

# **A Consideration of the Factors Influencing Soccer Referees` Judgment? An Overview**

**Peirooz SayfollahPour**

M.Sc Candidate, Sport Management, Islamic Azad University-South Branch, Tehran, Iran

## **Abstract**

The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding the factors affecting referees` judgment quality in sporting fields specially soccer. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration. Of course, there were few empirical studies found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out overseas. Overall, it was found there were many psychological, physiological and personal factors influencing referees` performance. Finally, it is suggested academicians and practitioners seize the opportunity to study the subject thoroughly.

**Key words:** Referee, Soccer, Judgment

## **Introduction**

Every game has laws under which it is played and soccer is no exception. There are rules set out by the Technical Committee of the game to be administered and adhered to by all participants. The interpretation of the laws of the game requires technical people who have undergone training programs over a period of time and have become well versed in it. From the origins of the game it is realised that the rules are made to govern the fast changing attitude of man. It was a spontaneous need, as players and officials developed and respected their own rules.

Refereeing a game of soccer has become a herculean task that only strong personalities can hope to cope with the enormous pressure that comes with being a referee. Referees are usually charged with the interpretation of the laws of the game in a fair and firm manner, and to regulate the play behavior of soccer participants. They watch the play for every second and bring the knowledge of the laws of the game to bear on the pattern of play of the teams.

The large number of the soccer referee decisions during a match, about three or four decisions each minute, is quite striking (Helsen & Bultying, 2004). A lot of elements such as a team`s reputation for aggressiveness (Jones, Paull, & Erskine, 2002), crowd noise, experience and anxiety (Balmer et al., 2007), a preceding foul judgment (Plessner & Betsch, 2001), the haughtiness of the players involved in a foul (Quaquebeke & VanGiessner, 2010), individual differences in referee ability to cope under pressure (Page & Page, 2010), and social pressure and nationality (Dawson & Dobson, 2010) act upon soccer referee decision-making. Using a qualitative method, Lane, Nevill, Ahamad and Balmer (2006) identified four categories of themes influencing soccer referee decision-making: ideal decision-making (accuracy –error, regulations, and professionalism), individual factors (opinion, concentration, and control),

experience factors (experience, personality, personal life) and situational factors (crowd interaction, environmental factors, player reaction, crowd factors). These authors proposed that a quantitative method could be used to test the impact of these themes on referee decision-making. Apart from these researchers, no one else looked into the impact of observers on referee decision-making during a match.

However, referee decision-making can have an effect on the course of a game and on sports actors' behaviour. Indeed, some decisions can inflame a match, get supporter or coach exited or lead players to behave in such a way that their misconduct cannot be made up for. Otherwise, referees can also calm down various social tensions and diminish excessive behaviour (Friman, Nyberg, & Norlander, 2004). No thought was given to the positive or negative outcome of such decision-making since, in principle, it was only used to regulate players' acts. And yet, sometimes, referees went too far with that type of decision-making.

### **Theoretical background**

The study of judgment and decision making (JDM) can be traced back to the late 1940s, evidenced by three major, quite independent approaches: decision- and game-theoretical, psychological, and social-psychological/sociological. Since then, JDM has been studied by researchers from many disciplines, who are especially attuned to the distinctive, yet interrelated facets of the normative and descriptive characterizations of JDM processes (Over, 2004). Judgments within the JDM tradition have been defined as "a set of evaluative and inferential processes that people have at their disposal and can draw on in the process of making decisions" (Koehler & Harvey, 2004, preface xv). Often, however, these judgments should be separated from the consequences of the decision itself, whereas for decision-making processes the consequences are crucial. The main focus of decision-making research lies in the understanding of choices between a set of options. The broad distinction between judgments and decision-making will be used to map the articles presented in this volume.

Normative theories (for a review, see Baron, 2004) are based on postulates that enable one's optimal maximization of gain and minimization of loss, and are concerned with prescribing human JDM behavior. However, since the introduction of the "bounded rationality" concept by Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon (1955), the area of JDM has been heavily "psychologized," turning its major focus to more descriptive characterizations of how real people actually behave.

Following the seminal work by Meehl (1954) on the differences between clinical and statistical prediction, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that human JDM behavior departs substantially from normative prescriptions. Consequently, the JDM psychology has focused on the gaps between the ideal (i.e., normative) and real (i.e., descriptive) facets of JDM, in an attempt to understand their causes. Currently, JDM is conceived to a large degree in terms of human information processing and is mostly regarded as part of cognitive and social psychology (as is evident from the different approaches to JDM included in Koehler and Harvey (2004).

## **Decision-making in sports environments**

The domain of sports offers an excellent opportunity for the study of decision-making, for a number of reasons. Within the topical scope of sports decision-making, there are a number of different decision agents (coaches, players, etc.), tasks (play-calling, ball allocation, etc.), and contexts (during play, during timeout, etc.). This provides the chance to examine a variety of interesting designs. Yet, each combination of the above factors produces a unique interaction of additional time.

The key feature of sports decisions is that they are naturalistic, meaning here that they are made by agents with some degree of task familiarity, in the environment with which they naturally encounter the decision (cf. Orasanu & Connolly, 1993). The difference between the study of decision-making in the laboratory and the “real world” is an important distinction that has only recently been appreciated in decision research. Contrast three decision scenarios facing a forward in soccer: selecting the recipient of a pass in a real soccer match; selecting the recipient of a pass in a computer simulation of soccer; and selecting from among a set of gambles. Obviously, if we are interested in how this agent actually makes decisions, then those she normally faces should provide the most valid evidence. In situations where the experimenter attempts to recreate the natural environment, there is the danger of incorrectly specifying the underlying structure (e.g., programming computer players different from the way real players behave). If the experiment uses a different domain altogether, even if the underlying abstract structure is the same, performance often does not transfer to the new domain (e.g., Ceci & Ruiz, 1993; Raab, 2005; see Goldstein & Weber, 1997, for criticisms of the gambling domain as a general “metaphor” of decision-making).

Second, the majority of sports decisions are dynamic. Decisions in sports, as well as in many other domains, unfold over time. The influence of this dynamic aspect is (at least) twofold. There are internal dynamics, meaning there is not so much a single point of decision as there is a course of deliberation. Information is not instantaneously gathered and processed; rather a decision maker must accrue information over time, and subsequent processing of this information takes.

The present study answers the following question:

What are factors affecting referees` judgment in soccer?

## **Methodology**

The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding the factors affecting referees` judgment quality in sporting fields specially soccer. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration. Of course, there were few empirical studies found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out both in Iran and overseas.

## **Findings**

### **Social perspective**

Referees are often subject to reproaches and vulnerable to many stresses such as maltreatment, spectator affronts, and lack of appropriate financial support by the officials . Since there is positive relationship between referees' job stresses and their health conditions and mental disorders , the referees who suffer from stress and burnout are emotionally exhausted, bear low morals and have inadequate mental health . Considering the fact that referees, particularly soccer referees, should continuously deal with media critiques, nervous coaches, aggressive spectators, discontent players and breathtaking pressures of a right or wrong decision, they may become vulnerable to anxiety, stress and burnout unless they can efficiently cope with these pressures.

According to Fahey et al (2003), refereeing can be likened to what is now known as worksite fitness and wellness. These are programs instituted at work places to augment the physical fitness level of management and employees. They reported that these programs have become common in the past decade and a half, for instance, by 1992, 83% of companies with more than 750 employees had such programs in the United States of America (USA). Companies develop and sustain worksite fitness and wellness programs because such programs; reduce healthcare, increase productivity of employees, and reduce absenteeism.

### **Physiological perspective**

Recent studies (Casajus & Castagna, 2006; Westerkerp & Meijer, 2001) postulate that the physiological changes that accompany advancing age result in declines in both aerobic and anaerobic performance, with speed and power most affected. On this premise Ndovi (2009) attributes the failure of some referees in the Cooper Test to the fact that their fitness is not specific, but general. He said the dreaded Cooper Test actually measures stamina, agility, speed, endurance, balance, reflexes, coordination and flexibility; attributes that are essential for a referee's maximum performance during a match. Unfortunately, Ndovi continued, referees lack the guidance and will power that can drive them to raise their fitness. They only train when there is an announcement that the Referees' Associations will conduct the fitness test. This invariably affects the aged ones. Ndovi contended, the fitness test is designed in such a way that anyone above 45 years, the retiring age for the profession, does it at his own risk, "you can cheat CAF and FIFA about your age but you cannot cheat the new fitness test if you are above 45. Studies (Castagna et al., 2005; Golant et al., 2008; Weston et al., 2008) on the age-related effects on physical fitness levels in elite-level soccer referees, stressed that referees assume the peak of their officiating careers at an averagely older age than competitively matched soccer players. An age bracket of 10-15 years was identified. They did not observe any group effect for the 12min performance whereas speed and acceleration tests were significantly better in younger referees. The authors advised younger officials to ensure that they develop appropriate levels of aerobic and anaerobic fitness to be able to match the demands placed upon them while refereeing throughout their careers. They further

recommended that to promote this, physical fitness test standards should be age-related. Weston et al (2008) examined the effects of age on the physical match performance and match physiological load of 22 professional elite-level soccer referees aged 31-48 over four consecutive seasons and found no age effect for distances from the ball, and average distance from fouls comparing younger referees to older ones, but indicated significant average age effects for total distances covered, the YYIRT and the short sprint. The authors concluded that the reduced physical match performances associated with increasing referee age did not appear to impact upon the older referees' ability to keep up with play. They, therefore, admonished refereeing bodies to review their age-based retirement guidelines. Referees are subjected to proportionality increase in physical demands as the years go by. Indeed their peak performance, according to Castagna, Abt & D'Ottavio (2007), Golant et al (2008), and Weston et al (2008), is usually between 30 and 45 years of age after which cardiovascular athletic performance starts to decline. During a soccer match the cardio-circulatory system of the referee is severely tasked, since research indicate that the referee does more running than the players (Golant et al., 2008). This places a lot of strain on the referee in the quest to exhibit huge levels of physical fitness. Referees need to be alert and near the scene of action, and their level of fitness must be such that fatigue will not impair their decision-making. This is corroborated by Golant et al (2008) who opined that referees are subjected to a proportionate level of physical activity as demanded by the variability of motion activities and exhaustion when officiating matches. This has serious implications for the efficient consumption, utilization and processing of oxygen in the organs of the body, and the adequate physical activity demands imposed on the older referee, since in the words of Venkateswarlu (2009), "as we age, we lose muscle mass, flexibility, and bone mass, and aerobic capacity declines. Loss of muscle mass results in a decrease in body weight, while the percentage of body fat increases".

### **Psychological perspective**

The referees' concentration and alertness is built when he or she is able to apply psychology and also manage stress effectively. Weinberg & Gould (1999) defined sport (and exercise) psychology as the scientific study of people and their behaviour to sport (and exercise activities) and the practical application of that knowledge. In the words of Salokum & Ogungbenro (2006), it is "a construct relating to the application of the scientific principles and practices of psychology to predispose, precipitate and perpetuate favorable corresponding psychomotor responses to both the internal and external stimuli associated with sport situations" (p. 30). Psychology which in simple terms is the study of behavior and mental processes seeks to read meaning into the actions of people. Behavior can be an observed movement or speech and mental processes are in the form of abstract thoughts, memories, and emotions.

It must be stressed that apart from physiological (strength, fitness) and biomechanical (technique) factors, psychological factors also play a crucial role in determining performance (Graham & Hardy, 1990). A large proportion of athletes fail to perform to potential because they are unable to maintain their concentration in the face of distractions. This is a problem for all serious sports performers and officials, no matter their ability level. For example, it is suggested by Graham & Hardy (when they cited Patmore, 1986) that, golf is at least 90%

psychological. The authors calculated that a golfer takes at least 16 hours to complete the 72 holes. The actual time used in swinging and striking the ball during these 72 holes is approximately 7 mins and 30secs, leaving 15 hours, 52 mins and 30 secs (99.2%) of thinking time. This clearly is ample time for even the most skilled performers to distract themselves. One of the major concerns of many sports performers and officials striving for peak performance is to reach a psychological state which will facilitate that level of performance.

Psychology of refereeing refers to the action of the referee after he has read players mind and behaviour before, during, and after a match. That is, the response the referee dissipates as a consequence of the actions exhibited by the players. It also relates to the influences on the referee himself to behave in a particular manner in conformity with the laws of the game during a match. The following factors, however, to a large extent affect the referee's psychology;

1. Knowledge of the laws of the game and its appropriate application
2. The size of the spectators; overwhelmingly large
  
1. The composition of the spectators; GFA members, referees committee members, other referees, females, and so on
2. The distance of the crowd from the referee
3. The attitude of the crowd
4. Influence of the home crowd
5. The experience of the referee; years of refereeing, age in relation to the players, exposure
6. The health condition of the referee (Agbovi, 2007).

### **Spectator perspective**

The prevention and management of aggression is a concern in many professions and civil settings where decisions are made and communicated. The perception of justice has been linked to lower levels of student aggression and hostility in a study of US college classes. In particular, student perceptions of procedural justice (belief that the evaluation process was fair) were found to be more important than distributive justice (the outcome or teacher decision) (Chory-Assad and Palsel 2004). If this notion is applied to the football context, players will be more accepting of decisions against their team if they perceive that the decision is made in accordance with the rules and that the rules are being consistently applied. Referees might enhance perceptions of fairness if they communicate links between their decisions and the rules, and to other incidents and decisions in the game.

Referees routinely experience dissent and abuse and other forms of aggression at all levels of match. They experience hostile reactions to their decisions and aggressive attempts to influence them from players, coaches, parents and spectators. Abuse of sports officials is widely understood to be the main reason for a decline in the number of sports officials in Australia (ASC, 2004) and other countries. In 2003/4 the Australian Sports Commission funded a national public education campaign to discourage abuse of officials (ASC, 2004).

Many of the research that focused on referees and pressure or aggression have been done by psychologists using various forms of self-report by experienced referees. Studies have identified individual referee differences in perceptions of (Friman et al, 2004) and response to (Folkesson

et al, 2002) aggression and abuse, and high levels of self-confidence among experienced referees that help them to externalize and cope with abuse (Neave and Wolfson, 2003). Explanations advanced for the abuse of officials include lack of respect for authority figures, young people imitating professional sport role models (NASO, 2002), spectators acting-out their feelings and frustrations (in Friman et al, 2004), and excessive importance of sport to the identity of small communities (in Friman et al, 2004; NASO, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the present study was to review the literature regarding the factors affecting referees` judgment quality in sporting fields specially soccer. The study was of non-empirical and descriptive one taking archival materials and first and second hand information into consideration. Of course, there were few empirical studies found in Iran. Hence, we reviewed non-empirical and empirical studies carried out overseas. Overall, it was found there were many psychological, physiological and personal factors influencing referees` performance. The large number of the soccer referee decisions during a match, about three or four decisions each minute, is quite striking (Helsen & Bultying, 2004). A lot of elements such as a team`s reputation for aggressiveness (Jones, Paull, & Erskine, 2002), crowd noise, experience and anxiety (Balmer et al., 2007), a preceding foul judgment (Plessner & Betsch,2001), the haughtiness of the players involved in a foul (Quaquebeke & VanGiessner, 2010), individual differences in referee ability to cope under pressure (Page & Page, 2010), and social pressure and nationality (Dawson& Dobson, 2010) act upon soccer referee decision-making.

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P., Simmons. Tackling Abuse of Officials: Attitudes and Communication Skills of Experienced Football Referees. School of Communication, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW, Australia  
[.psimmons@csu.edu.au](mailto:psimmons@csu.edu.au)