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## Exploring Referee Abuse Through the Lens of the Collegiate Rugby Coach

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## ABSTRACT

Referees are valuable contributors to the legitimacy of a sporting contest. Despite this, abuse in sport has become a growing concern and is regularly noted as an obstacle with which referees must contend. Continued abuses have been associated with referee discontinuation and have been noted as a detrimental influence in the recruitment and retention of referees. Sporting organizations, coaches, and players all feel the impact when there is an inadequate supply of referees. Coaches have been noted as a primary perpetrator of referee abuse; thus, in this study, the authors utilize a phenomenological approach to explore perceptions of referee abuse through the lens of the collegiate rugby coach. Data were collected from 15 participants, all of whom completed two phone interviews. Five factors that influence one's perceptions of and proclivity towards referee abuse emerged from the data: (a) personal characteristics/philosophies, (b) relationships, (c) social influences, (d) organisational expectations, and (e) culture. Implications to practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

*Keywords: Officiating, Referee, Abuse, Rugby, Recruitment, Retention*

## **1. Introduction**

Referee recruitment and retention have become an increasingly pressing issue “for the mere survival of many sporting leagues” (Phillips & Fairley, 2014, p. 185). To date, a limited number of scholars have focused on the factors that contribute to referee attrition, including referee abuse (e.g., Giel & Breuer, in press; Johnson, 2009; Rayner, Webb, & Webb, 2016). Despite the developing consensus that referee abuse has become more frequent and more acceptable (Ackery, Tator, & Snider, 2012; Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2016), few scholars have focused on the root causes of abuse behaviours or the power of non-referees to affect change. In recent years, attention has been drawn to the abuses that mentors (i.e., coaches, trainers, and managers) have perpetrated against players, focusing primarily on sexual abuse (e.g., Harthill, 2009; Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010). As a result, sporting organizations have developed policies aimed at mitigating these abuse behaviours. Despite the recent push to protect players from abuses within the sporting environment, little attention has been paid to the abuses endured by sporting officials, especially rugby referees (Rayner et al., 2016; Webb, Rayner, & Thelwell, 2018). Thus, we seek to understand referee abuse through the lens of the coach, an individual who is often cited as a perpetrator of such abuses.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Referee shortage**

In nearly every organised sport, an official is utilised in some capacity, though their titles vary, such as official, umpire, referee, and so on. Referees serve as the arbiters of a match ensuring fair and safe play making them vital to the production of organised sport competition. Despite their importance, sport organisations across the globe report issues in recruitment and retention (Swanson, 2018). In fact, the American Sport Education Program (ASEP) has labeled

the shortage of officials in the United States a national crisis, and Cuskelly, Evans, and Hoye (2004) found that it is a challenging endeavour to meet the demand for qualified referees across all sports, particularly at the grassroots level. Corroborating these findings, a National Organization of Sports Officials (NASO) survey found that 90% of high-school association executive directors noted a referee shortage within their own state (Johnson, 2009). Rugby is not immune to such issues. Though nearly 1,000 new referees are trained through USA Rugby's certification programs annually, the total number of referees registered with USA Rugby has decreased in the last five years. At the close of the 2017 membership cycle, USA Rugby listed 1,585 registered referees, down from 1,639 in 2012 (L. Zugschwert, personal communication, October 17, 2017).

More broadly, high levels of referee attrition create a significant human resource problem for sporting organizations with continued attrition impacting the availability and quality of sporting contests (Phillips & Fairley, 2014). Furthermore, many referees have suggested that verbal and physical abuses from players, coaches, and fans have contributed to their discontinuation with the profession (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1996; Dell et al., 2016; Rainey, 1995; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013).

## **2.2 Referee abuse**

### **2.2.1 Prevalence of referee abuse**

For the purposes of this study referee abuse represents,

A verbal statement or physical act, which implies or threatens physical harm to a referee or a referee's property or equipment. Abuse includes, but is not limited to, the following acts committed on a referee: using foul or abusive language toward a referee, spewing

any beverage on a referee's personal property, or verbally threatening a referee (Chiafullo, 1998, p. 202).

Scholars have supported the notion that referees routinely experience hostile reactions to their decisions (e.g., Dell et al., 2016; Rayner et al., 2016; Walters, Schluter, Stamp, Thomson, & Payne, 2016; Webb, Cleland, & O'Gorman, 2017; Webb et al., 2018). Total Youth Football (2008) found that 82% of soccer stakeholders (e.g., parents, players, coaches, spectators) had witnessed abuse aimed at match officials. In another study, 67% of English rugby referees reported being abused during competition (Rayner et al., 2016). Walters et al. (2016) reported that nearly two thirds of coaches and referees witnessed verbal abuse of a referee. Additionally, Rainey (1995) found that 11% of baseball and softball umpires had been assaulted at least once during their career. Of these assaults, nearly half involved significant physical abuse described as: punching, choking, or being hit with equipment. In a report prepared for the Australian Sports Commission, referee abuse in non-professional sport was found to be both frequent and increasing in occurrence (Cuskelly et al., 2004). Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported to be somewhat concerned or very concerned about the abuse of officials, and 81% of respondents believed that abuse of officials is never acceptable (Cuskelly et al., 2004).

As noted in the previous reviews, abuse is experienced from myriad sources and is not limited to a specific sport or geographic region. Despite the acknowledgement that referee abuse exists (e.g., Brackenridge, Pitchford, & Wilson, 2011; Rayner et al., 2016; Simmons, 2006; Webb et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2018) there is a dearth of research that focuses on the factors that underlie the abuse or considers abuse from a non-referee perspective.

### **2.2.2 Social acceptability of referee abuse**

The prevalence of abuse has forced referees to acknowledge that abuse is an expected and accepted part of the role (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger, Kim, Warner, & Tingle, 2017; Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014), expressing that, often, retained referees are able to reframe abuses. Within the broader sporting world, abuse of officials is generally considered socially acceptable (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Such normalized sporting behaviour has been termed a *tradition of deviance* (Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978): a cohesive set of norms that favor deviant behaviour. In this case, the deviant behaviour of abuse becomes acceptable because players and coaches (Chiafullo, 1998) see referees as outsiders. Without a personal relationship dehumanization occurs. Notably, there are few other contexts where such abuses would be permitted, yet in the sporting environment referee abuse is allowed and at times applauded.

According to Kellett and Shilbury (2007), similar to victims of abuse in other contexts, referees often rationalize abuse, at times minimizing the problem. While disassociation from abuses may be required in order to continue operating in a hostile environment, ignoring referee abuse may further normalize the issue. Rudd (2016) supported the notion that sport participants find some referee abuses to be justified. Participants indicated that it was, “morally wrong to throw objects or cast vulgar obscenities, [but that] it is part of the game to heckle opponents or yell in disgust with a referee’s officiating” (p. 182). The discrepancy between participant’s perspectives of abuse may result from a lack of understanding of sportsmanship or an unclear understanding of abuse. If participants do not understand what constitutes abusive behaviours they are also less likely to report the behaviours (Rayner et al., 2016). Walters and colleagues (2016) noted an important difference in reporting behaviours between referees and coaches. Coaches reported less abuse behaviours than referees, and it was suggested that this may result

from the in-game behaviours of coaches themselves. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that because coaches are regularly participating in the verbal abuse of referees they may be unaware or more tolerant of language that others would typically view as abusive. This incongruence highlights the importance of considering referee abuse more holistically. To date, few scholars have considered a coach's understanding of referee abuse or the antecedents that prompt one to partake in referee abuse.

### **2.3 The importance of coaches**

Scholars have indicated a need for consideration of not only the referee's perspective of abuses, but also the perspective of the coach (Walters et al., 2016). The perspective of the coach is valuable, as coaches are one of the major propagators (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1996; Nazarudin, Omar-Fauzee, & Din, 2009; Rayner et al., 2016) and can serve as role models. Within the sporting context, a coach is often considered to be not only a teacher of skills, but also a mentor who teaches life lessons that remain engrained throughout their players' lives (Walton, 1992). Coaches maintain a complex combination of roles including: an adult-role model, surrogate parent, potential peer, and possible prevention agent (Kirschenbaum & Smith, 1983). As such, coaches have the ability to significantly impact the collegiate sports environment. Coaches at the collegiate level are able to influence athletes' behaviour (e.g., Ranby et al., 2009; Scofield & Unruh, 2006; Seitz, Wyrick, Rulison, Strack, & Fearnow-Kenney, 2014) based upon the expectations they set and the behaviour they are willing to accept. If coaches are perceived to approve referee abuse, it is probable their players will engage in abusive behaviours or even increase their participation in such behaviours. Consequently, coaches' influence makes them a unique candidate for study, as their perceptions and expectations of referees can more broadly impact sport than other sporting stakeholders (e.g., spectators).

## 2.4 Social identity theory

Tajfel (1978) defined social identity theory as the “...part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [*sic*] knowledge of his [*sic*] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). In essence, the theory denotes the acknowledgement of group membership and thus its distinction from other groups, and the resulting benefits of said membership. The distinction between groups is particularly important in the identification process, as it forms the basis for membership (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004), and generates the concept of *us* and *them* (i.e., in- and out-groups; Tajfel, 1978). In this sense, barriers are critical to group formation and maintenance. Without barriers and distinctions, groups can blur and appear to be homogenous, which weakens the benefits of identification (Tajfel, 1978). Conversely, social identities are perpetuated by the similarities (e.g., membership or mission) within groups and by the similarity between the values of the group and individual (Pratt, 1998; Tajfel, 1978). As such, rugby referees and coaches representing teams signify distinct social identities, in that members from each group likely recognize the barriers between their respective groups (Jackson, 2002). Within the context of a rugby match, one group is comprised of officials, and the other groups (i.e., teams) are represented by the focus of this study: the coach.

## 2.5 Purpose

Though scholars have shown that referee abuse is a perpetual problem that relates to referee dropout, scholars have primarily focused on administrative shortcomings and community structures (e.g., Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2012; Warner et al., 2013). To date, most officiating examinations have focused on the referee; thus, we fill a gap in the literature by illuminating the issue of referee abuse from an



external perspective—that of the perpetrator. As such, the following research question guided the study:

**Research Question 1(RQ1):** What factors contribute to collegiate rugby coaches' perceptions of referee abuse?

Referee abuse appears to be a pressing issue facing sporting organisations at all levels (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Johnson, 2009; Swanson, 2018). Continued abuse towards referees has the ability to contribute to referee stress, performance issues, and negatively impact referee recruitment and retention.

It is difficult to imagine any other modern western industry in which abuse, intimidation and violence of this kind would be regarded as legitimate instruments of managerial control; indeed, outside the relatively closed social world of professional [sport], these techniques would almost universally be regarded not just as bad management practice but would almost certainly result in cases being brought to industrial tribunals and might also result in criminal prosecutions (Kelly & Waddington, 2006, p. 154).

Yet, sporting participants have not been empowered to act as change agents. Beginning with coaches, who have the ability to holistically influence perceptions of referee abuse and model behavioural changes, this study will take the first step in understanding perceptions of referee abuse and providing potential solutions to decrease its prevalence.

### **3. Methodology**

A phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 2013) guided the research as the researchers sought to illuminate the perceptions of rugby coaches toward referee abuse, as these perceptions represented the reality of referee abuse within the sporting context. A further goal of phenomenological research is to identify factors that underlie individuals' perceptions and

develop actionable solutions. Additionally, “results from a phenomenological study can be used for policy development, change in practice, increasing our capacity for care and compassion, and raising our consciousness to what was not known or otherwise erroneous” (Munhall, 2007, p. 154). For this study, we explored the ways in which coaches had experienced referee abuse in rugby as the object of intention. Because phenomenology provides a framework to take an in-depth look at motivations and behaviours (Crotty, 1998), the opportunity to elucidate the current state of referee abuse as experienced by collegiate rugby coaches were created.

A rugby coach’s insights are based on the individual’s own experiences and perceptions rather than assumptions or conventional wisdom. By exploring referee abuse through the lived experience of a coach, the individual is able to challenge or affirm social and structural norms and attempt to “grasp the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 170). Thus, instead of generating a list of socially acceptable responses, a phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to clarify the underlying assumptions that surround referee abuse and to find “commonalities across participants to see how lived experiences relate to a phenomenon of interest” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50).

### **3.1 Data collection procedures**

Coaches were recruited through an email sent by USA Rugby’s DI-A Commissioner, to all registered men’s DI-A head coaches. DI-A rugby coaches are working within the highest level of collegiate rugby in the United States where teams are inextricably linked to their college or university. These coaches are also register as a DI-A rugby coach with the national governing body, USA Rugby. Those interested in participation provided consent, completed a brief demographic survey, and responded to exclusionary questions including: (a) registration as a coach with USA Rugby; (b) current coach at the men’s Division I-A level; and (c) borne witness

to or experienced referee abuse within the game of rugby. Fifteen coaches met the inclusion criteria and were invited to partake in two research interviews.

Moustakas (1994) advised that phenomenological studies using interviews should include two broad questions regarding the phenomenon: (a) what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon; and (b) what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences with the phenomenon? Following Institutional Review Board approval, the creation of the first interview guide was constructed using these two broad questions: (a) Can you describe any instances of referee abuse that you have seen or experienced during your time in rugby; and (b) what factors (contexts or situations) have influenced or affected your experiences with referee abuse?

The interview guide was subsequently field tested by three experts in the field of rugby to ensure questions were relevant and appropriate, while enhancing readability and comprehension (Mertens, 2010). After field-testing, the interview guide was refined and minor changes in question content and order made (de Vaus, 2014). The final version of the interview guide was then pilot tested (Creswell, 2013) with two individuals external to the study, one who had a background in rugby and the other in coaching. After the pilot test, no additional lines of inquiry were added. The second interview guide was developed using data collected and preliminary analysis from the first set of interviews. Further, utilizing two interviews provided a structure in which the researcher was able to clarify previous data and probe further to extrapolate additional information (Polkinghorne, 1989). Utilizing two semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants to become familiar with the researcher, and established a safe environment to share experiences (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Further, multiple interviews increased the depth and meaning of the phenomenon and allowed the researchers to explore additional considerations

from the first interview (May, 1991). All interviews took place via phone, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

### **3.2 Participants**

USA Rugby collegiate coaches in the Division I-A (DI-A) men's competition served as the sampling frame for this study. Individuals who were both registered members of the USA Rugby National Governing Body and serve as a men's DI-A collegiate rugby coach at one of the 71 registered programs were eligible to participate. Participants were recruited via purposive criterion sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) to access "key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich cases" (Suri, 2011, p. 67). These participants were required to meet the three selection criteria mentioned above.

Fifteen participants completed two interviews, which ranged in length from 36 to 68 minutes; interview one averaged 51 minutes and interview two averaged 53 minutes. Collectively the 15 coaches represented 11 of the 71 (15.5%) DI-A collegiate rugby programs in the United States. The rugby coaches represented programs in six of the seven Division I-A collegiate rugby conferences, including the BIG10, Cal, East, MidSouth, Red River, and West Conferences. The sample was adequate (Crotty, 1998) to explore the phenomenon of referee abuse in rugby, as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) indicated that 12 interviews of a homogenous group allows for data saturation.

Of the fifteen participants interviewed, 14 were men and one of was a woman. Five nationalities were represented, with 10 coaches born in the United States and five born outside of the United States. The group also included individuals from four continents: Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania. Despite the relative youth of the Division I-A (DI-A) league structure, started in 2011, the coaches averaged 4.6 years of coaching participation at the elite collegiate

level (DI-A). The coaches overall coaching tenure averaged 18.1 years, with coaching careers ranging from four to 35 years. In terms of the coaching position held, 5 of the participants were assistant coaches, and 10 were head coaches. In addition to their coaching roles, every coach interviewed had played rugby and just over half (8 of 15) were certified rugby referees.

### **3.3 Data analysis procedures**

As a means to protect the identity of the participants, each coach was assigned a randomly generated gender-neutral pseudonym. The data were then analysed via inductive thematic analysis, which included the researchers (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes from the open-ended responses of the participants, (c) assessing the codes to create themes, (d) reviewing developed themes, and (e) defining and naming the created themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were derived from the data rather than from a previous hypothesis or categories that had been determined a priori (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). To develop codes, the coding team met and coded two interview transcripts. NVivo 11 was used to code the interviews. When coding transcripts for a second time, the researchers and external coders sought intercoder agreement amongst the codes assigned to a particular passage based on the definition created in the codebook. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), at least 80% of the codes assigned to the passages in the two verification interviews matched between the coders and researchers. Codes were then organized into preliminary themes. Themes were subsequently finalized and named.

In phenomenology, no matter the type or tradition, the idea of *openness* is key during data analysis phase. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology asserts that a focus of phenomenological inquiry is to manage preconceptions by bracketing or abstaining from them. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, in contrast, aligns with the view that we cannot

escape our own presuppositions; thus, from this perspective, induction relies on the researcher's willingness to remain open. Hermeneutic phenomenology, which focuses on the interpretation of an experience, allows for preconceptions, including existing knowledge, models, or frameworks, to be integrated into the research findings (Caelli, 2000; Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2008). Thus, the researchers were able to integrate generated themes with existing conceptual frameworks to appropriately position the current study within the sport management discipline.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness**

Numerous procedures were adopted to ensure the viability of study results, including audio-recorded interviews, verbatim interview transcription, and the maintenance of an in-depth research journal that helped to ensure that the data collected and the themes garnered were as dependable and as confirmable as possible. The use of audio recording and the maintenance of a research journal also provided a framework for replication and verification of this study. Beyond the collection of relevant data, peer review, member checking, intercoder agreement, and the clarification of researcher bias were utilized to ensure that any emergent problems were addressed prior to the creation of permanent consequences (Schwandt, 2015).

#### **3.4.1. Peer review**

Peer review served as an external check of the processes undertaken and outcomes established during this research study. Three external reviewers, who are experts in the field of rugby coaching and/or officiating, reviewed the interview guide to ensure its usability with collegiate rugby coaches. Additionally, once the data were analysed, an external peer reviewer with expertise in officiating research was utilized to challenge the assertions made by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and "assess whether the findings are plausible, based on the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250).

### **3.4.2. Member checking**

Since the study consisted of two interviews, we were able to utilize the second interview as an opportunity for respondents to validate or reject some of the initial findings. The second interview also allowed us to confirm much of the information that participants presented in our first interviews. Maxwell (2008) noted that, “this is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants say” (p. 244). Beyond the member checking utilized during the interview process, after the data had been transcribed, participants received a copy of their transcripts, which allowed them to review the collected data and note any inconsistencies.

### **3.4.3. Intercoder agreement**

The researchers and coders sought intercoder agreement among the codes that they assigned to specific passages throughout two interviews. Agreement of assigned codes was set at 80%, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The alignment in coding between the researchers and external coders did meet the 80% threshold. Despite this, there was inconsistency in coding, and thus, we evaluated the quality of the conflicting codes and ultimately refined and combined these codes in order to increase intercoder agreement. Once the codes had been clarified or merged, we recoded the interviews as necessary.

### **3.4.4. Clarifying researcher bias**

Understanding one’s position and biases from the outset can help the reader understand how “the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249). Two members of the research team had strong backgrounds with rugby in the United States, including previous administrative and coaching positions. The administrative positions included previous work in officiating, as well as, education and training.

Such coaching experience included Division I-A head coaching experience and an 18-year tenure as a collegiate coach. In addition to the researchers' backgrounds in rugby, another researcher has served as an athletic administrator for 14 years and a sport official for 20 years, and the other researcher has previous experience as an official and sport employee.

## **4. Results**

The findings resulting from the phenomenological methodology utilised in this study are an expression of the information and data articulated by the participants during the interview process. Verbatim quotes are utilised to express the experiences of the participants. The results are followed by a discussion that is framed through the lens of the researchers and corresponding literature.

### **4.1 Factors influencing coaches' perceptions of referee abuse**

Five themes describing the factors influencing the coaches' perceptions and, subsequently, their likelihood to engage in referee abuse, were determined. The coaches' perceptions of abuse were influenced by: (a) the personal characteristics/philosophy of the coach; (b) the coach's relationship with referees; (c) social influences; (d) organizational expectations; and (e) culture. Each theme is distinct yet related to the others as the factors influencing the coach do not exist independently.

#### **4.1.1 Personal characteristics and philosophy of the coach**

When considering what may influence a coach's perception of referee abuse, the coaches suggested that the phenomenon starts at the source. The coaches' innate characteristics, self-awareness, and accepted philosophies impacted their perceptions of referee abuse and their likelihood to engage in abuse behaviours. Hans explained, "If the coach is a hothead in real life, if he or she is a very reactionary person, that carries over into rugby, which carries over into all



aspects of someone's life." According to the coaches, stepping onto the pitch does not afford the coach the ability to disassociate from their personality traits. Eleven of the coaches reported that they believe ego had an impact on the coaches' propensity to engage in the abuse of referees. Sam suggested, "you deal with a lot of alpha males in sport, it's easy to make up for your shortcomings by looking at [those] of others. 99% of the time it's ego on both sides." In either instance, the personality trait of the individual was seen to influence a coaches' perception of referee abuse.

Despite individual innate personality traits, eight coaches believed that professional development and a growth mind-set could help coaches be more cognizant of abuse behaviours. For Dom it took a reflection to change their perception, "I just wasn't the best person that I could have been. Abusing the refs...you just come home when the dust has settled, and hindsight is 20/20, and you just know I shouldn't have done that." For many, the transition from player to coach was difficult; described as a time where they were forced to evaluate their own values and philosophies. This transition required coaches to pause and reflect upon the fact that they are no longer on the field and that their behaviour is influential to others. Sam explained, "one of the reasons I really started to temper it was because I would see videos of me yelling all game, whether it was abuse or not. That's all I was doing, how was I helping anything?" For many, it took a period of reflection to stop excusing and minimizing their own behaviours.

Both the innate personality of an individual and their willingness to reflect were characteristics coaches believed influenced their propensity to engage in referee abuse. Further, for 13 of the coaches, their coaching philosophy served as a defining factor, which influenced their actions and perceptions. Eight interviewed coaches suggested a coaching philosophy focused on outcome, or wins, led them to be more aggressive with the referee.

When I focused on outcome, I was a much angrier person and the frustration trickled into what we talked about before-the fairness of calls...When I started to focus and I was enlightened to the way of my athletes' performance is first and foremost, and my performance as a coach is first and foremost, and that if I get that piece right, if I get my performance right, my players get their performance right, then winning is an outcome of good performance. Then I never worried about winning and all I did was focus on my players, that's when I changed. (Pat)

Overall, the participants reported that a philosophy focus on performance rather than outcome decreased the likelihood that a coach would abuse a referee. Further, a philosophy founded on respect also would further reduce the likelihood of referee abuse. Coaches who were constantly discussing respect for all participants in the game, referees included, required themselves to be held to a high standard. Dakota noted, "And we have a similar zero tolerance policy internally for anything that just might not fit in terms of being a good human being, and referee abuse obviously doesn't fit in that." Dakota's coaching philosophy, like those of the majority of coaches interviewed, suggested that all participants in the game of rugby should be respected. Dakota highlighted that abuse amongst teammates would be considered unacceptable, as would coach abuse of players, thus the same expectation holds true regarding referees' behaviour.

#### **4.1.2 Relationships with referees**

The participants noted that having a strong relationship with referees humanized the individual and served as a deterrent from abuse behaviours. Few coaches claimed to have strong relationships with the referees officiating their competition, but all of the coaches noted that relationships with referees affected the way they engaged with that individual. "Same way you would see benefits from building a relationship between your players and your coach...the more

you know someone the less likely you are to engage in abuse, to be perfectly honest,” said Charlie. Hans went on to explain that a personal friendship with referees would be prioritized over a call in the game, “I know so many people and I know the referees personally, I’m not going to risk that personal friendship by yelling about a knock on.” Rowan expressed similar thoughts, when recalling the advice that one of his friends (a referee) had given him,

. . . Their advice has always been how about you try to figure out something about [the referee] away from the game. I think once you get to realize that they do it for enjoyment just like you, you know maybe they didn’t want to be a coach. Maybe they didn’t want to be a player, or maybe this was what they decided was their way to contribute to the game. Once coaches understand that more, I think we start to look at the rest differently and see them as sort of the critical part of game day....

Getting to know the referee on a personal level increased the perceived value of the referee overall. Coaches explained that they would be less likely to abuse a referee that they saw as a friend and valued as part of the game. Rowan posited: “. . . it comes down to relationships. Once everyone realizes that we’re all human beings, nobody is out here to screw anybody over, it humanizes the situation and it’s a lot harder to have that negative undertone and tension.”

While there was consensus that relationships between the referees and coaches created positive outcomes, coaches noted that there were limited opportunities for relationship building.

#### **4.1.3 Social influencers**

Twelve of the coaches considered themselves to be influential figures within the rugby sphere, noting their responsibility as a role model for their players and programs. These coaches believed that it was their responsibility to exert a positive social influence on their players, colleagues, and fans. Jordan explained, “It’s the coach’s responsibility 100%. If the coach says

I'm going to yell, "rah, rah," players will follow suit, 100%." With such influence over their player's behaviours, coaches believed that they are accountable for any referee abuse. Sam noted it ". . . comes from the coach. Everything in our sport starts with the coach. The fans feed off the coaches, the players feed off the coaches, the coach can stop the players, the coach can stop the fans." The coaches also described that referee abuse in rugby could be traced back to the views and behaviours of coaches. Amari explained, "I always think how your players act is a reflection on you as a coach. So, when I've had some of my players and people in the stands shouting abuse at a referee, I consider that reflective of me."

Because player behaviour tended to reflect the actions modelled by the coach, the coaches felt increasingly obligated to mitigate their own abuse behaviours. The coaches' perceptions of abuse or likelihood to abuse a referee were influenced by their player's likelihood to imitate their actions. Reese described, ". . . they kind of are looking for guidance and example setting, so if a coach is abusing a referee it's obviously giving the impression that it's ok to do so to your players [and] to the other coaches across from you." As Reese explained, the behaviour of a coach can have a domino effect, in that it could signal that referee abuse is appropriate, acceptable, and tolerable.

#### **4.1.4 Organizational expectations**

Fourteen of the 15 coaches also noted that expectations created by their organization or institutions influenced their abuse behaviours and perceptions. The stature of the Division I-A rugby competition created certain expectations of quality for the competition, including positional expectations for the referee. The coaches noted that the majority of the referees were not prepared to officiate such high-calibre matches. Thus, the coaches' expectation of the referee to provide a safe and fair playing environment—was often left unfulfilled. Dakota noted,

I would say safety is probably the number one thing, things like high tackles or dangerous plays. Sometimes in my experience it can also be about fairness. The referee's not calling or is calling the game seemingly one sided or the referee seems to be not qualified enough to referee the level of this match.

When the referee was perceived to be unfair, the determined disparity led to coach frustration and oftentimes was a precursor to abuse. Amari suggested "that biased and inconsistent refereeing is always going to be a cause for referee abuse." Fourteen of the coaches recalled occasions where referee abuse had resulted from unfulfilled expectations and perceptions of injustice. Hans explained, "I think maybe the number one reason why someone assaults a referee is that the referee makes a bad call or maybe makes a call that they feel is bad if it's a close call and it just drives people over the edge." The coaches' expectation for referee fairness during competition, and within the USA Rugby sporting structure, was a factor that influenced their perceptions of referee abuse and likelihood to engage in abusive behaviours.

At times, the expectations of fairness were further muddied by the inclusion of the issues surrounding safety. Twelve coaches commented that it was paramount that referees not only officiate a match fairly and consistently, but that they also protected the players. Whit recounted,

I think the safety issue, I will never fault a coach especially if there's video evidence... if they berate, verbalize, and abuse a referee if it protects those players. Especially if there's actual evidence to prove what the guy was doing was wrong and dangerous.

In this instance, the perception of injustice resulted from a safety concern that was deemed to have gone unpunished. Hans explained, "safety is, like, above and beyond everything else. I think safety is always on everyone's mind."

Safety was one of the few factor where coaches collectively began to reconsider their zero-tolerance stance regarding referee abuse. Typically, the coaches' concern for their players' safety overshadowed the concern for the referee's well-being. Rowan noted,

I will in no way shape or form try to deny that I will criticise a ref if I see that they are incapable of keeping players safe. My opinion is that the referee's number one job is not to give penalties and all that sort of stuff, it is to ensure that 46 players remain safe.

The coaches agreed that their expectation for maintaining a safe playing environment was the referee's primary charge. When it was perceived that referees did not fulfil safety or fairness role expectations, coaches reported they were more likely to condone or engage in abusive behaviours.

#### **4.1.5 Culture**

All 15 coaches described culture as a major contributing factor to referee abuse. Culture was referenced in regard to the *Rugby Culture*, the *American Sporting Culture*, and the *Soccer Culture*. Each of these cultural derivatives were believed to influence referee abuse. When discussing *Rugby Culture*, sometimes referred to as *International Rugby Culture*, there was consensus that the sported prioritized the core values [integrity, passion, solidarity, discipline, and respect (World Rugby, 2014)], and was perceived to be a "gentleman's game," when compared to other sports. Maxie explained: "Rugby all around the world is known, for setting the tone about respect. We're also the only sport in the world that treats the referee with so much respect." Twelve of the fifteen coaches noted that respect was a primary *Rugby Culture* value, "... respect for their opponents, respect for the game, respect for themselves, certainly respect for the referee. I think that is probably one of the critical principles in rugby is that respect and sportsmanship that we show to everyone involved," Jess noted. The value of respect epitomized

the coaches' perceptions of *Rugby Culture* and operationalized the meaning of gentleman in a "gentleman's game." One's shared understanding of *Rugby Culture* created a standard of behaviour that was said to permeate behavioural expectations. Even when the coach or player interpreted a situation differently than a referee, *Rugby Culture* holds that the referee is still to be respected.

*Rugby Culture* was also understood through its comparison with other sporting cultures as Amari posited, "So, in Britain, we take pride and we separate ourselves from the soccer culture, the rugby culture is much, much different. You see soccer players harassing referees, hurrying referees on the field, you'd never see that out of a rugby player." The respect shown to all rugby participants was what the coaches seemed to believe differentiated *Rugby Culture* from the culture of other sports. Coaches made it explicitly clear that they did not want the rugby culture to become like the soccer culture.

I think we just have to be very careful about it because traditionally we've been one of those sports where you know you have the 6'5" guy looking down at the ref saying: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Sorry, sir. And that's kind of what we don't want to get away from.

(Rowan)

While rugby was believed to set a high standard in terms of respecting all aspects of the game, soccer was seen to personify the expectation of negative and abusive behaviours against the referee. The stark contrast between the two international sporting cultures underscores the influence of culture on a coaches' underpinning related to referee abuse.

Beyond the comparison to soccer, many of the rugby coaches also noted the perceived differences between *Rugby Culture* and the *American Sporting Culture*, which consisted of other major American sports. Hans posited, "I think when you have people that are abusing referees you send the wrong message...that we're like any other American sport where...parents and

players everybody yells at the referee and no matter what happens the referee is wrong.” The juxtaposition between rugby culture and other American sporting cultures exemplified the way in which sporting cultures impact a coaches’ perception of referee abuse. In other sports, “they don’t have the culture rugby brings, they have the culture of American sports where the man goes out and kicks dust on the plate in baseball the coaches can yell any profanity at the referee, basketball players and coaches yell at the referees in all of our major sports,” said Sam. The coaches perceived rugby in the U.S. to be unique from the majority of other American sports.

The coaches also described the challenges athletes faced when moving from other American sports to rugby. Logan explained that new participants, “bring with them both the talent and the skills the love of sport that’s coming with them from other sports but they’re also bringing the baggage that goes along with it—demonizing opposition, abusing referees and those type things...” Most coaches felt that an exposure to *Rugby Culture* would, ultimately, serve as a deterrent to referee abuse. However, as the sport continues to grow, and new participants enter the game, the possibility of the degradation of *Rugby Culture* was perceived as an unwanted reality. Hans explained, “...we want to grow the sport, but what we kind of realize is that when we grow the sport and we take out athletes from other sports is we adopt those customs.” Sam mirrored Hans’ belief noting, “The win and the loss wasn’t always the barometer or the measuring stick. Sometimes it’s how the game is played and respected and sometimes that goes out the window when we Americanise it.” New participants facilitate the Americanisation of rugby, ultimately influencing *Rugby Culture*. As such, coaches highlighted the importance of teaching and retaining the culture’s core values. From the data, it was apparent that all fifteen coaches considered culture, inclusive of *Rugby Culture*, *American Sporting Culture*, *Soccer Culture*, to be incredibly influential on referee abuse behaviours and perceptions.



## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Factors influencing referee abuse**

Previous scholars of referee abuse have described abuses as the result of over-valuing sport in small communities (Friman, Nyberg, & Norlander, 2004), lack of rules knowledge (Neave & Wolfson, 2003), and frustration over referee decisions and mistakes (e.g., Friman et al., 2004; Simmons, 2006). When considering other types of abuse within sport, other scholars focused on risk factors or vulnerabilities of the victim and noted that there is no single risk factor that serves as the catalyst (e.g., Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Utilising coaches, we viewed referee abuse from the perspective of the perpetrator, rather than that of the victim. Thus, we extend the literature by adding a myriad of factors that may influence referee abuse perceptions and behaviours. The interviewees in this study identified these five factors which impacted their engagement in and perceptions of other coaches' engagement in referee abuses: (a) personal characteristics/philosophies, (b) relationships, (c) social influences, (d) organizational expectations, and (e) culture.

#### **5.1.1 Personal characteristics and philosophies**

Brackenridge (1997) noted that child maltreatment behaviours were collectively influenced by the perpetrator's personality and contextual dimensions. Consistent with Brackenridge's findings, the coaches interviewed described how personality influences one's actions related to referee abuse. Ego was also related to one's referee abuse perceptions. As the coaches prioritized themselves within the sporting structure, they subsequently devalued the referee. Placing themselves in a position of power seemed to provide credence to egotistical coaches who engaged in referee abuses.

Previous studies also suggested that a coach's philosophy was instrumental in influencing both their behaviours and those of their players (e.g., Martens, Dams-O'Connor, & Beck, 2006; Mastroleo, Marzell, Turrisi, & Borsari, 2012). Coaches in this study reported that those who valued player development over winning were less likely to engage in abuse behaviours. This finding aligns with previous research that reported those solely focused on winning could cause one to set aside moral behaviours (Woods, 2007) and to perceive that cheating and intentionally injurious acts are acceptable (Duda, Olson, & Templin, 1991). While a coaching philosophy focusing exclusively on winning may be attributed to referee abuse behaviours, one emphasizing athlete performance and enjoyment was believed to potential reduce said behaviours.

### **5.1.2 Relationships**

According to the coaches interviewed, strong relationships with the referee were seen as potential opportunities to reduce abuse behaviours. Such relationships foster the semblance of groups, whereby relationships formulate the basis for similarity and thus group formation (Pratt, 1998; Tajfel, 1978). Interestingly, participants acknowledged the presence of distinct groups (i.e., referees and teams), but believed that developing a rapport with the referees, which would highlight shared values and interests (e.g., the sport of rugby) and consequently reduce conflict. In effect, the palpable distinction between referees and coaches served as a barrier between groups (Jackson, 2002); however, it seems that there is potential for coaches and referees to recognise their similarities in order to develop a shared social identity based on sport (Pratt, 1998; Tajfel, 1978). Such a social identity has been previously hypothesized and validated in the sport setting (Oja, Bass, & Gordon, 2015, in press). In turn, this social identity, would form an in-group amongst coaches and referees (Tajfel, 1978). According to the coaches in this study, when a relationship between referees and coaches was adequately nurtured, they were believed

to help coaches see the referee as a valuable sporting participant, and an in-group member thereby weakening the likelihood of conflict (Ashmore et al., 2004).

### **5.1.3 Social influencers**

Other social influences also played a role in one's perception of referee abuse. The coaches consistently emphasized that being a role model for their players reduced their likelihood abuse referees. Coaches have been viewed as role models (Kassing & Barber, 2007; Raakman, Dorsch, & Rhind, 2010), which results in their every action being watched, and in many cases imitated by players (Arthur-Banning, Wells, Baker, & Hegreiness, 2009; Husman & Silva, 1984). The coaches suggested that while certain characteristics and philosophies may predispose an individual to referee abuse, it was primarily a learned behaviour (Bandura, 1973). The coaches noted it was their responsibility to deter abuse behaviours in their players and suggested those who did not do so created an abuse-tolerant environment. The coaches supported this notion, expressing that a single individual engaging in referee abuse could lead to a domino effect or a mob mentality.

Coaches also reported being cognizant that their own sideline behaviours resulted in their players' imitation. In an effort to reduce their players' abuse behaviours, the coaches reported that in most cases, they looked to mitigate their own participation in referee abuse. As such, the coaches indicated social influence can and does impact perceptions of referee abuse either positively or negatively, both for themselves and other stakeholders.

### **5.1.4 Organizational expectations**

The coaches reported organizational expectations impacted their abuse perceptions and therefore behaviours. Previous literature addressed numerous role expectations for the referee, including impartiality (Weinberg & Richardson, 1990), the maintenance of a safe sporting

environment through rule enforcement (Cuskelly et al., 2004), and the promotion of safe play (Fields, Collins, & Comstock, 2007). The controversy created by the referee role has “been the source of aggravation between officials and players, coaches and spectators and, in doing so, has highlighted the vulnerability of the referee’s position” (Cleland, O’Gorman, & Bond, 2015, p. 552). Similarly, the coaches in this study indicated that USA Rugby created role expectations for the referee—to be fair and maintain a safe playing environment—when these expectations were unmet, the coaches self-justified that coaches are more likely to perceive referee abuse as acceptable and engage in abuse practices.

When coaches perceived that the rules are not applied fairly, they are more likely to become aggressive (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). In this way, the coach is holding the referee accountable for perceived unfair treatment (Greenberg & Cropanzano, 2001), which according to the participants, may be exacerbated by the in-group versus out-group dynamics. The findings in this study support previous literature that perceptions of fairness influenced referee abuse.

Though previous literature has addressed safety as one of the positional requirements of the referee, it has not been specifically addressed as a factor that influences referee abuse. In rugby the official’s role in ensuring safety may go beyond simple adherence to regulations. Failure to protect the players was seen to influence the coaches’ perceptions of and likelihood to engage in abuse behaviours and that safety concerns were one reason when referee abuse would be warranted. Though there has been little research regarding the relationship of safety to referee abuse, this was a salient finding, as the coaches perceived both safety and fairness to be factors with considerable influence on referee abuse behaviours.

### **5.1.5 Culture**

Culture was the final factor that the Division I-A (DI-A) coaches noted to be instrumental in one's perceptions and actions related to referee abuse. Culture was described as the pattern of values, traits, or behaviours shared by the people in a region (Hofstede, 1980). The coaches noted three distinct, yet interrelated, sporting cultures. They highlighted the *American Sporting Culture (ASC)*, the *International Rugby Culture*—sometimes referred to as *Rugby Culture (RC)*, and the *Soccer Culture (SC)*. The ASC was suggested to emphasize winning and normalized abuse behaviours against the referee. Similarly, Fields and colleagues (2007) suggested that sporting culture in American promotes a *win-at-all-costs* environment that normalizes violence and abuse. The rugby coaches suggested that American sporting norms influenced abuse perceptions, especially for those transitioning into rugby from other American sports (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). As such, they were more likely to engage in referee abuse and to perceive referee abuse as acceptable.

Similar to the *American Sporting Culture*, the coaches suggested that SC tolerated and even promoted referee abuse. In many instances the coaches noted that soccer players were tacitly permitted to verbally abuse referees when questionable calls were made. For coaches in this study, *Rugby Culture* was considered the antithesis of SC. Those who embodied the ideals of soccer culture would perceive referee abuse to be acceptable and would be likely to engage in abuse behaviours against a referee. Similarly, the coaches felt that the RC was distinct from both the ASC and SC. Unlike the ASC where referee abuses were tolerated and, in some instances, praised, RC was seen as a game still governed by core values, including integrity, passion, solidarity, discipline, and respect (World Rugby, 2014). The participants suggested *Rugby Culture* was an ode to moral welfare (Hughes, 1895) and that the game was a gentleman's sport founded on respect. These notions were underscored by the coaches who suggested that respect

was a key value that should be upheld and extended to all participants. As such, they perceived referee abuse as a poor reflection of the sport. In this way, the coaches perceived that *ASC* negatively impacted perceptions of referee abuse, while *RC* had a positive impact.

Despite the distinctiveness of these five factors, it appears the factors may also influence one another. For example, according to the coaches interviewed in this study, having grown up within *Rugby Culture* or the *American Sporting Culture* was likely to inversely influence one's personal philosophies. As such, these factors can be understood both individually and collectively as influencers of referee abuse. Further, variations of each factor have the potential to influence referee abuse in myriad ways. As discussed, one's adherence to the social norms of *American Sporting Culture* may lead to the acceptance of and participation in referee abuse, while those immersed in *Rugby Culture* may find referee abuse to be abhorrent. Thus, the influence of the factor on referee abuse is clear, though the outcome of the influence may be variable.

### **5.3 Practical implications**

There are a number of practical implications that can be derived from the study's findings. First, the relationships built between referees and coaches are notably influential. As the coaches mentioned, providing additional opportunities for referees and coaches to interact could be instrumental in curbing referee abuse. Such opportunities may include the re-introduction of after-match functions in areas where these traditions are increasingly diminished, which provides an informal setting in which coaches, referees, and players can develop important relationships, has traditionally been a strong underlying aspect of *Rugby Culture*.

Channelling the underlying parameters of the reported *Rugby Culture*, provided stakeholders with an avenue in which referee abuse can be addressed. The traditional

socialization process of athletes and coaches alike, affords institutions and organizations an opportunity to infuse the positive aspect of *Rugby Culture* and move to eliminate those aspects of the culture deemed inappropriate. Coach certification and coach professional development could be used to further inform, socialize and further influence pedagogical and coaching practices with regards to referee abuse.

#### **5.4 Limitations and future research**

Because this phenomenological study sought to represent the meanings and lived experiences of the coaches, the data collected were self-reported. Though there is the potential for both selective memory and social desirability to impact a participant's self-reported data, the researchers completed two interviews with each participant in order to create an open and honest environment. During the interviews many of the coaches discussed their own participation in referee abuse and reported their own negative behaviours. Such responses indicate social desirability and selective memory had a limited influence on the outcomes. However, future researchers should seek to consider observed behaviours in addition to self-reported behaviours, triangulating these observations in order to enhance the impact of the study.

Future research may also consider other sporting stakeholders, such as players, administrators, and referees themselves. Alignment between various stakeholder groups around the issue of abuse and its antecedents would help to enhance its trustworthiness of these findings as they relate to perceptions and potential solutions to referee abuse. The value of understanding referee abuse in various contexts and through the lens of a myriad of stakeholders should not be overlooked. Further, gender may impact a coach's perception of referee abuse. In this study, there was only one female coach. As such, there were not enough data to explore gendered perceptions of abusive behaviours. When it comes to institutional abuse, women are more

commonly exposed to such behaviours and this may impact the way that they understand referee abuse (Tingle et al., 2014). Finally, the positioning of referee abuse within the psychiatric literature may prove valuable in extending the reach of such research. The researchers suggest the consideration of the ecological transactional models of abuse (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Stirling & Kerr, 2014) as a means to continue the exploration of factors that underlie referee abuse.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The current study expands the literature on referee abuse. First, the findings addressed the need for exploring referee abuse through the lens of non-referees; specifically, from the view of those who have perpetrated and witnessed the abuse. Referees alone are unable to create a holistic picture of the phenomena of referee abuse, thus this study provides an opportunity to view referee abuse, through a non-traditional lens. Considering referee abuse from the perspective of the coach allows for investigation of the perpetrator's mentality, which ultimately opens up as of yet unstudied avenues for exploring, understanding, and preventing abusive behaviours. The coaches in this study have identified five factors: (a) *personal characteristics/philosophies*, (b) *relationships*, (c) *social influences*, (d) *organizational expectations*, and (e) *culture* affect one's propensity towards referee abuse. Uncovering factors that underlie abuse is imperative to the development of a framework to guide sport managers in combating abuse.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that referee abuse is pervasive. Both the coaches in this study and referees in previous studies (e.g., Dell et al., 2016; Rayner et al., 2016; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2018) concur that referee abuse exists and should be minimized. As we recommend, considering interventions from interpersonal to



cultural levels may be effective in curbing abuse behaviours more holistically. With a stronger understanding of the coaches' perspective regarding referee abuse, sport administrators and scholars can curtail referee abuse with the use of concepts such as group membership and various sporting cultures.

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