

# Communications in Kinesiology

## Case Study



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## Why Would You Referee? An {Auto}ethnographic Account of a Football Official

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Adopting a creative yet novel autoethnographic approach, this study explores the experiences of the first author, a newly qualified footballing official. In doing so, the study provides a first person account to showcase the realities of refereeing whereby adding to a small pool of refereeing literature in the process. In providing an evocative account with a theoretical analysis, the research aims to 1) improve knowledge surrounding the current high drop-out rates within youth football referees by showcasing, and explaining the challenges associated with the position 2) inform and subsequently aid aspiring officials in their ongoing development and finally 3) encourage other referees to speak up to voice their concerns within the profession. By constructing the said narratives in an easy-to-understand manner, the study looks to showcase the challenges associated with officiating to a broad audience.

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, scholars have looked to develop a first person approach to research that advances social sciences through ethnographic storytelling (Ellis et al., 2010; Hayano, 1979; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Decades have since past and now a variety of academics have produced and reviewed their use of ‘autoethnographies’ (Ellis, 2004; Grant, 2010; Méndez, 2014). By challenging traditional methods of research, supporters have found thoughtful, engaging ways to open up to express, portray and to evoke an ‘insider’s point of view’ (Allen-Collinson, 2013; Wall, 2006; Young & Atkinson, 2012). Whereby, the method has loosely told the reader ‘what we do not hear’ and show ‘what we fail to see’ (Bochner, 2000). Due to this scholarly demand to discover the unique experiences of often silenced populations (Sparkes, 2020), within the field of sport, scholars have naturally embraced the qualitative approach and have produced a variety of creative and insightful vignettes (Ing & Mills, 2017; Mills, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2016). One such area of enquiry that would benefit from the approach would be within sport officiating, where at all levels and between sports, some say it has become normalised to criticise and question the performance of match officials (Terekli & Çobanolu, 2019). As a result, at a time when referees are deemed key to the restoration of football following the COVID-19 pandemic, a recent survey results states that 9 out of 10 of officials have received verbal abuse in the sport and many are questioning the support they receive (Webb et al., 2020). To counter this, policy makers and sport’s governing bodies are now running support workshops, but referees are not only failing to naturally progress to elite levels, but are discontinuing in large numbers (Terekli & Çobanolu, 2019; Webb et al., 2020, 2021). While as discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic will have had a negative influence on this cessation of sporting officials, further government guidance and restrictions will not only impact the difficulty for governing bodies to gain new recruits but also the current problematic retention rates (Webb et al., 2020). With such, without an effective recovery strategy in play that understands the challenges of our referees, the implications of abuse could potentially both reduce the pool of new recruits required for the fulfillment of fixtures at grass roots levels, thus reducing the opportunities for players to develop/stay active but this could also reduce the quality of elite referees, when County Football Associations are often quick to fast track talented officials to the elite game (Webb et al., 2020, 2021).

However, moving forward, an investigation using first person approaches could loosely represent both individual and collective experiences to answer key questions to why pre-COVID referee numbers were indeed plummeting (Devís-Devís et al., 2021). However, without comparable qualitative studies within the sport officiating literature, there is a need to embrace such first-person methodologies (Delorme et al., 2013; Devís-Devís et al., 2021; Friman et al., 2004).

That said, when utilising first person approaches to research, scholars must encourage readers to arrive with a belief that life and experiences are stories that we can listen to rather than question what is being represented (Grant, 2010). In doing so, successful papers can allow others to listen to those who are often not being heard (i.e. referees; Webb et al. (2020) ) and this process can help us all move towards a ‘better world’ (Dauphinee, 2010; Devís-Devís et al., 2021; Grant, 2010). To help achieve this, Le Roux (2016) acknowledged “the multilevel layers of researcher reflexivity, given the researcher and research are same person” . Then, after the first author retrospectively produced the narratives, the first and secondary authors both had lengthy discussions to intentionally prepare and evolve the stories so they are unique yet generalizable to highlight key refereeing experiences (Ellis et al., 2010; Winkler, 2017). Therefore, by the first author “sharing, discussing and reflecting” upon the direction of the narratives with the second author, like Mingé & Zimmerman (2013), the evocative narratives are “unpacked theoretically” with the trusted other to aid the research process and to circumvent the limitations of an over reliance on self-obtained data (Le Roux, 2016; Wall, 2016; Winkler, 2017).

With this in mind, taking on the collaborative approach of critically analysing and reflecting upon personal narratives (Gilbourne, 2012; Ing & Mills, 2017; Toner et al., 2012), throughout this manuscript, both the first and second author seek to add to the growing pool of sporting literature by exploring the first authors short adventure as a county accredited referee in association football (AKA Soccer). With past experience playing and in employment in the sport, the first author believes he has an understanding of the environment and perceives himself to be a cultural insider (Gilbourne, 2012; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). However, he finds himself in the juxtaposition between football person and referee to describe his pressing evocative ‘vulnerabilities’ (Defenbaugh, 2008; Jones, 2006). That said, when he reflects upon his refereeing training and continued development, he found himself drawn towards what happened during his first competitive fixture following the official qualification status as a ‘referee.’ Whilst, he started writing the piece from memory as a self-reflection to help make sense of a troubling situation

as a postgraduate student, he was initially hesitant to submit the work for internal examination (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012). Rather, in time, the first author found himself speculatively forwarding a draft manuscript to a critical friend (i.e. the second author), who has an expert understanding of said' approaches. Thus, like Ing & Mills (2017), the collaborative 'journey' evolved the manuscript from what can be described as 'a number of messy descriptions of lived events' to informative texts portraying true 'evocation' (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Mingé & Zimmerman, 2013). It is hoped by this process, the aim to be 'moderate' on the evocative to analytic continuum will allow this manuscript to combine personal perspective with analysis 'to advance the readers understanding 'in ways it might never have otherwise been' (Wall, 2016). That acknowledged, while we intend to make the manuscript illustrate the hurdles the first author singularly faced, contemporary empirical literature has begun reporting the common problems when pursuing a career as a 'referee' (Cleland et al., 2015). Therefore, by revealing the environment in an easily understood manner (like Smith (2013) ), it is our hope this manuscript will provide support to all who have a vested interest in officiating in the sport. While the first authors consent is tacitly implied, the author has since removed himself from his officiating role and both authors must stress that individuals involved in the study have been anonymised to cause no further harm. The episode that follows will explore the events and reveal the first authors feelings attached to his refereeing adventure assigned to officiate a grass roots Sunday league under 10 fixture in the United Kingdom. Subsequently, his thoughts looking back are then offered.

## 2. Refereeing Adventure

### (a) Arriving a referee

My eyes flicker as the sun gapes through the small gaps I have unintentionally allowed between my curtains. To fightback, I stretch my arms towards the top of my brow and make contact the adjacent bedside cabinet. As I do so, a half full glass of milk pours straight onto the carpet below. Undeterred, I remove my phone and automatically scroll towards my inbox. I curse under my breath as I finally acknowledge the consequences of the curdling white liquid, yet I realise I have to by-pass this issue if I am to move forward today. In fact, I referee a youth's football game in under an hour. I run my fingers through the strands at the top of my hair. I know I just need to quickly re-familiarise myself with the latest youth soccer laws. It is all I put my focus on. I note the updated changes to youth soccer, find my pre-packed bag, tracksuit and swiftly I scamper towards the venue. On arrival, the combinative smell of Bovril and fried bacon greets me. I now walk past a once white, now derelict, club house turned greasy café. The players are already here and they look ready. I catch the eye of the home manager; I know him but not well enough to remember his name. I confidently shake his hand and tell him, "what a lovely morning it is to play football." I have seen them play before so I do not expect any trouble. I now re-lace my boots and follow my muddy imprints back to the centre circle. However, I am diverted to expletives that reverberate around the venue. At 6 ft 4, 30 odd', I see steam rise from the shaved scalp of the away coach. He's screaming at one of his late arriving players. I want to rush over and stop it but I must not. I look towards the line of parents, but all I can sense is the combination of hangovers and lost sleep. Some do not want to be here and frankly nor does this kid now. The coach soon stops his onslaught and inevitably this means it is time for me to introduce myself. I tread forward cautiously. The coach reactively opens up his body to let me in, I inform him of my name and quickly retreat. I better take my position, call in the captains and get this fixture started.

### (b) First Half

I take one deep breath, blow my whistle and finally, the contest gets underway. Like a pinball, the ball moves left, to right, to left again with each player eager to connect their footwear with the leather sphere. The contest moves so fast. I just wish one team could just gain some control of proceedings and let the game slow down. But I realise this will be doubtful given the evident lack of quality from the players on show. Suddenly, the ball moves out wide in front of the away supporters. With close control, the home defender shows the first signs of composure as he darts past an opposing player. Yet, his movements are greeted with a chorus of disgruntlement. Why are the visitors angry? A short time later, I realise they believe the ball has proceeded out of play. It's so difficult to tell, the faint white lines are masked by the mud that has freshly appeared. The game continues, but the away coach wants to make his thoughts heard...

As I feel the words deflect off my outer skin, I realise I have two choices available to me; should I pretend I did not hear the comments or react? I choose the latter and do my best to stay calm and quell the situation. However, seconds feel like minutes as I delve deep into the depths of my mind to find the correct words to use. “I can understand why you are frustrated, but please err... stop?” I worry the warning may have not hit its mark, but I realise I needed to say something. In an attempt to move the fixture forward I encourage the players to move into position so I can restart it. But, I notice the coach prowling up and down the touchline. I’ve seen this behaviour before; it is the same as you see from caged lions at a zoo as they prowl the glass begging tourists to enter their enclosure. I hear the coach shout louder to in-force his physical dominance as his right arm flexes as he soon points to where I am on the field. I know the coach feels he is at the top of this food chain and wants to make me aware of this fact, but I soon jog over to send him off. I redirect him and his protruding fingers to the graffiti tagged children’s playground situated metres from the playing surface as I take a large deep breath.

I cannot back down now; I must survive. Instantly, I feel adrenaline releasing through my bloodstream. I wipe the sweat from the far corners of my brow as a knot develops in my stomach. Was I too hasty? I assure myself that condemning problem behaviours will be beneficial to the game. “You’re kidding, right?” the coach mutters simply. I purse my lips tightly to hold back my annoyance at his arrogance in suggesting his abuse could be deemed a joke. Does he want me to push him there? Fortunately, at this point a helpful parent moves in front and forcefully orders him away. I feel a little vindicated as I am back in control. I can almost feel the coach’s actions waking the parents from their former slumber. A few seem embarrassed, while the majority react to my every move. It starts with a few comments, but before long the parents turn into thriving angry mass of anonymity. I do not understand. I do not need this attention. My fragile confidence drains away as I realise that I am on my own. The grass feels like quicksand and the more I struggle the faster I sink. I need help.

Seconds later, the away team now gains the lead through a long-range dipping effort. A goal keeping mistake but his opponents are not shy in rubbing it in his face. The celebration lasts minutes with each parent taking it in turns to congratulate the goal scorer. As I restart the contest once more, the sent off coach reappears with a can of energy drink in hand. Ignoring my dismissal, he returns to applaud his player. There is just over a minute left in the first half, I blow my whistle early and hope that the coach leaves again before we return for the second half.

### (c) Half-time Interval

During the half-time team talk, both coaches brief their players on their tactical masterplans. The kids are between nine and ten years of age, but this does not stop both teams from moving tiny magnetic men around a white board. I stay in the protective chalky lines of the center circle and try to regain my composure. I keep my distance, but like wolves, the away team’s coach and parents continue to prowl and stare in my direction. They can smell blood. I wonder to myself if this is what it is like to be a medic in a war zone, but quickly shut down the analogy. This is not a war zone; it is junior football.

### (d) Second Half

The relative serenity of half-time is over as one boy rolls the ball to the other and the battle resumes. The ball immediately canons out of the pitch towards the left hand touchline and I award a throw to the home team. Unbeknownst to me, I have wandered into enemy territory once more. I have made the decision in front of the away team parents. I know this as “you cheat” now rings strongly in my ear. I choose to ignore it, yet with a gush of wind I feel a large splat of substance hit the side of my face. I can feel it has viscous properties as I put my fingers to my cheek. Time stands still as my nervous system sends this message from my finger tips to my brain. I look down at my palm as I see green, sticky mucus dripping slowly towards the turf. Suddenly, the lost time races back as I quickly turn to identify a culprit. I am dazed and confused as shouts come from all directions. “Come on Ref!” echoes around the park turned amphitheater. I briefly pause and ponder whether the words are a challenge to fight, but it’s merely that the game has continued, and I have not been watching. The game has gone.

I blow my whistle; retrieve the match ball and turn once more to confront the parents. The need to defend myself starts to overpower any feelings of being a victim. I recall my years on a school playground; lines of bullies converge to see if one lad will react. He always gives them what they want. I too see those stormy dark clouds start to drift in, but as the referee, I must clear the weather again. I demand to know who spat at me, but the group deny any knowledge as to the origin of the phlegm that still trickles off me.

I stand and wait, staring at each of them waiting for someone to break. However, I know there is nothing I can do. I stand my ground forcefully, but I am crumbling on the inside. I am trapped. I want to find the culprit by any means necessary, but am wearing black and representing the county. I have been taught dealing with these situations is the club secretary responsibility, but he has just fled the scene to get home. If I now push forward I could lose everything that I have worked hard to achieve. I cannot stop the game now either as it would only punish a group of kids who have behaved far better than their parents. In the blink of an eye, I encounter a second wind of emotions. The desire to resist still urges me forward. Yet, my shoulders shrink and my legs become heavy. That is it, I have no chance. Enforcing any code of conduct will be an aimless task now. I need to back down and go where they want. Carry on this duty for them and in the way they deem appropriate. The damage has been done.

#### **Leaving a nobody**

The surf is high  
 I'm surrounded by waves.  
 The wind begins to pick up  
 Testing me to tread water,  
 Survival is now my aim.  
 They control me,  
 I cling on,  
 But I have no choice;  
 The current is too strong:  
 I see my dream float away.  
 Okay, you can say I'm weak  
 Alright, call me feeble if you like  
 We love football; you could let me join you?  
 You made me a pawn to our game ... GOOD-BYE.

I attempt to see the game out, but the away team's parents now know that anything goes. I am sure they know and are being purposefully antagonistic, to kick me while I am down. Now, in the controlling the seat, the supporters begin to exploit every moment of my indecision with an ironic cheer. I only wonder how they would feel in my position or how they would react if they were losing. I question my ability again, and whether I should walk away, but I cannot answer it now. The players zig and zag around me, but I stand motionless lost in a well of self-doubt. I am done with all of this. As the final seconds pass I wait anxiously ready to blow my whistle three last times. I know I am a hostage to their desires and I will not endure a second more of this than I have to. The game eventually finishes with a convincing 3-0 win for the away team. I want to ask the parents if they are proud of how they behaved or how they would feel if it were one of their children in my boots. I could go over and get the last word. Maybe, I could question their footballing pedigree? But I do not have what it takes to play their game. I bite my lip. I could have just stayed in bed this morning. I just want to go home and right now; it is over. I never want to come back.

### **3. Black Clouds**

A week later, I tug at the side of my window so my head can stick out. I see rain. It feels early. But, I can only hear the spray of cars moving through pot holes along my flooded road. It seems that the day has already started without me. I now look to find my referees kit in the dirty washing basket beneath me. I know it must be still there. I hang an empty smile below my eyes as I find my last sock and immediately, I go walking towards today's coliseum. It is not that far. I now feel vibrations from a 4x4 as it shuttles past, soaking my black tracksuit through to the skin. But, I am not here and you cannot see it, so it does not matter. As water now drips off the small number of hairs that attempt to conceal my sunken jaw, I trudge through the gravel pit, they call a carpark. I now see the home team manager meandering around puddles towards me. Have you ever been caught up in a dream, where your legs were frozen but you could not escape? I have. I am so relieved when he tells me today's fixtures are cancelled. Yet, I have to let my lips lie to vent my disappointment; my heart knows how I feel. But, do I need to tell him of my desire to quit? No, that will get me nowhere. I stand under a hollow birch tree as the wind picks up and the precipitation falls more violently. Maybe this is what it means to be an official? The shackles are loose and I will finally break away.

## 4. Reflections

Whilst writing this manuscript, both authors were keen on understanding the susceptibility for authors to be self-indulgent when creating and critically assessing narratives (Emerald & Carpenter, 2016). Therefore, both authors began discussing the key themes of this narrative to minimise such aspects. The first vignette understandably illustrates the author's failures in meeting the challenging situations associated with officiating (Cleland et al., 2015; Dell et al., 2014; Folkesson et al., 2002; Friman et al., 2004). Although the first author was not taught to resist confrontation, he was initially confident in his ability to control the situation through an 'assertiveness' evident by standing his ground in a bid to promote good conduct. This premise illustrated by 'I am the referee,' the passage of words shaped like a sword to showcase the ongoing fight to stay in control of the game. However, despite the slow removal of the coach from the field of play, perhaps explainable by his difficulty in accepting authority from a referee perceived to be of 'inexperience' (Friman et al., 2004), the first author was then subjected to both verbal threats and physical abuse during the competitive fixture. Although Friman et al. (2004) advocate that similar hostilities are typically the result of others lacking knowledge of football rules, due to the nature of his miss-treatment, it may be effective to associate the supporter actions with confrontational spectator's behaviour normalised in professional football (i.e. modern fan culture) (Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; Razavi et al., 2014; Slabbert & Ukpere, 2010).

That appreciated, while the events are perhaps explainable, the narratives also showcase how helpless a referee can be in response to forms of conflict. When subjected to similar hostilities, refereeing workshops support the home club secretary's role in dealing with supporters/coaches behaviours. However, when such assistance is unavailable, in problem situations the recommended alternative of abandoning fixtures would likely cause further confrontation from all parties. Therefore, with the option of direct resistance towards the supporters/coaches likely to be ineffective (Mann, 1989), the first author found himself in a difficult position where the only obtainable alternative to ensure my safety was to ignore the abuse and finish the fixture (Friman et al., 2004). However, as the narrative showcases, this process too has many difficulties, made apparent through both the physical and psychological abuse which caused damage to the ability to officiate (Dell et al., 2014). As a result, due to reductions in self-confidence and self-worth, burnout followed (Dell et al., 2014; Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Wolfson & Neave, 2007), which in this instance eventually led the first author to question his commitment to the role moving forward (Parsons & Bairner, 2015). This process outlined by 'leaving a nobody,' the short evocative feelings intentionally shaped like a pawn, to illustrate the authors feelings to the role in being discarded, a small piece to a bigger game. With stylistic similarities to Gilbourne & Richardson (2006) tales from the field, this vignette showcases while the referee understands footballing culture as he has been in the coach's position, he simply cannot grasp what triggered the events to occur. That said, while this made the first author become burdened with self-doubt, by attempting to formulate external attributions to explain others bad behaviour (i.e. others frustrations, lack of footballing knowledge and desire to win), he did acknowledge his potential susceptibility to make mistakes to stay adequately assertive in a bid to see the fixture out until its completion (Wolfson & Neave, 2007).

Finally, the 'Dark clouds' reflective analysis then shows how referees often suffer in silence (Defenbaugh, 2008; Jones, 2006). While stigma and misunderstanding permeates through the sport, making mental health in referees a taboo subject (Mellick, 2020), this vignette then highlights the many mental health challenges associated with refereeing and the need for the development of a forgiving platform to allow referees to speak up. As despite the importance of many referees to the sport, in this short vignette, the first author feels he has no choice but to turn his back on the profession because of the outcomes of this sporting culture.

## 5. Conclusion

In light of the English Football Association's recent RESPECT campaign (Cleland et al., 2015; Wilson, 2017) which indirectly aims to improve the experiences of footballing officials, there are still unresolved high attrition rates that they advocate cause a shortage of referees in the sport (Dosseville et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 1990; Wolfson & Neave, 2007). That appreciated, with little known about the reasoning surrounding referee's retention (Warner et al., 2013), by making himself vulnerable with a purpose (Winkler, 2017), this study reveals how demanding it can be to officiate and the challenges that are involved.

While the abuse encountered is deemed to be 'normal' in the sport (Terekli & Çobanolu, 2019), this study highlights the continued need for increased authority to officials; not just in the implementation of

the laws of the game but also for highlighting the importance of future interventions targeting supporters behaviours (Brackenridge et al., 2011). Therefore, at a time following the COVID-19 pandemic when governing bodies acknowledge their concerns surrounding the mental health of referees, coinciding with the recent launch of The FA's 'Mental Health Pilot Scheme' Based on this research design, to achieve change, governing bodies could move away from empirical based data and using similar first person approaches; delve deeper using case study analysis by developing a platform to allow referees to speak up. This would not only shed further light on the realities of the profession but also uncover what support is required, moving forward.

However, while having the ability to 'block out' abuse is a key characteristic of top level elite officials (Slack et al., 2013), at an amateur level, the narrative reveals like Dell et al. (2014), that referees often feel left underprepared and lacking the necessary skills to be a success. Therefore, the narrative promotes the importance of referees self-reflection of their vital skills and knowledge of the role; particularly when such hostilities are common in modern football cultures (Dell et al., 2014) effectiveness of the RESPECT initiative in the elite game (Cleland et al., 2015), at lowers levels, there could perhaps be a greater emphasis on reducing the win at all costs attitudes ingrained in the sport through environment subtle law changes (e.g. silent side lines- allowing encouragement only and referees respect marks given to respective clubs). Whereby, this whole development could be facilitated by increasing contact between governing bodies, individual referees and coaches (Parsons & Bairner, 2015).

That said, auto-ethnographies can both "show" and "tell" (Ellis et al., 2010). Therefore, by combing evocative personal perspective with theory driven analysis, through this approach we have both shaped the environment and described the nature of the experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). As a consequence, we have allowed readers an opportunity to walk in the referees shoes, to explore this complex yet 'ordinary' experience (Emerald & Carpenter, 2016, p. 28). However, as we look to directly represent the realities of the profession, we wish to draw to attention the hurdles that many are required to overcome to do the duty as 'referees.' Thus, with comparable events of misconduct perhaps to blame for the recent surge in refereeing withdrawals [taylor1990a; wolfson2007a; dosseville2014a], we will not draw neat 'conclusions' from the study (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2017). Rather, we simply hope the current paper enables others to overcome difficult situations and encourages the said others to voice their refereeing experiences. As this process could not only provide hope and direction to budding referees but potentially initiate change in the years to come.

## 6. Additional Information

### (a) Data Accessibility

Not applicable for the current study.

### (b) Author Contributions

- Contributed to conception and design: CI, JM
- Contributed to acquisition of data: CI
- Contributed to analysis and interpretation of data: CI, JM
- Drafted and/or revised the article: JM, CI
- Approved the submitted version for publication: CI, JM

### (c) Conflict of Interest

Co-author Dr John P. Mills founded SportRiv, and more recently the Society for Transparency, Openness, and Replication in Kinesiology (STORK). John also works as an editor for STORK.

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### (e) Acknowledgments

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### (f) Preprint

The pre-publication version of this manuscript can be found on SportRxiv ([doi.org/10.31236/osf.io/n2ym7](https://doi.org/10.31236/osf.io/n2ym7)).



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