

# Why Referees Stay in the Game

Lynn L. Ridinger, Old Dominion University  
 Stacy Warner, East Carolina University  
 Jacob K. Tingle, Trinity University  
 Kyungun R. Kim, University of Central Missouri

## **Abstract**

*Current trends indicate the number of qualified sports officials continues to dwindle. Therefore, this research sought to better understand reasons for initial entry, continuation, and potential discontinuation with officiating, while also identifying problematic issues, and potential solutions. Content analysis was utilized to examine five open-ended online survey responses from 2,485 referees. The results indicate that Enjoyable Affiliation (58%) and Remuneration (14%) were key to referees becoming involved in officiating. Those two themes, Enjoyable Affiliation (75%) and Remuneration (14%), were also identified as important to retaining officials. Physical Limitations were mentioned by 58% of the respondents regarding why they plan to discontinue. In terms of the most problematic issues, referees most frequently indicated Abuse (42%) and Administrative Issues (20%). Lastly, findings suggest the best ways to recruit and retain officials are to Provide Mentors and Training (32%), Market to Young People (23%), and Increase Pay (19%). Practical implications and strategies that include attracting more women, under-represented ethnicities, and young people into sports officiating are provided.*

## **Introduction**

The recruitment, retention, and development of key personnel are vital to the success of any organization or industry (Barr & Hums, 2012; Chelladurai, 2014). In the sport industry, referees play an essential role in the workforce and it is important to understand reasons associated with their initial involvement, continued involvement, and departure from the role of officiating. A better understanding of these factors can help sport administrators to develop strategies to more effectively recruit and retain referees. With a growing concern about a shortage of youth and high school sports officials (Eilerson, 2016; Erzar, 2017; Leighton, 2017; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger, Kim, Warner, & Tingle, 2017), there is an urgent need to expand the pool of qualified officials in a variety of sports. A shortage of officials can lead to a number of issues that can negatively impact the sporting experience of athletes, coaches, fans, and sport administrators.

In response to the need for officials, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) embarked on a national officials recruitment campaign aimed at encouraging more individuals to become licensed officials ("NFHS Launches," 2017). The NFHS took a two-pronged approach by trying to attract new sport officials, while also addressing issues that cause individuals to stop officiating. Posters encouraging student-athletes to consider officiating were sent to high school athletic directors across the country and a new website was created to make registering as an official easier. Also, the NFHS launched a social media campaign to provide student-athletes with information about officiating. To address retention issues, sportsmanship efforts have been intensified by state associations and they are encouraging member schools to show support for officials through programs such as Minnesota's "Thank a Ref" campaign ("NFHS Launches," 2017). Every U.S. high school state association has been impacted by the shortage of officials, leaving athletic administrators scrambling to find enough

referees to cover their events. Although concerns regarding the recruitment and retention of sports officials are not new (Sabaini, 2001; Titlebaum, Haberman, & Titlebaum, 2009), the effects of not having enough qualified officials are increasingly dire. Due to the lack of officials, some associations have discussed reducing the number of games or dropping sports altogether (“Infographic,” 2016; Stevens, 2016). It is becoming increasingly more difficult to both recruit new and retain current officials. Having an adequate number of trained officials is an important issue for sport organizations; however, the average career length of many officials is relatively short (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013). According to Leighton (2017) only about 20% of novice officials continue in the role for more than two years, and this is especially alarming given the aging population of the current officials (Erzar, 2017).

There is anecdotal evidence suggesting several reasons why people do not want to officiate, which include time, pay, and safety concerns (Eilerson, 2016; Erzar, 2017; Newberry, 2016; Stevens, 2016). Officiating can be time consuming and the afternoon starting times for many high school games are not conducive for individuals with day jobs. In terms of remuneration, the pay for officiating high school sports provides some extra money, but it is only supplementary income (Erzar, 2017). Many believe the most compelling deterrents to officiating are the escalating verbal abuse from parents and coaches (Eilerson, 2016; Stevens, 2016) and the possibility of being assaulted by an angry fan or player (Erzar, 2017; Newberry, 2016).

There have been a number of academic studies focused on stress, burnout, and coping responses of referees (Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Dorsch & Paskevich, 2006; Goldsmith & Williams, 1992; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Rainey, 1995; 1999; Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Taylor, Daniel, Leith, & Burke, 1990; Wolfson & Neave, 2007). Interestingly, the overall results from these studies suggest that most referees are effectively able to cope with the stress. In fact, officials have indicated abuse was anticipated and accepted as a normal part of their role (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Wolfson & Neave, 2007).

More recent research has examined the sociological and organizational factors associated with both retention and attrition of referees (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Phillips & Fairley, 2014; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle, Warner & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013). Findings from these studies revealed that there are multiple social and administrative factors such as a sense of community, mentorship, training, and administrator consideration that impact whether an official will continue in the role. One of the more comprehensive studies on officiating was Warner and colleague’s (2013) work with former basketball officials. Utilizing a sport development framework (Green, 2005), they thoroughly examined the entire referee experience from initial entry through discontinuation; however, the study took a phenomenological approach and their sample included only 15 participants. In general, sport officiating research has been limited to small samples of referees from one or two specific sports. Nevertheless, the results of Warner et al.’s (2013) work, the Referee Attrition Model, provides the theoretical framework for this current study.

Except for Warner et al. (2013), few studies have examined all stages of the referee career lifespan. Building on the work of Warner et al., this current study sought to gain a better understanding of the entire referee experience from the initial recruitment stage through eventual departure. This study is unique and extends the current body of knowledge because unlike Warner et al.’s work, which collected data from 15 basketball referees, it obtained data from a large sample of officials representing a wide variety of sports. It targeted high school officials in the United States to gather thoughts and opinions from those at the ground level.

Open-ended questions were used to solicit non-prompted responses about individual experiences, as well as perceptions of problems and ideas to help recruit and retain officials. While previous studies have suggested possible solutions for referee recruitment and retention, these ideas have been inferred by researchers rather than generated from an analysis of data gathered directly from the participants. An end goal of this study was to generate ideas that could help ease the recruitment and retention problems facing high school associations.

The overarching purpose of this current study was to examine reasons associated with referee recruitment, retention, and attrition of high school sports officials. Specifically, this study sought to gain a better understanding of reasons for initial entry, continuation, and potential discontinuation with officiating. Perceptions of the most problematic issues associated with officiating were examined. Additionally, ideas to help recruit and retain officials were assessed in an effort to generate possible solutions that could help sport administrators develop more effective strategies. An online survey was developed and distributed to officials registered with two state high school athletic associations in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The survey included the following five open-ended questions that were used to guide this study:

1. Why did you first become involved with officiating?
2. Why do you continue to officiate?
3. Why might you choose to discontinue officiating in the future?
4. What are the most problematic issues associated with officiating?
5. What can be done to help recruit and retain officials?

### **Review of Literature**

Several early studies on sports officials examined initial entry into officiating and reasons for continuing in the role (Furst, 1989, 1991; Purdy & Snyder, 1985). Furst (1989, 1991) studied college level basketball, football, softball and volleyball officials, while Purdy and Snyder (1985) focused on high school basketball referees. Initial involvement was attributed to influence from friends and relatives or through a personal interest in a sport. Reasons to continue officiating included love of the game, challenge and excitement of officiating, and the camaraderie with other officials. Others have investigated sources of officiating stress and relationships among stress, burnout, and termination intentions. The samples in these studies included youth soccer officials (Taylor et al., 1990), intramural and high school volleyball and football officials (Goldsmith & Williams, 1992), high school baseball and softball umpires (Rainey, 1995), rugby union referees (Rainey & Hardy, 1999), and high school and college basketball officials (Burke, Joyner, Pim, & Czech, 2000). In general, findings indicated the effects of stress were marginal and burnout was rare among officials. Two later studies found that veteran Australian Rules football umpires (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007) and experienced English soccer referees (Wolfson & Neave, 2007) were able to use effective coping strategies to deal with stress. They were not bothered by criticism from coaches, players, or fans; they simply anticipated and accepted abuse and criticism as part of the role of officiating.

More recent research has explored sociological and organizational factors impacting the retention and attrition of sports officials. In a study on sense of community among Australian Rules football umpires, Kellett and Warner (2011) found the factors that added or detracted from the building of a referee community. Affinity with the sport, interactions with others involved with the sport, and sharing social spaces contributed to a sense of community while lack of administrative consideration as well as inequity in terms of pay and access to resources detracted from the sense of community for referees. Phillips and Fairley (2014) also found that

community and camaraderie were important factors, in terms of referee identity and meaning derived from the officiating role, for veteran Australian Rules football umpires. Ridinger (2015) identified both contributing and constraining factors associated with involvement of youth sports baseball umpires and lacrosse officials. Her findings revealed that mentorship, training, and administrative consideration were key factors in overcoming constraints and continued officiating involvement.

Cuskelly and Hoye (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study to explore the efficacy of organizational support aimed at increasing retention of early career sports officials. Their sample comprised rugby referees in Australia with no more than five years of officiating experience. Results revealed that stressors of officiating and commitment predicted intention to continue; however, no additional or unique variance was explained by perceived organizational support. In another study on organizational support, Kim (2016) surveyed referees from 12 different sports associations in Hong Kong and found that perceived organizational support served as a mediator between distributive justice and both job satisfaction and career commitment. They concluded that the relationship between perceptions of fairness (i.e., distributive justice) and work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and career commitment) was meaningful when referees perceived organizational care and support from their officiating associations.

A few studies have employed samples of former referees in investigations focused on attrition of officials. Tingle et al. (2014) explored the experiences of former female basketball officials and found that their discontinuation from officiating was related to a lack of mutual respect from male officials, perceived inequity of policies, a lack of mentoring, and gendered abuse. In a study of amateur ice hockey officials in Canada, Forbes and Livingston (2013) found that attrition was linked to dissatisfaction with the local hockey associations in terms of opportunities to move up the ranks, appropriate fee structures, training assistance, administrative consideration, and appreciation. Utilizing Green's (2005) model of sport development as a framework, Warner et al. (2013) examined factors associated with former basketball referees' recruitment, retention, and advancement. They identified 10 themes related to officiating experiences and decisions to discontinue participation. At the recruitment stage, salient factors for attracting officials included staying part of the game, meeting needs for competition and challenge, remuneration, and socialization into the community of officials. At the retention stage, a number of factors that negatively impacted retention were found. These included lack of training/mentoring, lack of community, and hostile interactions with coaches, parents, and spectators. At the advancement stage, factors leading to attrition included lack of administrator consideration, biased administrator decision-making, and difficulty navigating sport policies. Warner et al. concluded that attrition of referees resulted primarily from negative experiences related to organizational and managerial issues. Because Warner et al.'s work encompassed the entire referee experience (start to discontinuation), Ridinger et al. (2017) utilized those findings to develop the Referee Retention Scale as a tool to help predict job satisfaction and retention.

Similar to Warner et al. (2013) and Ridinger et al. (2017), this study sought to examine factors impacting the entire officiating experience from initial entry through potential discontinuance from the role. Consequently, Warner et al.'s (2013) Referee Attrition Model served as the conceptual framework for this study. The Referee Attrition Model suggests that similar to athletes and Green's (2005) sport development framework, referees go through recruitment, retention, and advancement stages. The Referee Attrition Model proposes various on-the-court and off-the-court factors that impact basketball referees exiting the role. Although the Referee

Attrition Model was only based on the experience of 15 basketball referees, it provides the framing and foundation for this study.

The purpose of this study was to examine reasons associated with referee recruitment, retention, and attrition of high school sports officials. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to express their own views on what motivated them to become involved with officiating, what inspires them to continue officiating, and what factors might lead to their departure from the officiating role. Further, this work extends the work done by Warner et al., in that it utilizes a larger sample and different method to test the finding of the Referee Attrition Model. Two additional questions were posed to determine what issues were considered most problematic and to gather ideas about how to recruit and retain officials.

### **Methods**

An online survey was developed to gather data from officials registered with the high school athletic associations in two states located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. After approval for the study was obtained from a human subjects review committee, representatives from each association emailed an invitation with a survey link to their respective members. The web-based Qualtrics system was used to collect survey responses. The five open-ended questions being examined in this study were part of a larger study on the refereeing experience.

Content analysis was used to analyze the data. Content analysis is a technique for systematically describing the content of written, spoken, or visual materials (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). Content refers to the specific topics or themes in the material. Content analysis is descriptive in nature and the basis of a content analysis is quantification or expressing data in terms of numbers and frequencies (Sommer & Sommer, 2002). Content analysis was specifically chosen because it “provides a replicable methodology to access deep individual or collective structures such as values, intentions, attitudes, and cognitions” (Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007, p. 6). For each of the five open-ended questions being examined in this study, the main investigator initially used open coding to analyze the data. Open-codes were then categorized into themes until the themes began to repeat themselves. Next, through an iterative process with the other investigators the themes were examined until categories emerged. A code book was generated for each of the five questions and the number of categories ranged from 11 to 17 per question. The coding book identified, described, and provided examples for each theme and was reviewed by experts on the topic to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two independent coders were given a detailed explanation on NVivo and descriptive coding using the coding book, followed by a practice session under the guidance of the main investigator. Results from both coders were compared to ensure 100% intercoder agreement was met and any uncertainties about how to classify a response were discussed with the primary investigator (Creswell, 2009). Average frequencies were then calculated for each question and category. Peer debriefing and member checks with experts were then conducted to further ensure trustworthiness of the results (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

### **Results and Discussion**

The survey was sent to approximately 17,000 officials in two high school athletic associations and 3,042 surveys were returned for a response rate of 18%. Of the completed surveys, 2,485 included responses to all five open-ended questions. The completed, useable surveys

comprised the final sample resulting in a 15% response rate. Respondents from the two different athletic associations were compared on several items (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, and years of officiating experience) and no significant differences were evident, so the two groups were combined for further analysis. This section provides a demographic profile of respondents followed by a report of themes for each open-ended question and representative quotes to illustrate the content of each theme. The questions primarily elicited short answer responses; however, one response often contained multiple reasons. As such, each individual reason was coded independently. Thus, a one or two sentence response could have been coded into multiple categories.

Of the 2,485 respondents, most were male (89%), Caucasian (81%), married (76%), had at least a four-year college degree (72%), and a household income of over \$65,000. The respondents' ranged in age from 17 to 80 with a median of 54. Years of officiating experience ranged from 1 to 51 with a median of 22 years. Respondents included referees from a variety of sports, with representation from football (22%), basketball (20%), soccer (14%), baseball (13%), volleyball (9%), softball (7%), lacrosse (4%), wrestling (3%), swimming and diving (2%), field hockey (1%), track and field (1%), gymnastics (0.4%), ice hockey (0.2%), and tennis (0.1%). Many of the respondents officiated at multiple levels that included high school sports (94%), middle school sports (68%), recreational youth teams (63%), travel teams (50%), intercollegiate athletics (28%), college club teams (21%), college intramural (13%), and professional sports (5%).

The profile of the respondents demonstrated that high school sports officials are not very diverse. They are predominantly Caucasian males who are college-educated, married, and have a household income of \$65,000 or higher. The most alarming demographic information was related to age. The median age was 54 and almost two thirds (63%) of the sample was 50 or older. Only 18% of respondents were under the age of 40 years. There is great concern about who will replace the veteran referees when they stop officiating. Recruiting younger men and women into officiating continues to be difficult (Schaeperkoetter, 2016; Stevens, 2016; Tingle et al., 2014) and this becomes even more problematic with two year retention rates of only 20% (Leighton, 2017). Although 46% of high school athletes are females ("NFHS Participation," 2017), only 11% of the individuals who referee their games are women. Consequently, this study affirms previous findings that argue understanding the female officiating experience more in-depth is paramount to recruiting and retaining more officials (Kim, 2016; Schaeperkoetter, 2016; Tingle et al., 2014). Additionally, the vast majority (81%) of high school officials are Caucasian; little is known about why a greater diversity of individuals are not involved with officiating.

### **Q1. Why did you first become involved with officiating?**

Four themes emerged for this question regarding initial involvement: *Enjoyable Affiliation*, *Remuneration*, *Need for Officials*, and *Encouragement*. Similar to previous literature (e.g., Ridinger, 2015; Warner et al., 2013), the results of this study indicated one of the key factors for why referees initially become involved is due to their love and dedication to the sport (58% *Enjoyable Affiliation*). *Enjoyable Affiliation* was defined as enjoyment, love of the game, and desire to stay connected and give back to the sport. *Remuneration*, which dealt with pay, money, or income received from officiating, was also noted as a reason for initial involvement with officiating by 14% of respondents. Other ways to draw more men and women into officiating include appealing to the need for more and better officials (11% *Need for Officials*)

and providing encouragement to friends, relatives, and others with a connection to sports to become involved with officiating (9% *Encouragement*). This finding on the influence from friends and family supports early research on initial entry into officiating (Furst, 1989, 1991; Purdy & Snyder, 1985). Table 1 lists the themes for initial involvement, definitions, the percentage of respondents who identified reasons related to each theme, and sample quotes.

**Table 1:** Themes for Initial Involvement with Officiating

Percentage of Respondents	Theme	Definition	Sample Representative Quotes
58%	Enjoyable Affiliation	Enjoyment, love of the game, and desire to stay connected and give back to the sport.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “For love of the game and wanted to stay involved after my playing days were over.”</li> <li>• “Wanted to be part of the high school game again and give something back to the sport and the players.”</li> <li>• “I have been active in sports all my life. Playing, coaching and now officiating. I love the competitive spirit and also love to help guide the younger players with sportsmanship.”</li> </ul>
14%	Remuneration	Pay, money, or extra income from officiating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I was 16 and found out I could make more money calling little league games than working fast food so I got involved umpiring and absolutely loved it. I couldn’t believe they were actually paying me.”</li> <li>• “I started officiating as a college undergraduate looking for a way to earn money to pay for tuition.”</li> <li>• “Initially to make pocket money when I first got out of college.”</li> </ul>
11%	Need for Officials	Both a shortage of officials and the demand and necessity for better officials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Plus there was (and continues to be) a shortage of judges and referees for dive meets.”</li> <li>• “To improve the quality of officiating.”</li> <li>• “My son and daughter played, and the officials were not very good. I knew I could do better and make the game fair for both teams.”</li> </ul>
9%	Encouragement	Support and encouragement from a friend, relative, or coach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My father is an official, and he encouraged me to do it to make extra money.”</li> <li>• “I was a junior high school soccer coach. When I left that role a friend encouraged me to try officiating soccer.”</li> <li>• “My friend was a high school volleyball official and convinced me to start officiating. I started club the same year, and college a few years after that”</li> </ul>

**Q2. Why do you continue to officiate?**

The question related to why someone continues to officiate resulted in five themes, two which overlapped with the themes for initial involvement with officiating (i.e., *Enjoyable Affiliation* and *Remuneration*). The remaining three themes were *Fitness*, *Community*, and *Challenge*. Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated they continued to officiate because of the fun and enjoyment derived from officiating, their love of the game, and a desire to stay involved and give back to the sport (i.e., *Enjoyable Affiliation*). This supports previous literature which found that stress and psychological constraints associated with officiating can be mitigated by a strong affiliation with the sport (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Kellett & Warner,

2011; Phillips & Fairley, 2014). Similar to the percentage for initial involvement, *Remuneration* or pay was a factor for continuation (14% of respondents). Previous research suggests that pay may be an important factor for initial entry into officiating, but continued involvement is related more to intrinsic motives such as love of the game, enjoyment and challenge of the job, and camaraderie with fellow officials (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013). Using officiating as a form of exercise for *Fitness* was mentioned by 14% of respondents. For those respondents, one reason to stay involved with officiating was because it serves as a good way to be active and stay in shape. Physical fitness was identified as a motive in previous studies on ice hockey referees (Forbes & Livingston, 2013), Australian Rules football umpires (Phillips & Farley, 2014), and lacrosse officials (Ridinger, 2015). Respondents also indicated that sense of community and camaraderie with fellow officials was an important determinant to their retention (13% *Community*). This supports previous studies exploring sociological factors associated with officiating (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013). Additionally, 10% of respondents indicated the challenge of calling a good game and striving for self-improvement (*Challenge*) were important and reinforced early officiating research findings

**Table 2:** Themes for Continued Involvement with Officiating

Percentage of Respondents	Theme	Definition	Sample Representative Quotes
75%	Enjoyable Affiliation	Enjoyment, love of the game, and desire to stay connected and give back to the sport.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Appreciate the opportunity to be involved with soccer and give back to the game.”</li> <li>• “I officiate because of the joy and pleasure it brings me.”</li> <li>• “I love the sports and it gives me an ability to give back with a smaller time commitment than if I were coaching.”</li> </ul>
14%	Remuneration	Pay, money, or extra income from officiating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I also like the money that is earned throughout the season.”</li> <li>• “It is easy money and I enjoy being around the sport.”</li> <li>• “To stay connected with the game, plus supplemental income.”</li> </ul>
14%	Fitness	Officiate to stay in shape and be active.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like the physical activity.”</li> <li>• “Good motivation to stay in shape.”</li> <li>• “It’s paid exercise instead of going to the gym.”</li> </ul>
13%	Community	Sense of community developed from camaraderie with fellow officials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like the camaraderie in our association.”</li> <li>• “Fellowship with other officials”</li> <li>• “It is fun, the community of officials are good people to be around, stay connected to old friends and teammates.”</li> </ul>
10%	Challenge	Challenge of calling a good game and striving to improve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I love the challenge that is presented for me to constantly improve my game. Keeps me fresh and learning.”</li> <li>• “It is an exhilarating vocation that allows me to be an integral part of competitive contests and continuously develop skills relating to human interaction, interpersonal communication, and conflict resolution.”</li> <li>• “I enjoy the physical exercise, the mental challenge of rules knowledge and proper application, and ultimately to provide a playing environment that is safe, and fair for both competing teams.”</li> </ul>



(Burke, et al., 2000; Furst, 1989, 1991; Purdy & Snyder, 1985). Table 2 lists the themes for continued involvement, definitions, the percentage of respondents who identified factors related to each theme, and sample quotes.

**Q3. Why might you choose to discontinue officiating in the future?**

Four themes associated with discontinuation from officiating emerged: *Physical Limitations*, *Time Conflicts*, *Administrative Issues*, and *Abuse*. By far the most frequently mentioned factor for discontinuing involvement with officiating was *Physical Limitations* (58%). Items categorized under this theme included issues related to age, health, wear and tear on the body, injuries, diminished skills, and inability to keep up with the action. Aging of the referee population has been noted as a problem in the popular press (Erzar, 2017); however, previous research has not identified aging as an issue. The findings of this study indicate it is a compelling problem. With a median age of 54 with an average 22 years of experience, this sample included many

**Table 3: Themes for Discontinued Involvement with Officiating**

Percentage of Respondents	Theme	Definition	Sample Representative Quotes
58%	Physical Limitations	Health issues, wear and tear on the body, and diminished skills due to age.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When my knees finally give out!”</li> <li>• “Age and issues with arthritis may not allow me to officiate much longer.”</li> <li>• “Health reasons may play a part in that decision as well as age and a declining ability to perform well.”</li> </ul>
17%	Time Conflicts	Travel and game time conflicting with job schedules and family obligations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If my work schedule doesn’t allow it or my family situation at home doesn’t allow enough time.”</li> <li>• “Church and family commitments, kids are growing, new job with more administrative duties.”</li> <li>• “If I get married, or go back to school for my doctorate. I know of many people who have gotten divorced because of officiating. Officiating keeps you away from home, and from family for a great deal of time.”</li> </ul>
11%	Administrative Issues	Politics, unfair assignments, lack of opportunities for advancement, and lack of support from administrators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am tired of the politics/unfair treatment within the officials association.”</li> <li>• “The good old boys network in my association. Very frustrating.”</li> <li>• “The politics. It is so frustrating to go through all the trainings and to go through the evaluation process to improve and gain more certifications only to not get assignments. You have to ‘play the game’ and kiss ass to get assignments.”</li> </ul>
10%	Abuse	Disrespect and verbal abuse from coaches, players, and fans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The increasing vitriol from parents, spectators and coaches.”</li> <li>• “The hassle of dealing with arguing players, coaches and parents - and the growing level of disrespect for officials. It starts to wear on you.”</li> <li>• “Growing adversarial relationship with fans, coaches, and players. Lack of sportsmanship and abuse from coaches. It’s harder to recruit and retain officials, and the sport keeps growing and adding more teams every year so that those of us who still officiate are spread thin and are getting burned out.”</li> </ul>

veteran officials, some who admitted they were having problems keeping up with the action on the field or court and would retire soon. Seventeen percent of respondents listed *Time Conflicts* between the time devoted to officiating and other responsibilities such as job schedules or family obligations may cause them to discontinue their role as an official someday and represented the second most frequently mentioned reason for discontinuance from officiating. This supports Ridinger's (2015) findings from a study that investigated contributors and constraints to involvement with officiating. She identified conflicts with job and school schedules, family demands, and time spent traveling and training as problematic. Eleven percent of respondents indicated *Administrative Issues*, such as concerns about politics, unfair game assignments, lack of opportunities for advancement, and lack of support from administrators would lead to their departure from officiating. This supports findings from several studies (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013), which found that attrition was linked to dissatisfaction with administrative processes. While abuse, stress, and safety from coaches and parents including a growing lack of respect and sportsmanship receives attention in the popular press (Eilerson, 2016; Erzar, 2017; Newberry, 2016), only 10% of respondents in this study were likely to quit due to the abuse they received. This supports research by Kellett and Shilbury (2007) and Wolfson and Neave (2007) which concluded that experienced officials expected and accepted abuse and criticism as part of their role. Table 3 lists the themes for discontinued involvement, definitions, the percentage of respondents who identified factors related to each theme, and sample quotes.

#### **Q4. What are the most problematic issues associated with officiating?**

Four main themes emerged about the most problematic issues associated with officiating: *Abuse*, *Administrative Issues*, *Need for Officials*, and *Time Conflicts*. Although only 10% of respondents indicated they would leave officiating due to *Abuse* (which included unsportsmanlike conduct and disrespect or bad behavior from coaches, parents and/or players) 42% recognized it as a problematic issue that was likely affecting recruitment and retention of younger officials. Interestingly, when asked about ideas to help recruit and retain officials, only 8% mentioned *Reduce Abuse* as a solution. *Administrative Issues* (20%) was the second most frequently mentioned problematic issue associated with officiating. This factor encompassed a variety of concerns such as politics and favoritism (i.e. the "good old boys network:), unfair game assignments, poor training, lack of continuing education, lack of opportunities for advancement, and lack of appreciation from supervisors and administrators. As noted previously, studies on officiating attrition (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013) also identified administrative issues as problematic. Seventeen percent of respondents viewed the *Need for Officials* as a major problem. These comments addressed problems associated with shortages of officials, the difficulties of recruiting younger officials, as well as the need for more quality officials who are motivated by more than just the money. A growing concern about the need for officials has been the impetus for recent studies on officiating. The time associated with officiating activities (i.e., travel, games, meetings, and clinics) and conflicts it created with job and family demands was identified as a problematic issue by 12% of respondents. This supports results from a report for the National Association of Sports Officials, which found that "obligations of career or other job" was the top reason why referees quit and "time away from family" was another major reason leading to attrition (Sabaini, 2001). As noted by Titlebaum et al., (2009), some reasons cannot be controlled by sport administrators and finding solutions is not easy. Table 4 lists the themes for the most problematic issues associated with officiating, definitions, the percentage of respondents who identified issues related to each theme, and sample quotes.

**Table 4:** Themes for the Most Problematic Issues Associated with Officiating

Percentage of Respondents	Theme	Definition	Sample Representative Quotes
42%	Abuse	Disrespect and verbal abuse from coaches, players, and fans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Belligerent fans and coaches and players with attitudes. Not receiving sufficient training in dealing with these and other challenges.”</li> <li>• “Abuse from coaches and fans who often do not understand the high school game.”</li> <li>• “The hostile environment. Makes it tough to get people to stick around long enough to develop the knowledge and skills to effectively call a game.”</li> </ul>
20%	Administrative Issues	Politics, unfair assignments, lack of opportunities for advancement, and lack of support from administrators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Favoritism. Moving officials up the ladder before they are ready.”</li> <li>• “Dealing with a booking agent that shows too much favoritism and only uses a small pool of officials.”</li> <li>• “The politics of officiating can be difficult to navigate. For example, placating to different assignors.”</li> </ul>
17%	Need for Officials	Both a shortage of officials and the demand and necessity for better officials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Not enough officials. Officials who are doing it just for the money.”</li> <li>• “Shortage of quality officials due to the sport growing faster than the number of officials; aging community of officials and the need for more young people to become involved.”</li> <li>• “Officials are getting older and there are few younger people joining the ranks which means the quality of officiating is going down.”</li> </ul>
12%	Time Conflicts	Travel and game time conflicting with job schedules and family obligations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Getting time away from life (family/work) for the commitment.”</li> <li>• “Availability to be able to accept all assignments because of jobs and situations in their private life...Distances you have to travel. Early start times for a lot of games, this causes officials to take off from work early. Some jobs are not as understanding as others. A lot of vacation time is used to be able to make game times.”</li> <li>• “Time consuming. With so few officials you are requested nearly 100% of your spare time.”</li> </ul>

**Q5. What can be done to help recruit and retain officials?**

The final open-ended question, which asked about ideas to help recruit and retain officials resulted in five themes: *Provide Mentors and Training*, *Market to Young People*, *Increase Pay*, *Reduce Politics*, and *Reduce Abuse*. Approximately a third of respondents (32% *Provide Mentors and Training*) suggested providing mentors, better training, education, and/or more support from supervisors were keys to recruiting and retaining officials. This finding supports previous results from the literature (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013). Research has shown that providing support through better training, education, and mentorship can cultivate a sense of community (Kellett & Warner, 2011) and help referees deal with abuse (Kelly & Shilbury, 2007). Twenty-three percent of respondents recommended using more marketing tactics such as social media and word-of-mouth advertising to target young people, especially those with a connection to sports such as high school and college student-athletes (i.e., *Market to Young People*). Almost two-thirds of the

officials in this sample were 50 or older and it is vital to prepare younger individuals to take their places when they retire. Additionally 19% of respondents indicated *Increased Pay* would attract and retain more officials. The recently launched NFHS National Officials Recruitment Campaign addresses this need to market to younger people by targeting high school student-athletes. The messages being communicated in the campaign to “give back to the sport you love” and “earn extra income” (NFHS Launches, 2017) highlight the main reasons individuals first start officiating. Warner et al. (2013) also suggest emphasizing the enjoyable aspects of officiating in marketing and promotional strategies. Surprisingly, only 8% of respondents thought demanding better behavior from fans, coaches, and players (*Reduce Abuse*) and 9% of respondents indicated more fairness in game assignments and more transparent paths to upward mobility (*Reduce Politics*) would help recruit and retain officials, yet these two areas were identified as the most problematic issues associated with officiating. Table 5 lists the themes for ideas to help recruit and retain officials, definitions, the percentage of respondents who identified ideas related to each theme, and sample quotes.

**Table 5:** Themes for Ideas to Help Recruit and Retain Officials

Percentage of Respondents	Theme	Definition	Sample Representative Quotes
32%	Provide Mentors and Training	Provide mentors and offer better training, education, and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Without a doubt, young people need a mentor and friend to get them through the first 3 or 4 years.”</li> <li>• “Mentoring program, continuing education, strong community and support.”</li> <li>• “Associations need to train and guide recruits as well as have mentors that better understand why new officials are wanting to officiate.”</li> </ul>
23%	Market to Young People	Market and advertise to recruit young people with a connection to sport.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Contact high school and college coaches whose athletes are graduating and would like to stay close to the sport. Create a Facebook page or use the classified ads.”</li> <li>• “For recruitment, advertise. Social media would be a good way to start.”</li> <li>• “Provide information on becoming an official. Start with colleges, local rec centers, high schools, and military bases.”</li> </ul>
19%	Increase Pay	Provide more financial incentives by increasing pay.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Better pay is always a motivating factor”</li> <li>• “Pay higher game fees, less unpaid meeting and compensate officials for all of their required work!”</li> <li>• “Higher pay with work closer to home.”</li> </ul>
9%	Reduce Politics	Distribute games more fairly and address issues related to upward mobility and advancement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Lessen the ‘politics’ of becoming involved and moving up through the ranks.”</li> <li>• “Develop a fair rating system and award games based on merit, not who you know.”</li> <li>• “Take out some of the politics behind officiating where people are given opportunity based on their skill level and not based on their sex or who they know.”</li> </ul>
8%	Reduce Abuse	Decrease verbal abuse and demand more respect from coaches, players, and fans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Until bad behavior in the stands is frowned upon by the community and schools, it will be more difficult to retain young people.”</li> <li>• “Higher expectations for coaches and fans, with realistic procedures to deal with those that choose to abuse their rights.”</li> <li>• “Address conduct issues of fans and coaches that will often scare away newer officials.”</li> </ul>

### ***Implications for Recruitment and Retention***

Based on the demographic profile of officials in this study, there is a compelling need to increase the diversity of officials in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. With 82% of respondents age 40 or older and 58% indicating they would discontinue officiating due to age and health-related issues (i.e., *Physical Limitations*), there is a great concern about who will take the place of the current officials when they retire. First, a better understanding of factors that both attract and deter young people from officiating is needed. Next, measures to address potential officiating concerns should be developed and marketing efforts need to target a younger audience. Once young people do become involved with officiating, it is paramount that they receive adequate training and support. As found in this study and in previous research (Kellet & Warner, 2011; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al., 2014, Warner et al., 2013), providing mentors for new officials can cultivate a sense of community and encourage continued involvement.

Given the ever growing population of female athletes (“NFHS Participation,” 2017), coupled with the reasons for initially entering the profession, additional recruitment strategies should include a directed effort to attract more women to the field. The fact that 89% of the respondents were male highlights a major concern, but also a massive opportunity. According to Forbes and Livingston (2013), Ridinger et al. (2017), and Tingle et al. (2014), improved mentorship efforts, continuing education, and more egalitarian administrative decisions are important strategies to retain officials. The findings of this study bolster the previous research and make it apparent that more intentional strategies to develop community amongst officials will enhance retention efforts. Recruiting more diverse individuals is another area of opportunity to expand the pool of officials.

Other implications stem from the reasons why referees initially become involved with officiating and why they continue. The primary factor attracting individuals to officiating and keeps them involved is *Enjoyable Affiliation*. In order to keep the officiating environment enjoyable and encourage referees to stay involved with the sports they love, it is vital that administrators address the main concerns that emerged in this study. Administrators should develop strategies to decrease verbal abuse and demand more respect from coaches, players, parents, and fans. For example, education sessions on rules and appropriate behavior could be required for coaches and recommended for others stakeholders. Also, measures need to be taken to provide proper training and evaluation of officials, a transparent and fair system for assigning games, and to pair mentors with novice officials. Finally, plans must be developed to counter the shortage of officials currently plaguing many high school sports programs. Effective recruitment and retention strategies based on reasons valued by referees are needed to increase the pool of qualified officials. Potential groups to target include women, under-represented ethnicities, and more young people with a connection to sport.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

One limitation of this study is that, despite the large sample size, it focused on just one segment, high school sport officials. It is not known if these factors and solutions translate to other levels of officiating such as college or professional sports. Another limitation is that the sample only included a single region of the United States. There may be regional discrepancies among sport officials with regard to recruitment, retention, and attrition concerns. Future research should address these limitations by examining the various levels of officiating and

expanding the study on a global scale. Additionally, there is a dearth of research on officiating barriers related to ethnicity or race, and gender. As such, future research should explore why young people, women, and more people from under-represented ethnicities do not seem drawn to the officiating profession. Furthermore, a study on the effectiveness of various recruiting and retention strategies could provide useful results. Another important line of research should more deeply examine why some officials find a sense of community and retain an enjoyable affiliation with the sport, while others do not (Leighton, 2017; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al. 2014; Warner et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

Conceptualizing sports officiating using Warner et al.'s (2013) Referee Attrition Model as a framework allowed for a more holistic examination of the officiating life-cycle. The results of this study reveal reasons associated with referee recruitment, retention, and attrition of high school sports officials. The robust sample of 2,485 respondents from 14 different sports makes this the largest known study on American sports officials. To address the growing concern about the shortage of high school referees (Eilerson, 2016; Erzar, 2017; Leighton, 2017; Ridinger, 2015; Ridinger et al., 2017), this study sought a better understanding of what attracts individuals to the officiating role, what leads to their continued involvement, and what might cause disengagement from the role. Further it extends the Referee Attrition Model by identifying factors relevant to a larger sample of officials and beyond the sport of basketball. Sport stakeholders can glean important insights on managing high school referees from the results of this study. Findings suggest that abuse and problematic administrative issues need to be addressed by sport administrators to ensure that the officiating environment is enjoyable. This will likely result in referees staying involved and giving back to the sports they love. Furthermore, measures should be taken to attract more women, under-represented ethnicities, and young people into officiating, and all new recruits should receive training, mentoring and administrative support. Everyone involved in sports would benefit from a greater supply of licensed officials who are properly trained and committed to ensuring safe and fair athletic competitions.

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