

# Emotional management in refereeing: a proposal from psychological intervention

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## ABSTRACT

The role of referees has received limited attention within sport psychology interventions, despite the emotional and decision-making demands inherent to officiating. This study presents the implementation and evaluation of an emotional regulation workshop for football referees, with the aim of analysing perceived effectiveness and participant satisfaction. The sample consisted of 38 referees ( $M = 19.8$  years,  $SD = 2.91$ ) from the Football Federation of the Region of Murcia, officiating across different competitive categories. The intervention comprised three sessions focused on regulating psychological variables, incorporating practical strategies for application before, during, and after matches. Evaluation was conducted using an ad hoc questionnaire, including quantitative items (Likert scale from 0 to 10) and qualitative responses. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction across all sessions and highlighted the usefulness of the emotional regulation techniques. Most participants indicated that the skills acquired could be applied to personal and academic contexts. The main limitations were the absence of a pre-test measure and the time interval between sessions. Overall, the results suggest that this type of intervention may contribute significantly to improving psychological well-being and self-efficacy among referees.

**KEYWORDS:** sport psychology; referees; psychological intervention; perceived usefulness; satisfaction.

## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation (1946) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and mental health as the ability to recognise one's abilities, cope with life stresses and contribute productively to society. In sport contexts, mental health concerns not only athletes but also other agents such as coaches, families and referees, who face significant emotional and decision-making demands (Reardon et al., 2019). Sport Psychology seeks to promote both performance and well-being through strategies aimed at managing these psychological demands (Cantón Chirivella, 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2021).

Emotional processes play an important role in sport settings characterised by pressure, rapid decisions and social evaluation. This is particularly evident in refereeing, where officials must make decisions affecting competition outcomes while

facing criticism from players, coaches and spectators (Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Folkesson et al., 2002; Mascarenhas et al., 2005). Referees enforce the rules, judge the legality of actions and manage interactions with players, tasks requiring continuous decision-making under pressure and appropriate control of arousal and self-confidence (Arbinaga et al., 2023; Buceta, 2022).

Research indicates that situational stress, social pressure and rapid information processing may affect referees' decision-making accuracy and consistency (Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Mascarenhas et al., 2005). Exposure to aggression and criticism may also compromise emotional stability and officiating effectiveness, highlighting the importance of emotional regulation (Behnke et al., 2022; Buceta, 2022; Folkesson et al., 2002). Espín Pazmiño and Enderica Malo (2021) found that emotions do not

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significantly affect decision-making when referees possess adequate emotional regulation skills, whereas Guamán Saldaña et al. (2023) reported high levels of emotional exhaustion and motivational difficulties.

Despite growing interest in the psychological demands of refereeing, research on structured psychological interventions remains limited, with most studies focusing on describing emotional processes rather than evaluating applied training programmes. Therefore, further research is needed to explore practical strategies to improve emotional management in refereeing contexts.

The aim of the present study was to present the implementation of an emotional management workshop for football referees and to analyse participants' satisfaction and perceived usefulness for refereeing performance.

## METHODS

### Design

This study implemented a psychological workshop for football referees followed by a post-intervention evaluation. Participants' satisfaction and perceived usefulness were assessed through self-report measures administered after the final session. As no pre-intervention assessment or control group was included, the study corresponds to a descriptive post-intervention evaluation.

According to the classification proposed by Ato et al. (2013), this study followed a descriptive, non-probabilistic, cross-sectional selective design, based on self-report data collected at a single post-intervention time point. As no pre-intervention assessment or control group was included, no causal conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention can be drawn.

### Participants

The sample consisted of 38 football referees affiliated with the Football Federation of the Region of Murcia, officiating across different competitive categories. Most participants officiated in youth football (63.2%), followed by Second Territorial Division (26.3%), while Preferente (5.3%), First Regional Division (2.6%) and Second Regional Division (2.6%) were less represented. The mean age was 19.81 years ( $SD = 2.91$ ; range: 15–27 years); 86.8% were male and 13.2% female. Participation was voluntary, and inclusion criteria required that referees be actively officiating during the current season, be members of the Football Federation of the Region of Murcia, and provide informed consent.

## Measures and variables

Three PowerPoint presentations (one per session) were developed for the intervention, addressing emotional management topics in refereeing (emotions, emotional regulation, stress, arousal and performance). Evaluation was conducted using an ad hoc questionnaire assessing satisfaction and perceived usefulness. The questionnaire included four Likert-scale items (0–10), one dichotomous item (yes/no) regarding transfer to other life areas and open-ended questions for qualitative feedback. The main variables analysed were satisfaction with the workshop and perceived usefulness of the contents for refereeing performance and other contexts.

## Procedure

The intervention was conducted as part of the project "Promotion of Mental Health and Psychological Well-being in Sport", promoted by the Football Federation of the Region of Murcia and the Universidad de Murcia. The workshop consisted of three face-to-face sessions ( $\approx 60$  minutes each) delivered during referees' training sessions by a sport psychologist involved in the project. Sessions included brief theoretical explanations, group discussion and practical exercises based on refereeing situations, addressing emotional regulation, stress management, attentional focus and arousal regulation. After the final session, participants anonymously completed an online questionnaire evaluating their satisfaction and perceived usefulness of the workshop. Additional details about the workshop contents are presented in Table 1.

## Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and modes) to describe satisfaction and perceived usefulness. Qualitative responses were analysed through basic thematic categorisation to identify recurrent themes related to perceived usefulness, practical applicability and suggestions for improvement.

## RESULTS

Table 2 summarises the questionnaire results. Participants reported high satisfaction with the workshop (modal score = 10). Referees also indicated positive perceptions of usefulness for refereeing preparation and match performance (modal scores = 8), and most reported that the contents were transferable to non-sport contexts. Qualitative responses highlighted the usefulness and practical applicability of emotional regulation strategies, although some participants suggested improvements related to the duration and organisation of the sessions.

**Table 1.** Workshop Content on Emotional Management.

| Sessions | Contents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Observations                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Present difficulties in refereeing</li> <li>- Emotions</li> <li>- Functional analysis of behaviour</li> <li>- Emotional management techniques: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before the match</li> <li>• During the match</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Following the initial assessment of the participating referees, the first session was delivered, addressing topics related to the difficulties faced by referees. |
| 2        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stress and key aspects to consider</li> <li>- Expectations, attitude and performance</li> <li>- Techniques before, during and after the match</li> </ul>                                                                                                    | This session primarily focused on stress and the different variables that influence it, as well as on providing various techniques for its management.            |
| 3        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategies for emotional regulation and match management</li> <li>- Arousal and performance</li> <li>- Attentional focus</li> <li>- Self-talk</li> <li>- Assertive communication</li> </ul>                                                                 | This was the final session of the workshop, aimed at providing techniques to support effective functioning and refereeing performance during the match.           |

**Table 2.** Overall Results of the Satisfaction and Perceived Usefulness Questionnaire.

|                                                                                                    | Level  | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-----------|------------|
| Are you satisfied with the psychological training provided?                                        | 7      | 5         | 13.2       |
|                                                                                                    | 8      | 5         | 13.2       |
|                                                                                                    | 9      | 10        | 26.3       |
|                                                                                                    | 10     | 18        | 47.4       |
| To what extent do you think it has contributed to your preparation and training as a referee?      | 5      | 5         | 13.2       |
|                                                                                                    | 6      | 1         | 2.6        |
|                                                                                                    | 7      | 6         | 15.8       |
|                                                                                                    | 8      | 13        | 34.2       |
|                                                                                                    | 9      | 5         | 13.2       |
|                                                                                                    | 10     | 8         | 21.1       |
| To what extent do you think it has helped to improve your refereeing performance during the match? | 0      | 1         | 2.6        |
|                                                                                                    | 5      | 4         | 10.5       |
|                                                                                                    | 6      | 1         | 2.6        |
|                                                                                                    | 7      | 8         | 21.1       |
|                                                                                                    | 8      | 11        | 28.9       |
|                                                                                                    | 9      | 5         | 13.2       |
| Has the training been useful to you in other areas outside of sport?                               | 1(Yes) | 34        | 89.5       |
|                                                                                                    | 2 (No) | 4         | 10.5       |

## DISCUSSION

This study analysed the implementation of an emotional management workshop for football referees and evaluated participants' satisfaction and perceived usefulness. The results showed high satisfaction and a positive perception of the workshop's usefulness for refereeing preparation, match performance and everyday life.

These findings are consistent with the framework of Sport Psychology, which emphasises the role of psychological skills training in promoting performance and well-being (Cantón Chirivella, 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2021). In line with the World Health Organisation's perspective on mental health (World Health Organization, 1946), referees perceived the workshop as providing useful tools for emotional regulation, stress management and psychological preparation before matches.

Emotions and emotional intelligence are closely related to sports performance through processes such as anxiety regulation, attention and decision-making (Behnke et al., 2022; Bru-Luna et al., 2021; Canedo Nogueira et al., 2022; Espín Pazmiño & Enderica Malo, 2021; Llano Caiza, 2025; Merino-Prados et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2021). In refereeing, emotional regulation and arousal control are particularly relevant for decision-making under pressure (Buceta, 2022; Merino-Prados et al., 2023; Teques, 2025; Urra Tobar et al., 2018). The perceived usefulness reported suggests that the strategies addressed may help referees manage emotions and maintain optimal arousal levels, especially among young referees with limited experience.

Research has also highlighted risks of emotional exhaustion and demotivation among referees (Guamán Saldaña et al., 2023), supporting the relevance of psychological support programmes. Similar findings have been reported in brief psychoeducational interventions in sport populations showing improvements in emotional regulation and self-efficacy (Gostian et al., 2022; Mejía et al., 2024). Consistent with these results, referees emphasised the practical applicability of the strategies and the usefulness of experiential learning formats.

Some limitations should be considered. The study relied on a post-intervention evaluation without a control group or pre-intervention measurement, limiting causal interpretation. Future research should employ pre-post designs with control groups and validated instruments to assess variables such as emotional intelligence, perceived stress, self-confidence, or competitive anxiety. The dichotomous response used to assess transfer of learning may also have restricted response variability.

Despite these limitations, the workshop was positively evaluated by participants, highlighting the potential value of incorporating emotional management training into refereeing education programmes (Cantón Chirivella, 2023; Lochbaum et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2021). Future studies should examine these interventions using more robust designs, larger samples and objective indicators of performance and psychological well-being.

## CONCLUSIONS

The emotional management workshop generated high satisfaction among referees and was perceived as useful for refereeing preparation, performance and other areas of everyday life. These findings highlight the relevance of emotional regulation and stress management in refereeing contexts and support the inclusion of psychological training in referee education programmes. However, as the study relied on post-intervention perceptions without a control group or pre-post evaluation, the results should be interpreted with caution and further research using more robust designs is required.

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## CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Laura Gil Caselles — Conceptualization; Methodology; Project administration; Supervision; Validation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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