ECRs cited performance concerns as their chief worry before going into a game.

During the game stressors came from two main sources—performance concerns, and abuse from players, coaches, and people on the sidelines. This echoes the results from the RRR-Q, where performance concerns such as making a “bad” call and abuse by coaches/players/spectators were rated as the most common stressors, albeit of moderate severity. Typical of those who reported performance concerns being an issue is a comment from Rob (treatment group), “I think one of the other stresses during a game is when you do make a mistake how you handle that”.

After the game: Verbal abuse, particularly from team coaches, arose as a consistent theme. Typical of the responses is that of

“...the worst time I was ever stressed or really worried about something was I was approached after the game by a captain of a team and you know he questioned a couple of rulings and ... and questioned my ability.”
Milly (non-treatment group), “I’ve had a couple of incidents where the coaches have wanted to continue what’s happened on the field off the field . . . they’ve wanted to come and talk to me very forcefully about calls that I made.”

One of the younger ECRs, Keith (treatment group), identified time pressures as being particular source of stress associated more with scheduling refereeing amongst other commitments and refereeing spilling over into other parts of his life rather than actual refereeing. Keith was involved coaching a junior team who played in the morning or midday, refereeing, studying, as well as working in the hospitality industry on weekend nights and found backing up for work on Saturday night and Sunday difficult after a full day at rugby. Time pressures were felt by Dave as well who was married with two young children and worked in a professional capacity. Dave’s job also called for him to travel interstate from time to time. Dave would like to devote more time to bettering his refereeing but found he could not put in the hours needed to observe others and learn from them, find time to socialise with other referees, “being seen” and building networks.

Opportunities for tangible support appear to be readily present in this area. If Associations are seen by ECRs to not only have proactive education and culture-altering strategies in place to combat abuse towards referees from playing and supporter elements of their community, but also to follow-through on reports of abuse, and carry out sanctions on offenders then the affective responses of ECRs are liable to be more positive towards the Association. Offering flexibility to allow ECRs to balance their refereeing commitments with external commitments they are more likely to truly engage with the game and feel part of the rugby community, a factor cited by many ECRs as key to their initial and continuing involvement.

**Sport Commitment**

The commitment of the ECRs surveyed was predominantly a function of their “enjoyment” of rugby refereeing and the “involvement opportunities” available to them as part of their refereeing (see Table 13). This echoes the reasons respondents cited for their initial involvement, answers typically being along the lines of “keep fit, meet people, stay involved with the game”. The low mean score on social constraints across both surveys and both groups indicates that the commitment of referees is not a function of the influence of significant others (e.g., friends or family). This result is interesting because it contrasts with the “time pressure” factor in the stress scale which measured competing demands between refereeing and occupational, family and social responsibilities and increased significantly for the non-treatment group (see Table 11). Mean
scores for pre and postseason treatment and non-treatment groups are displayed in Table 13.

In a similar vein to the stressors of officiating scores the sport commitment scores were analysed to test for statistically significant between group and within group differences. Sport commitment was found to be a much more stable construct than stressors as evidenced in the small proportion of between and within group differences (see Tables 13 and 14, respectively). These results are perhaps what might be expected to the extent that stress tends to vary from one refereeing situation to another whereas commitment is a more enduring quality. There were only two statistically significant within and between group differences. ECRs in the treatment group had significantly higher Involvement opportunity scores (mean = 4.1) than did those in the non-treatment group (mean = 3.7) in the pre-season survey (see Table 13 with “**” item). The enjoyment factor for the treatment group also decreased significantly between the pre and post-season surveys (see Table 14). All other within and between group differences were statistically unchanged. These results suggest that those ECRs who were assigned to the treatment group may have been expecting to experience a higher level of refereeing involvement because they were assigned a mentor for the season. However, the significant decrease in enjoyment for the same group suggests that despite perceived opportunities for increased involvement, the treatment group ECRs experienced a decrease in their level of enjoyment. Interestingly, the involvement opportunities change score for the treatment group decreased (mean = 0.19) between the pre and postseason surveys but this change was not statistically significant.

In relation to commitment, the in-depth interviews explored the factors that influenced the development of commitment to refereeing rugby. This is exemplified by Milly, who took up refereeing as her family was already heavily involved, “My brother plays Under 14s this year and you know my Dad’s coached my brother for a number of years, my Mum’s manager of the team and both my parents are involved in committees and that sort of stuff, so our whole life you know revolves around football.” Susan (non-treatment group) joined rugby first as a player, and then translated her experience as a high level field hockey referee into rugby refereeing. This speaks highly of the involvement opportunities perceived through involvement as a referee. Susan was already aware of the advantages of being a player as well as a referee in a different sport gave her and chose to leverage these with her existing rugby playing involvement. A similar attraction interested Warren (treatment group) who was a player and coach when he decided, on the spur of the moment, to take up
refereeing, after being encouraged by staff from his State rugby union.

**Reasons for ongoing involvement:** Not surprisingly, the variety of reasons cited by participants for their ongoing involvement as rugby referees also centred on involvement opportunities. Love of the game, the fitness aspect of refereeing and learning about the game were three such reasons. Learning about the game and the facilitation factor of being a referee in charge of 30 players provided the stimulus for Warren from the treatment group. “…I’ve been around rugby since day dot, and I’ve learnt more in the last two years in rugby . . . [as a referee] . . . than I ever have.” Typical of responses from all of the referees interviewed is the comment by Milly, “You know, I could be doing other things like I love it. I really enjoy it.”

**Rewards sought from involvement:** Crucial to the ongoing commitment of early-career referees are the rewards they seek from their involvement. Some ECRs within the cohort were paid to referee while others were not. Payments, although welcomed, especially by the younger members of the group to help pay for fuel, were not sought as a major reward and crucial to continuing involvement or quitting rugby. The rewards sought by the cohort tended to be more intrinsic in nature. Neil cited the enjoyment factor of commitment in his sought-after rewards. “Look, mainly it’s about fun … you know, if you get a good game and if you think you’ve done a good job and they’ve had a good game it’s a great reward.”

**Perceived organisational support**

Table 15a displays the mean scores for perceived organisational support for both treatment and non-treatment groups. Mean scores were above the mid-point of the 7 point measurement scale and ranged from 4.8 to 5.4. However, the mean scores were at a level where there appears to be opportunities to improve the organisational support offered to ECRs. It should be noted that the ECRs were more optimistic about perceived organisational support at the time of the pre-season survey than they were at the time of the post-season survey. Mean scores decreased for both the treatment and non-treatment groups during the season (see Table 15a) but there were no significant differences between the two groups. However, the within group change score for organisational support decreased significantly during the course of the season for the treatment group (see Table 15b). This result was unexpected because the treatment group ECRs were subjected to strategies designed to deliver improved levels of organisational support. This result indicates that either the strategies were poorly designed or not well implemented or that placing ECRs in a treatment group raised their expectations about the extent and types of organisational

“…my grade hasn’t changed in three years. Now that’s basically telling me I haven’t improved since I started in my first game.”
support that could be offered. Regardless of specific reasons for the decrease, the results suggest that there are opportunities to improve organisational support for ECRs.

The in-depth interviews asked a number of questions about ECRs’ perceptions of the support offered by their Referees’ Association and by clubs. Follow-up and probing questions sought more detailed responses to a range of organisational support issues and initiatives. In terms of tangible support, Keith offered his experience of the overall standard of supports for referees during and after the game. “Some clubs are really good, some clubs are really poor. And you get to know that as you go around. You’ve just got to be prepared for the worst and be aware of where the crowd control people are. There’s never been a safety issue I don’t think. But it could be better.” Susan was comfortable knowing that supports were available to her in relation to abuse from spectators, if the need arose, “Comparing it with other sports, rugby is very, very well structured, well organised.” In contrast, Scott (treatment group) had trouble getting support to prevent issues at his weekly junior fixtures. “There are no support people around. They don’t even assign touch judges who are, you know, helping you.”

Social supports: As much as the presence, or otherwise, of physical supports can have an impact on the officiating life of ECRs so can non-physical supports. For the terms of this report, these were termed social supports and were taken to mean largely intangible things that are often psychological in nature. Examples of these are an Association carrying through sanctions against those involved in referee abuse, formal and informal mentoring, presence of a refereeing career path and flexibility in appointments to balance other commitments with refereeing. The last of these being particularly relevant to participants of this study, as according to data from the RRR-Q, 35.9% of ECRs were still active rugby players.

Milly’s (non-treatment group) positive experience of how her association deals with referee abuse enhanced her feelings of being supported. Milly was confronted by an irate junior coach after a game. When he refused to leave her alone and continued to get into her personal space and verbally abused her, Milly told him he would be placed on report. Milly spoke proudly of the way her Association escalated the report to a judiciary panel and then suspended the offending coach. Participants from one State union within the treatment group highlighted a post-game “Scorecard” strategy as particularly effective. At the end of a game match officials are given the opportunity of awarding bonus points to teams whose players, coaches, officials and spectators abide by the rules of the game and refrain from abuse. “There are four or five boxes for each team ... they’re things like, obvious stuff like yellow and red
cards. But there’s also the spectators arguing with the referees, coach arguing, captain arguing with the referees and players who criticise. So if everyone’s been on their best behaviour, there’s been no send-offs or anything, you get five or six ticks and they get all full bonus points for that game.”

On the other side of the coin, the older ECRs spoke of inequitable access to support and avenues for individual development presenting a barrier to their involvement in refereeing. Opportunities for advancement appeared to be provided to some ECRs and not others, and it was felt that greater good could be done offering improved and personalised supports to all ECRs. Scott stated, “I think they’re just picking the guys out of the top and just putting them there to probably push them up to become nationally known, rather than just being a good referee.” A reluctance of referee coaches to be available to critique lower level games was also cited. Typical of responses in this area is Rob’s comment, “my coach basically tells me that most coaches don’t want to do the lower grade referees in my State and that’s the biggest problem.”

A number of participants complained of the isolation of being an ECR. These participants felt disconnected socially and found always officiating at different venues and not having a “home base” difficult. They also thought this had some impact on their ability to improve and advance through grading levels as a referee. Dave felt that the large distance his association was spread across, combined with a lack of personnel, contributed to the lack of feedback and referee coach support. “I’ve done a fair bit of out of town refereeing this year and I don’t think I had a coach or someone like that to come to any of my games.”

**Awareness of existing retention strategies:** Mentoring programs of some description were identified by participants from each of the treatment sub-groups. This indicates that even in the first season of interventions being put in place that they have been visible to the targeted ECRs. Dave identified mentoring as an existing strategy within his association. “There were mentors assigned to referees through the association but the way I gathered, it was more if you needed help you went to them. The premise was if you needed help or needed questions answered you’d see your mentor.”

Keith spoke of the beneficial aspects of being in a squad of ECRs all at a similar level of ability mentored by the one senior official. “I go out a lot socially with the guys in my squad, so it’s almost like you’re playing in a club which is good, so you’re getting to know other people, socialise.” Having accessible channels of communication, such as one example where a private email distribution list was set up for squad members added an extra facet to the value of referees’ squads according
to participants from one treatment area. Squads set up around mentoring therefore appear to provide associations a valid strategy to decrease the isolation reported by ECRs, aid in their socialisation as referees and as part of the rugby community, and to assist individual improvement.

**Suggestions for further retention strategies:** By and large the participants did not have much to add in suggesting new. Most of this section of interviews centred on improving existing strategies, for example, better allocation of resources for all ECRs. Rob suggested more recognition was needed for extra effort from referees. “You know plenty of us have to double up when someone doesn’t turn up for a game. We had someone not turn up for a first grade game last year, after I’d done second grade. So I backed up for another game. You know that’s a long afternoon, four hours on the run basically. No recognition for that … [those] are the people you want to support in the game. If you want to keep the money coming in, you thank people appropriately.”

In summary, the interview phase of the research was a particular useful tool in gaining further insight into the stressors and commitment of ECRs and their perceptions of the support they receive from their associations. The cohort did not rate stress highly as a factor, but did make reference to performance concerns prior and during games and abuse from spectators, during and after games as issues that had some influence over them. Of particular concern was the regulation of coaches’, team officials’ and spectators’ behaviour at the conclusion of games and their propensity to at times confront ECRs if they felt their team had been slighted.

The commitment of participants was largely intrinsically motivated, that is, ECRs were motivated to continue for their own internal reasons more so than external reasons like financial remuneration. The support provided to ECRs, their perceptions of this support and their awareness of existing retention, appeared to be largely dependent on the resources of the participant’s association or their geographical circumstances. Participants whose associations were required to service games played across a large geographic area reported lower perceptions of support, as did those whose associations were reported to be low on personnel who could look after functions such as grading and monitoring ECRs to ensure they progressed through levels. This lack of progression was seen as especially disheartening to the older participants in the cohort and led to feelings of isolation.

On a positive note, situations where associations followed through in dealing with abuse of ECRs gave ECRs a sense they were supported from the top down. Associations where opportunities for mentoring and networking were provided

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*Our Refs Association has put out like a development squad and whatever so that’s access to training and you know other sort of facilities and mentor programs and that sort of stuff, which is good.*
and flexibility in appointments allowed ECRs to referee as well as work and study as needed led to positive affective responses from participants. An environment where a culture of support appeared to exist (support from peers, more experienced referees and people within the association) enhanced participants’ feelings towards the association and commitment to refereeing.

**Intention to continue refereeing**

Table 16a displays the mean scores for both the treatment and non-treatment groups, pre and postseason which were all above 4.0. Mean scores from both groups were measured on a 5 point Likert scale, and as such these scores indicate a high level of intention to continue refereeing. There were no significant between group (treatment v non-treatment) differences on either the pre or post-season survey results. Consistent with the perceived organisational support results reported above there was, however, a statistically significant decrease in the within group behavioural intention score for the treatment group (see Table 16b). The treatment group ECRs started the season with strong intentions of continuing to referee (mean = 4.4) and this score decreased 0.2 points by the time of the post-season survey. Through only a slight decline numerically attention may need to be paid to maintaining high behavioural intention scores amongst ECRs through being active in addressing the perceptions of referees regarding the value of continuing to referee.

In the sports officials retention model shown in Figure 1 the construct of intention to continue (dependent or predicted variable) is shown as the end product of the interrelation between sport commitment, stressors of officiating and perceived organisational support (independent or predictor variables). It is not sufficient, nor does it reveal much, to calculate scores for behavioural intention in isolation. To this end, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were run separately on the treatment and non-treatment group data to model the influence of independent variables singly and in combination in predicting variance in the dependent variable—intention to continue refereeing.

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses (complete model) are summarised in Tables 17a and 18a. Details of the multiple regression are also provided in Appendix 3. The results for both the treatment and non-treatment groups (see Tables 17a and 18a) show that the independent variables in combination explained up to 86% of the variance in the dependent variable post-season intention to continue refereeing (see R-squared values). Perceived organisational support did not add significantly to the prediction of intention to continue refereeing for the
treatment group or the non-treatment group (see R-squared change). Despite this result it is worthwhile examining the results of the regression models separately for the treatment and non-treatment groups to gain a better understanding of the behavioural intentions of ECRs. The results of further regression analyses without the stress and commitment variables (reduced models) are also reported and yield some differences in the influence of perceived organisational support between the treatment and non-treatment groups (see Tables 17b and 18b).

**Treatment group—complete model**

Table 17a summarises the results for the treatment group. The results show that post-season intention to continue was predicted by a combination of commitment—involvement alternatives, commitment—social constraints, and stress—time pressures. Involvement alternatives which measured the attraction of activities other than refereeing rugby and time pressures which measured competing demands between refereeing and other responsibilities were acting as repulsion factors and negatively influencing ECRs behavioural intentions. In contrast, social constraints which measured commitment based on choosing to referee in response to the influence of friends and family had a positive influence on the behavioural intentions of ECRs and was acting as an attraction factor. Pre-season intention to continue refereeing was a strong predictor of post-season intention in Step 1 of the regression model but was found to be an unstable predictor variable for the treatment group. Pre-season behavioural intention was not a significant predictor at any other step in the regression model and shared variance with the stress and commitment variables. Interestingly, the enjoyment factor for commitment was not a significant predictor of intention to continue. This may have been related to the significant decrease in enjoyment reported by the treatment group (see Table 14). Despite the implementation of intervention strategies designed to increase organisational support amongst the treatment group, there was no discernable increase in their intention to continue refereeing that was not explained by their pre-season intention to continue (in the absence of other predictors only), commitment and stress.

**Treatment group—reduced model**

The reduced model excluded stress and commitment variables in the prediction of post-season intention to continue refereeing and the results are displayed in Table 17b. With the influence of stress and commitment removed, pre-season perceived organisational support was found to be a significant predictor of intention to continue. The intention of ECRs in the treatment group to continue refereeing was influenced in a positive direction by their perceptions of organisational
support (post-season). This suggests that with stress and commitment factors being equal for all ECRs, those referees who perceive that they are better supported in their role as a referee are more likely to continue to referee.

**Non-Treatment group—complete model**

Table 18a summarises the results for the non-treatment group. The results in the final model (Step 4) show that post-season intention to continue was predicted by a combination of commitment—social constraints (pre and post-season), commitment—involve opportunities, and commitment—enjoyment. None of the stress factors were significant predictors of intention to continue for the non-treatment group. Enjoyment and attraction factor was in the expected (positive) direction and a strong predictor variable with a beta weight of 0.9. Involvement opportunities (pre-season) was also a strong predictor but was a repulsion (negative) factor and also in the expected direction in that it was measuring the extent to which ECRs would miss the atmosphere and camaraderie of refereeing if they quit. Commitment based on social constraints was an interesting predictor of intention to continue for the non-treatment group in that it was a moderate repulsion factor in the pre-season results and a moderate attraction factor in the post-season results. In the pre-season survey period the intention of non-treatment group members was being negatively influenced by their family and friends. However, by the end of the season family and friends were positively influencing the ECRs intentions to continue refereeing. In contrast to the treatment group, pre-season intention to continue refereeing was a consistently strong predictor of intention to continue (post-season). The non-treatment group were not exposed to the intervention strategies delivered to the treatment group and perceived organisation support had no discernable influence in their intention to continue refereeing as was expected.

**Non-Treatment group—reduced model**

Results of the reduced model which excluded stress and commitment variables in the prediction of post-season intention to continue refereeing are displayed in Table 18b. As expected, even with the influence of stress and commitment removed, neither pre or post-season perceived organisational support influenced ECRs in the non-treatment group to be more likely to continue to referee. This result was reassuring in that this group was not deliberately exposed to organisational support strategies as were the treatment group.

**Limitations**

The study had a number of limitations which should be considered in drawing conclusions and making
recommendations for managing referees. First, the results of this study cannot claim to be representative of all ECRs, as those who would be less likely to continue may also have been less likely to be involved in the survey process. Second, the study employed a relatively small sample size, which was also affected by individuals dropping out of the study. Third, the referees were not randomly assigned to treatment or non-treatment groups, which may affect how effective these treatments were for ECRs. Fourth, some referees were likely to have been subject to pre-existing organisational support strategies and thus we cannot attribute all the differences between the groups on their intention to continue on the treatment conditions employed during the study. Finally, there was also some unavoidable variability in the effectiveness to which the volunteer mentors implemented the intervention program as it was designed.
Conclusions

Referees clearly are vital to the operation and development of the game of rugby. As the game is structured and played currently and for the foreseeable future there is no feasible alternative to appointing qualified and well trained referees to officiate at competitive rugby. Whether the goal is to maintain the game at its present level of participation or to increase participation, rugby administrators have three options for avoiding a shortage of referees—recruitment, productivity or retention. These options were outlined in the introductory section of this report. They are not mutually exclusive and a likely to more effective if used in combination. However, referee retention is arguably the better of the three options because it is important to the base level provision of referees in sufficient numbers to meet demand and to the quality of the game. In terms of referee numbers, higher rates of retention means less pressure to increase the productivity (games per week) of current referees and less need for recruitment and associated training costs. In terms of the quality of the rugby experience for players, coaches, spectators and supporters, referees who are retained for a number of seasons are more likely to develop mastery of the laws of the game as well as being better able to apply those laws with fairness, consistency and greater authority. If the game of rugby is to grow and develop, in both participant numbers and quality of the game, referee retention will need to be a key focus of strategic and operational planning. It can be concluded from the results of this research project that:

(1) Individuals become initially involved in refereeing rugby for altruistic (contribute to the community) and social (school connections and family) reasons. Most do not start refereeing to earn money. However, a sizeable minority acknowledge that financial remuneration is a reason for their initial involvement and it is likely that the large proportion of full time students who referee are more likely to be retained if they were paid to referee.

(2) ECRs are more likely to be attracted to refereeing rugby and possibly retained more effectively if they have a previous connection to the game of rugby through a role other than refereeing (eg., player) or have been socialised into rugby through schooling, family or friends. The predominant pathway to refereeing is through involvement in rugby as a player then as a touch judge. The transition from coach, team manager or committee member to referee is a much less common pathway to refereeing amongst ECRs.

“... we need to tell people like myself, you know this is the goal that you are set and they need to actually monitor, you know give us some motivation to actually strive harder to continue refereeing... do this [and] we’ll push you up a notch, you know referee senior level, fifth grade, fourth grade. And just tell us ... you need something ... to hang in front of us to keep us running and refereeing.”
(3) If rugby is assumed to be similar to many other competitive sports there is a high and perhaps increasing risk of significant levels of turnover amongst referees, possibly as high as 30% or more annually.

(4) ECRs, defined as those with less than five years experience post-accreditation, are likely to have lower retention rates than those with more years experience. The evidence for this conclusion is:
   b. The majority of ECRs in rugby, referee at junior club level where tangible (eg., referee rooms) and direct social and networking support (eg., referee coaches and mentors) are the most difficult to organise and deliver at a consistent and predictable standard across all rugby clubs and competitions.
   c. The majority of ECRs have not progressed beyond level 1 accreditation. Whether through insufficient opportunities either to referee higher quality games or to upgrade their accreditation, lack motivation or availability of time to upgrade, or perceived lack of support or encouragement, referees who are not progressing their “careers” are likely to find the decision to quit easier than it is for those who may have demonstrated a higher commitment to refereeing.
   d. More than 40% of ECRs were engaged in full time study and could quit refereeing at short notice if the pressures of study or demands of part time paid work increase or they move into the full time labour market upon completion of study.
   e. Referees incur direct financial commitment of about $400 per season (median) to referee rugby which could act as a disincentive to those who do not have a reliable and reasonable source of income.
   f. Refereeing requires a substantial in-season time commitment of about ten hours average per week of which less than two hours is actually refereeing.

(5) The sport of rugby is generally doing an excellent job in assuring the safety of ECRs in the refereeing environment. This was evidenced by the low scores on the fear of physical harm stress factor and that scores in this factor decreased significantly for both the treatment and non-treatment groups over the course of the season studied.

(6) The factors explaining intention to continue refereeing operate through more complex socio-cognitive processes than were described by the Sports Officials Retention
Model. This was evidenced, for example, by organisational support:

a. Not explaining intention to continue when stress and commitment were included in the model, but
b. Explaining intention to continue for the treatment group in the expected (positive) direction when stress and commitment were set aside from the model.

(7) There was less observed change in commitment factors than in the stress factors during the course of the season surveyed. Commitment to refereeing for ECRs is predominantly a function of enjoyment and opportunities for involvement in the game of rugby that might not otherwise be available if not for refereeing (eg., players unable to continue in the game due to injury can turn to refereeing to stay involved in the game).

(8) Organisational support strategies are more effective at minimising the negative impact of the stressors of officiating on intention to continue than it was at enhancing the commitment levels of referees. This was evidenced by the finding that:

a. In contrast with the treatment group (no change) the non-treatment group who did not have access to an organised intervention program had significant increases in performance concerns and time pressure.

b. Aside from a decrease in enjoyment for the treatment group there were no observed changes in commitment for either the treatment or non-treatment group.

(9) Organisational support strategies for ECRs need to be carefully designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated in order to facilitate enjoyment by ECRs rather than imposing any unnecessary formality or administrative burden that might detract from their enjoyment of the core activity of refereeing.

(10) The development and delivery of appropriate levels and types of organisational support is likely to be effective in reducing the stressors of officiating experienced by ECRs. This is evidenced by the findings that performance concerns and time pressures increased significantly during the season for the non-treatment group but remained unchanged for the treatment group.
Recommendations

(1) The ARU explores the establishment of a KPI for the rate of referee retention and monitors retention rates at a National and State Union level and investigates the feasibility of benchmarking its referee retention rate with selected international unions and possibly other football codes in Australia.

(2) The ARU documents case studies of best practice in relation to the nature of organisational support provided to referees in club rugby and promulgates these practices to all member Unions annually.

(3) Referee recruitment efforts and messages should be directed towards targeted groups who already have a connection to the game through school, family and friends involved in rugby.

(4) The ARU and member unions investigate the costs and benefits of establishing standards for accredited referees for all levels of the game including: minimum pay, flexibility with referee appointment rosters, refereeing performance feedback and mentoring, particularly for ECRs.

(5) The ARU consider further research which focuses on more objective measures of stress amongst it referees (eg., physiological observations and recordings of referees’ stress in-situ) and test the efficacy of programs designed to reduce stressors amongst referees.

(6) Member Unions and their sub-Unions and clubs be strongly encouraged to maintain the high standards they have achieved in controlling the game environment (eg., ground marshals, separating the playing area from spectators, supporters and coaches) to the point ECRs generally report negligible levels of fear of being physically harmed.

(7) The ARU and Member Unions give consideration to the development and implementation of mentoring and organisational support programs with priority for less experienced and younger referees in particular.

(8) Prior to or soon after commencing refereeing ECRs be provided with practical training designed to build resilience and coping strategies for handling the inevitable stressors associated with refereeing. Coupled with this recommendation is the development and implementation of policies designed to ensure that referees remain confident in their ability through appointment to games which match or appropriately extend their knowledge, skills and experience as a referee.
(9) Out of pocket expenses of refereeing be further investigated and strategies developed to ensure that referees are reimbursed or sponsored for items such as accreditation and training, uniforms and equipment, transport and travel.

(10) The nature and reasons for the high proportion of referees’ time being devoted to off-field activities be examined. Consideration be given to rolling some off-field time activities into networking or socialising opportunities for ECRs. This would serve two purposes: Saving time and decreasing feelings of isolation amongst refereeing. Referees with too many commitments over and above their on-field role may encounter more conflicting family and social demands and search for alternative ways to be involved in rugby other than refereeing.

(11) The ARU and Member Unions examine the feasibility of using increasingly widely adopted information and communication technology strategies (eg., email, pdf files, social networking sites) to facilitate the training and recognition of referees as well as for more efficient dissemination and collection of information and reports to, from and between referees.
References


