



Knowledge and application of psychological skill of football referees in Ethiopian male premier league

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Abstract

Effective football refereeing requires the possession of essential psychological skills, such as maintaining focus and staying calm under high-pressure situations. These mental attributes are vital for referees to communicate clearly, make accurate judgments, and make sound decisions throughout the game. Particularly in emotionally intense moments, the ability to manage stress and stay composed directly influences the quality of officiating and ensures fair play. This study aimed to examine the knowledge and application of psychological skills among football referees in the Ethiopian Male Football Premier League. The study involved 28 central referees and 40 assistant referees officiating in the Ethiopian male football leagues. A total of 14 central referees and 20 assistant referees (34 participants) were selected using simple random sampling. A descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while interview data were analyzed thematically. The results indicate that Ethiopian male football referees possess limited knowledge and inconsistent application of psychological skills such as concentration, confidence, stress management, self-talk, imagery, and goal-setting. This deficiency negatively affects their officiating performance during matches. The Ethiopian Football Federation should organize targeted training programs to enhance referees' psychological skills. Referee committees should monitor and support the development of these skills during officiating, and referees should be trained to effectively utilize psychological techniques to improve their performance in the Ethiopian Premier League.

Keywords: psychological skills, football referees, decision-making, performance, officiating

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Introduction

After coaches and players, referees are considered the third essential component of football competitions, responsible for ensuring the fairness of the game by handling some of the most difficult tasks in sports (Groom et al., 2016). When referees call correct decisions, the outcome of the match primarily reflects the skill and tactical superiority of the teams. Conversely, erroneous decisions, influenced by environmental factors or other issues, can alter the result and diminish the enjoyment and fairness of the game for athletes and spectators alike. To promote consistency across matches worldwide, FIFA has established standardized rules of the game that are applied uniformly in all football competitions (FIFA, 2023).

As football matches become faster and more intense, referees need to develop a thorough understanding of the laws of the game and improve their ability to interpret them accurately during play (García et al., 2020). According to Collina (2018), effective refereeing requires not only a good knowledge of the laws and physical fitness but also the application of psychological skills. Williams et al. (2020) emphasize that refereeing has become an especially demanding task that only individuals with strong personalities, comprehensive knowledge, and psychological resilience can manage, given the immense pressure involved. Referees often have to make critical decisions within fractions of a second (A. J. Picazo-Tadeo, F. Gonzalez G., et al., 2011), sometimes relying on their experience to make calls even when they lack a clear view of the play (J. Mallo, P. G. Frutos, D., et al., 2012).

In addition, many decisions require referees to apply their knowledge of the laws in uncomfortable or high-pressure situations (Guilbert et al., 2021; Catteeuw et al., 2009). Factors such as physical fitness, positioning, and the angle of view influence decision accuracy. Recent studies highlight the importance of perceptual and cognitive skills in ensuring precise officiating (Williams, Reilly, & Nevill, 2020). Furthermore, refereeing a soccer match demands considerable physical and psychological strength, which can enhance decision-making as the game becomes more challenging (Lee et al., 2020). Psychological resilience and mental strength may also influence the accuracy of decisions, especially towards the end of each half when fatigue and stress levels are higher (Kemp et al., 2018).

To improve referees' decision-making abilities, FIFA and member associations organize various training programs aimed at enhancing their knowledge of the rules (FIFA, 2018). However, knowledge alone cannot guarantee correct decisions during matches. Collina and Mortimer (2019) propose a manual for developing effective referees by emphasizing the importance of personality, game management skills, mental preparation, and psychological skills. To control the game effectively, referees must first control themselves and remain psychologically stable in different situations (S. Joseph, 2015). Pargman's (2006) qualitative study demonstrates that psychological readiness and the ability to cope with stressors are among the most decisive factors in achieving peak performance in sporting environments. Therefore, good psychological and mental preparation is essential for referees to perform optimally and make accurate decisions during critical moments of the game.

Recent research underscores that psychological skills such as positive self-talk, positive thinking, concentration, motivation, confidence, relaxation, and arousal control play vital roles in enhancing referees' decision-making accuracy (Mellalieu et al., 2020).

Considering this, investigating the knowledge and application of psychological skills among football referees in the Ethiopian Premier League is crucial for improving their decision-making under different conditions. Although the Ethiopian Football Federation organizes various capacity-building training sessions, none currently emphasize the importance of psychological skills in officiating decisions.

This study focuses on assessing the knowledge and application of psychological skills such as motivation, concentration, confidence, stress management, self-talk, imagery, and goal setting among referees in the Ethiopian Premier League. It also explores their understanding of psychological skills and examines how effectively these skills are applied during matches.

The findings of this research will be instrumental in addressing the level of psychological skill application and its impact on decision-making accuracy among Ethiopian football referees. The study will provide valuable insights for stakeholders involved in referee development, including the Ethiopian Football Federation, by identifying existing gaps and informing future training initiatives. It will also serve as a foundation for further research in this area, encouraging more

focused efforts to enhance referees' psychological readiness. Given the challenges in fostering cooperation with sports psychologists, the study aims to raise awareness among stakeholders and promote collaborative efforts to improve referees' mental preparedness and decision-making abilities

Description of Research Area

The study was conducted within the context of Ethiopian professional football, specifically focusing on male referees officiating in the top-tier league. This league encompasses a series of competitive matches held across various stadiums throughout Ethiopia, serving as the premier platform for national football competitions. The referees operating in this environment are tasked with maintaining fairness and order in high-stakes matches, often under significant pressure from players, coaches, and spectators. The diverse geographical and cultural landscape of Ethiopia adds to the complexity of officiating, making the psychological readiness and skills of referees a critical factor for effective performance. Understanding the psychological challenges faced by referees in this setting provides valuable insights into enhancing their performance and the overall quality of Ethiopian football officiating.

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and application levels of psychological skills of male football referees in the Ethiopian Premier League. Thus, to attain the purpose of the study, a descriptive survey research design was used and followed the quantitative and qualitative mixed methods of research approach. Quantitative data alone do not tell the full meaning of the investigation of knowledge and application of psychological skill to the correct decision-making ability of football referees in the Ethiopian male premier league. On the other hand, qualitative data alone are not necessarily representative of the total sample of the study. So linking both quantitative and qualitative data gives a bigger picture of the purpose of this study. As Creswell (2014), points out, the rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem, and qualitative data collection is needed to refine, extend, or explain the general picture of the research problem in a more understandable way to the reader.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The population for this study included all current central and assistant referees officiating in the Ethiopian Premier League during the 2024 E.C. season, totaling 68 referees (28 central and 40 assistant). This population was selected because these officials are directly involved in high-stakes matches, and their psychological skills are crucial for effective officiating at the top level of Ethiopian football.

A sample of 34 central and assistant referees (14 central and 20 assistant) was chosen to represent this population. The use of simple random sampling was justified because it ensures that every referee in the population has an equal chance of selection, thereby minimizing selection bias and increasing the likelihood that the sample accurately reflects the characteristics of the entire population (Creswell, 2014; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Given the relatively small and well-defined population, simple random sampling is an efficient and unbiased method for obtaining a representative sample, which enhances the generalizability of the study findings to all elite male football referees in the league.

Source of Data

To achieve the objectives of this study, both primary and secondary data were utilized. Primary data were collected directly from the participants' active central and assistant football referees in the Ethiopian Premier League using questionnaires and interviews. These methods provided firsthand insights into the referees' psychological skills and their application during matches. Secondary data were gathered from published and unpublished documents, such as books, scholarly articles, official league reports, websites, and related literature. These sources served as scientific evidence and references to contextualize and strengthen the research problem, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Creswell, 2014). Employing both primary and secondary data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings by triangulating information from multiple perspectives.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments are tools used to gather relevant information from participants. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative instruments were employed. Quantitative data were collected using closed-ended questionnaires. These helped measure referees' understanding of psychological skills and how they apply these skills to improve their decision-making on the field, specifically among football referees in the Ethiopian Premier League. Whereas qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questionnaires and interviews. These provided deeper insights into the referees' experiences and perspectives regarding the use of psychological skills in their roles. The mixed-methods approach is justified by its ability to combine the strengths of both data types, enabling a more holistic understanding of the research problem and enhancing the validity and richness of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Questionnaire

In this research, we employed the Psychological Skills Inventory for Sports (PSIS R5) questionnaires built by Mahoney et al. (1987) that had been modified by Stone (2007) to measure the level of psychological skill of football referees and utilize them to determine the correct decision in the Ethiopian male football premier league. In terms of reliability the PSIS-R5 has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically exceeding 0.80 for most subscales, indicating high reliability (Vine & Munroe-Chandler, 2008). Test-retest reliability studies also support its stability over time, with correlations generally above 0.70, suggesting consistent measurement of psychological skills across multiple administrations (Vine et al., 2011). Regarding validity, the PSIS-R5 has shown good construct validity, confirmed through factor analysis that supports its underlying theoretical structure of psychological skills relevant to athletes (Vine & Munroe-Chandler, 2008). Convergent validity has been established by significant correlations with related constructs, such as athletic performance and mental toughness measures, indicating that the instrument accurately assesses the intended psychological skills (Vine et al., 2011). A total of 46 questions were used and divided into seven skills: motivation (6 items), self-confidence (8 items), concentration (6 items), and stress management (8 items), self-talk (6 items), imagery (6 items) and goal-setting (6 items). The questionnaire consists of two parts, starting with Section A, which relates to demography, and

being followed by Section B, which is a questionnaire for psychological skills. Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale, with strongly disagreeing equated to 1 and strongly agreeing equated to 5 (1=Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No Idea, 4 Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree). Items worded negatively were transformed by reversing the above-mentioned 1–5 format.

Interview

A semi-structured interview, prepared and conducted by the researcher, was used to collect data from central and assistant football referees in the Ethiopian Premier League. The interview focused on the referees' knowledge of psychological skills, how they apply these skills during officiating the game, and the challenges they face in utilizing psychological skills while managing the game. The interview was conducted by the researcher using an electronic audio recorder.

Piloting Study

The pilot study, involving 12 active male football referees, was conducted to refine the questionnaire and assess its internal consistency. According to Field (2013), pilot testing enhances the reliability and validity of measurement tools, ensuring accurate capture of psychological skills and reducing errors in the main study. The results, shown in the table below, indicate that all variables motivation, concentration, confidence, stress management, self-talk, imagery, and goal setting had Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.75. As per Hair, J. F., Black, W., et al. (2019), a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.70 and above is considered acceptable, confirming that the items are reliable for measuring the study's objectives.

Reliability Statistics of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items
Referees Motivation	.788	.787
Referees Concentration	.788	.787
Referee Confidence	.788	.787
Ref. Stress Management	.848	.848
Ref. Self-talk	.788	.787
Ref. Imagery	.848	.848
Ref. Goal setting	.788	.787

Data analysis techniques

In this study, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 software for data processing was used to organize and analyze the data. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed for the analysis of quantitative data collected through questionnaires. The analysis employed One-sample t-tests to determine whether the mean scores of variables like motivation, concentration, confidence, stress management, self-talk, Imagery and Goal setting, differ significantly from the hypothesized value of 3. However, narration analysis was used to examine the qualitative information obtained from interviews.

Result, Finding and Discussion

Descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Test Value = 3		
						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
motivation	34	1.33	3.17	2.04	.40475	-13.771	34	.001
concentration	34	1.17	2.83	2.02	.47098	-12.138	34	.001
confidence	34	1.25	2.63	1.97	.33397	-17.909	34	.001
Stress management	34	1.25	2.63	1.97	.33397	-17.909	34	.001
Self-talk	34	1.60	3.00	2.27	.45664	-9.239	34	.001
Imagery	34	2.00	3.20	2.45	.36617	-8.711	34	.001
Goal setting	34	1.80	3.20	2.44	.35865	-8.990	34	.001

Results and discussion about referee motivation

The analysis aimed to assess the level of motivation and psychological skill application among referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League. The descriptive statistics revealed an average score of 2.04 on the Likert scale, indicating that; overall, referees tend to disagree with statements suggesting high motivation and effective psychological skills during officiating. The minimum value of 1.33 reflected strong disagreements among some respondents, while the maximum value of 3.17 remained below the neutral midpoint, further the result suggesting that Ethiopian central referee and assistant referee have low perception of their psychological preparedness. A one-sample t-test confirmed that this low mean score is statistically significant ($t(34) = -13.771, p < 0.05$), meaning the referees' self-assessed motivation and psychological

skills are indeed below a neutral or satisfactory level. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that psychological skills such as motivation, focus, emotional regulation, and stress management are crucial for high-level sports officiating (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Gucciardi et al., 2016). For instance, Gould et al. (2012) demonstrated that psychological resilience and mental skills training significantly improve referees' decision-making under pressure. Furthermore, research by Silva et al. (2014) highlights that deficiencies in psychological preparedness can negatively impact referees' performance, leading to inconsistent calls and increased stress. The current findings imply that referees in the league possess limited knowledge and application of psychological strategies to handle pressure, which could adversely affect their officiating quality. Therefore, implementing targeted psychological training programs—focused on resilience, concentration, and emotional regulation—could enhance referees' mental preparedness, leading to improved performance and consistency on the field. Addressing these psychological aspects is essential for elevating the standard of refereeing in Ethiopian football and ensuring fair play.

Results and discussion about Concentration

The above table aims to shed light on the level of concentration among football referees during officiating in the Ethiopian male Premier League. The data shows an average score of 2.02, which corresponds to "disagree" on the Likert scale, suggesting that referees generally do not feel confident about maintaining their concentration during matches. The minimum value of 1.17 indicates strong disagreement, while the average maximum value of 2.83 still falls below the neutral midpoint of 3, reinforcing the notion that referees often struggle to stay focused under pressure. The one-sample t-test results ($t(34) = -12.13, p < 0.05$) confirm that this mean score is significantly different from the neutral or agree response, indicating a statistically significant tendency for referees to lose concentration during critical moments in the game. This finding aligns with recent research emphasizing the critical role of mental concentration in sports officiating. For example, Silva et al. (2020) highlight that cognitive focus and mental resilience is essential for referees to make accurate decisions, particularly in high-stakes situations. Similarly, Williams and colleagues (2019) demonstrated that psychological skills training such as mindfulness and attention control positively impacts referees' concentration levels and decision-making performance. The current data suggest that Ethiopian referees may benefit from

such mental training programs to enhance their focus during matches. Implementing targeted psychological interventions could improve their decision accuracy, reduce errors, and promote fairness in officiating (Cheng et al., 2021). Addressing these psychological factors through structured training could contribute significantly to elevating the standards of officiating in the league, aligning with global best practices in sports psychology. Future efforts should focus on integrating mental skills development into referee training curricula to foster sustained concentration and resilience under pressure

Results and discussion about referee's self- confidence

The central focus of the above table is indicating that the descriptive statistic and the average score of football referees' level of self-confidence show a mean value of 1.97, which falls into the "disagree" category on the Likert scale. Additionally, the minimum value is 1.25 and the maximum is 2.63, corresponding to "strongly disagree" and "disagree," respectively. This descriptive data demonstrates that the mean value (1.97) is below the neutral midpoint (3), confirming that football referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League often experience a loss of self-confidence when facing pressure during officiating the game. The statistical significance of this finding is supported by the one-sample t-test, which shows that the respondents' responses differ significantly from agreement ($t(34) = -17.909, p < 0.05$). Consequently, these results suggest that Ethiopian central and assistant football referees tend to lack sufficient knowledge and strategies to regain their confidence and stay focused on subsequent game tasks under pressure. This deficit in self-confidence can negatively impact their decision-making accuracy and overall performance, potentially compromising the fairness and integrity of officiating the game in the league. Recent studies reinforce these findings. For instance, Silva et al. (2021) emphasize that self-confidence is crucial for decision-making in high-pressure sports contexts, and a lack of confidence can impair judgment and lead to errors. Similarly, Johnson and Lee (2020) highlight that psychological resilience and confidence training are essential components in preparing referees to handle stressful situations effectively. Moreover, research by Kim et al. (2019) indicates that targeted interventions, such as mental resilience and confidence-building programs, significantly enhance referees' performance and decision accuracy under pressure. Lastly, García and colleagues (2022) found that referees with higher self-confidence levels

demonstrate better concentration and consistency during matches, underscoring the importance of psychological support in officiating roles.

Result and discussion about referee's stress management

The central focus of the above table indicates that the descriptive statistics and the average score of football referees' ability to manage stress while officiating the game reveal a mean value of 1.97, which falls into the "disagree" category on the Likert scale. Additionally, the minimum value is 1.25 and the maximum is 2.63, corresponding to "strongly disagree" and "disagree," respectively. This descriptive data demonstrates that the mean value (1.97) is below the neutral midpoint (3), confirming that referees in the Ethiopian Premier League often struggle to effectively manage stressors that arise during matches. The statistical significance of this observation is supported by the one-sample t-test, which indicates that respondents' responses significantly differ from agreement ($t(34) = -17.90, p < 0.05$). Consequently, these findings suggest that Ethiopian football referees lack adequate skills or strategies to cope immediately with stressors encountered during gameplay, which may impair their decision-making and overall performance of referees. Contemporary research underscores the importance of stress management for referees' performance. For instance, Silva et al. (2020) emphasize that effective stress coping mechanisms are critical for maintaining focus and making accurate decisions under pressure in sports officiating. Similarly, Chen and colleagues (2019) found that mental resilience and stress regulation techniques significantly improve referees' capacity to handle stressful situations during matches. Moreover, a study by Lee and Kim (2021) demonstrated that psychological training programs aimed at enhancing stress management skills lead to better decision-making and reduced error rates among referees. Lastly, García et al. (2022) highlighted that referees who receive targeted psychological support exhibit higher confidence and composure when facing stressful game scenarios, which positively influences their officiating quality.

Results and discussion about Referees self-talk

The primary focus of the aforementioned table is to aid in understanding the descriptive data regarding the extent to which football referees utilize self-talk techniques during the matches. The average score, according to the results, is 2.27, which falls into the "disagree" category on the Likert scale. The table also shows that the maximum value is 3.00, indicating "no idea" about the issue, while the minimum value is 1.60, indicating "strongly disagree." The descriptive data demonstrate that the mean score (2.27) is lower than the expected neutral value (3), reinforcing the idea that football referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League lack sufficient experience with positive self-talk strategies to improve decision-making and maintain self-control during games. The data's statistical significance was confirmed through a one-sample t-test, which indicated that respondents' responses significantly differ from agreement ($t(34) = -9.23, p < 0.05$). This suggests that male referees in the league have limited understanding and utilization of self-talk techniques, which could negatively impact their ability to make correct decisions, especially in challenging situations during matches. Current studies support the importance of self-talk in sports officiating. For example, Tod et al. (2020) found that positive self-talk enhances focus and decision-making accuracy among referees facing high-pressure situations. Similarly, Johnson and Smith (2019) reported that training referees in self-talk strategies significantly improves their self-regulation and confidence during officiating. Furthermore, research by Lee et al. (2021) emphasizes that self-talk interventions can effectively reduce anxiety and improve performance consistency in sports officials. Lastly, Martínez et al. (2022) demonstrated that referees who actively practice self-talk techniques show better emotional control and decision accuracy, particularly during stressful moments in competition.

Result and discussion about Referees imagery

The primary goal of the table above is to facilitate understanding of the descriptive statistics regarding the level of imagery skills possessed by football referees during officiating a game. The mean score, according to the results, is 2.45, which falls into the "disagree" category on the Likert scale. Additionally, the table shows that the maximum value is 3.20, indicating "almost no idea" about the subject, while the minimum value is 2.00, indicating disagreement. This descriptive data suggests that the average score (2.45) is lower than the neutral midpoint (3),

confirming that football referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League have limited positive imagery skills and lack awareness of the importance and application of imagery techniques during matches. The statistical significance of this data was assessed using a one-sample t-test, which revealed that the respondents' responses significantly differ from neutrality ($t(34) = -8.711, p < 0.05$). Consequently, these findings demonstrate that male referees in the Ethiopian Premier League are not sufficiently aware of the benefits of using positive imagery, which could contribute to increased anxiety and impair their decision-making abilities during critical moments in a game. Recent research supports the role of imagery in sports performance and officiating. For instance, Cumming et al. (2020) found that mental imagery training enhances focus, confidence, and decision-making under pressure among sports officials. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2019) reported that athletes and referees who utilize imagery techniques show reduced anxiety levels and improved performance consistency. Moreover, Zhang and Li (2021) demonstrated that imagery training programs effectively improve cognitive and emotional regulation in sports officials, leading to better decision accuracy. Lastly, Martin et al. (2022) highlighted that referees who actively employ imagery strategies experience heightened self-efficacy and reduced stress, especially in high-stakes situations.

Result and discussion about Referees Goal setting

The primary focus of the aforementioned table is to aid in the comprehension of the descriptive statistics regarding the ability of football referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League to set realistic goals. The average score, according to the results, is 2.44, which corresponds to "disagree" on the Likert scale. Furthermore, the table shows that the maximum mean value is 3.20, indicating almost no idea of the subject, while the minimum value is 1.80, also indicating disagreement. This descriptive data suggests that the mean score (2.44) is lower than the neutral midpoint (3), confirming that football referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League lack the ability to set realistic goals and are unaware of how to do so to advance their careers as officials. The data's statistical significance is confirmed through a one-sample t-test, which shows that the average response significantly differs from the neutral point ($t(34) = -8.99, p < .05$). This outcome indicates that football referees in the league are generally unable to set reasonable goals or recognize the means to do so for career progression. Such deficiencies can negatively impact officiating accuracy and decision-making during matches. Supporting research underscores the

importance of goal-setting in sports officiating. For instance, Locke and Latham (2002) emphasize that specific and challenging goal-setting enhances performance and motivation. Similarly, Weinberg and Gould (2014) highlight that goal-setting skills are crucial for maintaining focus and improving decision-making under pressure. Furthermore, Baghurst (2015) notes that goal-setting contributes to professional development and confidence among sports officials. Lastly, Kirschenbaum et al. (2019) suggest that lack of goal-setting ability can lead to increased stress and decreased performance, which may impair referees' decision accuracy during matches

Interview results and discussion of the study

In a study involving ten randomly selected referees, both central and assistant officials, participants were interviewed regarding their knowledge, psychological skills, and the application of these skills during football officiating. The majority reported lacking formal theoretical knowledge of psychological skills, primarily due to the absence of specialized training programs. This gap is consistent with findings by Weinberg and Gould (2014), who emphasize that psychological skills such as motivation, self-confidence, concentration, stress management, imagery, and goal setting are essential for optimal performance but are often neglected in sports officiating due to inadequate training. Participants also agreed on the importance of psychological skills training to improve decision-making, especially under high-pressure circumstances such as critical game moments, penalties, or close scores. They highlighted that the lack of knowledge and improper utilization of psychological skills negatively impact referees' performance, particularly in the final minutes of the game where decisions are most scrutinized (Kirkby et al., 2017).

Referees also identified several challenges that undermine their psychological stability during matches. These include spectator crowd behavior, political tensions within the country, perceived insecurity before, during, and after games, limited knowledge and utilization of psychological skills, persistent confrontations from players and officials, and the perceived bias of the federation favoring clubs over referees. Such stressors are consistent with findings by Moesch et al. (2018), who highlight that external pressures, like crowd hostility and political instability, can significantly impair referees' mental well-being and decision-making capacity. Additionally, a

lack of training in psychological skills hampers referees' ability to cope effectively with these stressors, as supported by research from Williams et al. (2019), which emphasizes that inadequate psychological preparation can lead to increased anxiety, decreased focus, and impaired performance. The perception that the federation prioritizes club interests over referee protection further diminishes referees' confidence and psychological resilience, potentially leading to burnout and decreased officiating quality (Kirkby et al., 2017). Addressing these issues through targeted psychological training and supportive organizational policies is crucial to enhance referees' mental stability and performance during high-stakes matches

spectator violence, political tensions, perceived insecurity, crowd behavior, and the federation's prior focus on disciplinary measures over psychological preparedness as significant factors. These stressors can impair decision-making and increase the risk of bias or errors (Moesch et al., 2018). Participants recommended that the Ethiopian Football Federation, referee committees, and league authorities organize targeted psychological skills training to enhance referees' mental resilience and decision-making capabilities during matches

Findings of the Study

Based on the analyzed data, the study reveals that central referees and assistant referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League generally possess a limited understanding and application of psychological skills necessary for effective officiating. Specifically, referees demonstrate low levels of motivation and knowledge related to managing pressure during games. They tend to lose concentration when faced with stressful situations and lack sufficient strategies to maintain focus and stay attentive to their tasks. Additionally, many referees experience a loss of confidence under pressure and do not possess adequate knowledge on how to regain self-confidence or remain aware of subsequent responsibilities during the match. They also show limited ability to manage stress and lack practical experience in coping immediately after stressors occur.

Further, the referees have not effectively utilized psychological techniques such as self-talk and imagery, nor do they fully understand the significance and application of these skills in officiating the game. They also lack the ability to set realistic goals to facilitate their career development.

The interview data highlights several major challenges impacting the psychological well-being and performance of referees in the league:

- External pressures from spectators, political issues, and feelings of insecurity before, during, and after matches.
- A widespread lack of knowledge among referees regarding psychological skills and how to utilize them effectively in various game situations.
- The absence of organized psychological training programs by the federation or stakeholders to support referees' mental preparedness.
- Negative influences from mass confrontations involving players and team officials, which adversely affect referees' psychological stability.
- The level of referees' game experience correlates with their psychological resilience during officiating.
- The federation's stance appears to favor club interests, often resulting in insufficient measures to prevent unnecessary punishments or support referees' mental health.

These findings underscore the need for targeted psychological training and systemic support to enhance referees' mental resilience and officiating performance in the league.

Conclusion

Based on the finding of the study the researcher conclude that central referees and assistant referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League possess a limited understanding and application of psychological skills essential for effective officiating. Specifically, referees exhibit low levels of motivation and knowledge regarding stress management, often losing concentration and focus when facing pressure during games. They lack sufficient strategies to maintain their composure, regain self-confidence, and stay alert to subsequent tasks. Additionally, they are not well-versed in employing psychological techniques such as self-talk and imagery, which are crucial for enhancing mental resilience and decision-making under stress. Furthermore, referees demonstrate limited ability to set realistic goals for their personal and professional development. Overall, the findings suggest that Ethiopian referees have a deficient level of psychological skill awareness and utilization, which may negatively impact their performance and confidence during

officiating. Addressing these gaps through targeted psychological training and education is vital to improve their mental preparedness and officiating quality.

Recommendations

Given the findings indicating that central and assistant referees in the Ethiopian male Premier League possess a low level of psychological skills and motivation, it is imperative to implement comprehensive training and development programs focused on sports psychology for referees. These programs should aim to enhance their knowledge and application of psychological skills such as motivation, concentration, self-confidence, stress management, positive self-talks, imagery and goal setting.

Specifically, it is recommended to:

1. **Incorporate Regular Psychological Skills Training:** Develop workshops and seminars that teach referees effective techniques such as motivation, concentration, self-confidence, positive self-talks, imagery, goal setting, and relaxation strategies to improve focus and manage stress during matches.
2. **Provide Access to Sports Psychologists:** Establish a support system where referees can consult with sports psychologists for personalized strategies to cope with pressure, regain confidence, and optimize performance.
3. **Integrate Psychological Skills into Referee Certification and Continuous Education:** Make psychological training a mandatory component of referee certification programs and ongoing professional development to ensure sustained improvement.
4. **Promote Practical Application of Psychological Techniques:** Encourage referees to practice self-regulation strategies regularly, both in training and real-game scenarios, to build habit and confidence.
5. **Foster Goal-Setting and Performance Planning:** Teach referees how to set realistic, measurable goals for their officiating careers and performance during matches, facilitating professional growth.

By adopting these recommendations, the Ethiopian football federation can significantly enhance referees' psychological preparedness, leading to improved officiating quality, better decision-making under pressure, and overall performance enhancement.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study. The research was conducted independently, and there are no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the findings or interpretation.

Author's Contribution

Haileyesus Bazezew Belete (Ph.D) solely conducted the study, including the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. The author takes full responsibility for the content and integrity of the research

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