

Decision-making in football officiating: An interview study with top-level referees

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Introduction:

Officials take a vital role in almost every competition-oriented game sport. For this reason, an interesting area of research has emerged over recent years with respect to sport officiating. However, the majority of the football-related studies can be characterised as pursuing a “from-theory-to-practice” strategy. Therefore, the present project aimed on the reconstruction of subjective theories of elite football referees and on the identification of problems in the practice of top-level football officiating.

Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from 23 European elite referees, either from UEFA’s elite group (19) or first group (4). With the average length of 19.4 min (*SD* = 5.4 min, range: 10.5 min-39.2 min), all interviews were transcribed verbatim, analysed independently by two coders to generate a category framework which was necessary for further processing based on the qualitative content analysis.

Results:

From the entire interview material, the data analysis resulted in 91 raw-data themes that were grouped into 22 lower-order themes and further structured into 7 higher-order themes, namely: (1) descriptive, (2) characteristics of a good elite referee, (3) difficulties, (4) pre-match preparation, (5) communication through headset, (6) decision-making, and (7) decision-making training.

Discussion:

The vast researched area of visual capabilities and perception enhancement in refereeing is also recognised by the interviewees as highly relevant. A clear need for further research, however, could be revealed for an optimisation of the following topics: The pre-match preparation, the evaluation of supporting technical devices, the development of innovative training tools for improving decision-making quality, the optimisation of the communication within the referee team, particularly through the headset, and the evaluation of supporting training methods like mental practice. Hence, for sport scientists with a special interest in applied work, these topics can be recommended for conducting further research.