

Shefket, M. (2023). Establishing several features in the training of football referees in the Republic of Bulgaria. *Actual Issues of Modern Science. European Scientific e-Journal*, 27, 57–64. Ostrava.

DOI: 10.47451/ped2023-09-01

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Establishing Several Features in the Training of Football Referees in the Republic of Bulgaria

Abstract: The development of the football game imposes significant demands on the referees. Applicants for the respective categories must meet certain conditions, such as not only mastering the rules of the game, but also possessing knowledge of the English language, to be physically and mentally prepared. In this aspect, an electronic questionnaire aimed at Bulgarian football referees has been developed. It contains questions bearing information about the social and demographic characteristics of the people examined, about the difficulties in terms of physical and theoretical preparation of the respondents, as well as for the practical application of the rules of the football game on the field. The study subject is the football game. The study object is the signs characterizing some peculiarities in the training of football referees in the Republic of Bulgaria. The study purpose is to reveal some peculiarities in the training of football referees in Bulgaria. The results are being analyzed, conclusions and recommendations are being formulated.

Keywords: football, football refereeing, rules of the football game, physical and theoretical training.

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Установяване на някои особености при подготовката на съдии по футбол в Република България

Резюме: Развитието на футболната игра налага съществени изисквания към реферите. Кандидатите за съответните категории трябва да отговарят на определени условия, като освен владението на правилата на играта, в това число да притежават знания по английски език, да са физически и психически подготвени. В този аспект е разработена електронно анкетна карта, насочена към български рефери по футбол. Тя съдържа въпроси, носещи информация за социално-демографските характеристики на изследваните лица, за трудностите по отношение на физическата и теоретичната подготовка на респондентите, както и за практическото приложение на правилата на футболната игра на терена. Резултатите са анализирани и са формулирани изводи и препоръки.

Ключови думи: футбол, футболно съдийство, правила на играта футбол, физическа и теоретична подготовка.

Abbreviations:

AVAR is Assistant Video Assistant Referee,

VAR is Video Assistant Referee.

Introduction

The development of the football game imposes significant demands on the referees. “Football refereeing is a major factor not only for the proper running of the game and the regulating of the relationships between the players, but also for its qualitative stimulation. Therefore, refereeing is the object of extremely great attention among the world’s sport community” (*Ignatov, 2021, p. 15*).

While at the beginning of its development football managed without a referee, only with an agreement between the captains of the two teams, “as time went on, when honors and rewards acquired a role for the participants and victory became important, it began to resort to a person who receives trust and who, could reach an agreement between the parties, in controversial moments. This is how the figure of the arbitrator was born—without having an official appointment and without having the figure of an athlete” (*Tsanev, 1992, p. 9*).

Football life in Bulgaria gives a positive impetus to the appearance and development of football refereeing. According to Dimitar Tsanev, “in the early period of the development of Bulgarian football, this role was usually assigned to the most prepared teachers, football players and activists. The determination of the referee took place according to mutual agreement of the two clubs, as the main criterion for his selection was to have trust in him.” (*Tsanev, 1996, p. 21*) “The year of 1920, marks the beginning of football refereeing. The first Referee Section (for football and basketball) was created in Sofia” (*Shopov, 2009, p. 22*). “The referees for football and basketball—both men and women—entered the collective Refereeing Board, and later on 2.12.1924 the referees for ice hockey and tennis joined, and on October 6, 1926, also the referees for hazen.” (*Tsanev, 1996, p. 23*)

In modern sports society, according to the Rules for Football Refereeing in Bulgaria, legal capacity is acquired after completing a training course for a football referee and successfully passing an exam, subject to the following conditions:

- Possess Bulgarian citizenship or be permanent residents of the country;
- Be 16 years old or turning 16 in the year of application;
- To have completed primary education;
- Not have been convicted of an intentional crime, regardless of subsequent rehabilitation;
- To be physically and mentally healthy.

Those who wish to participate in a training course, which is organized by the District or Zonal Council of the BFU (ZRC or RRC), together with the Manager of referees—in amateur football. The training takes place within a minimum of 15 studying hours. The training program includes lectures on the Rules of the Game, on the internal acts of the BFS and the relevant ones national and international acts and practical classes.

After completing the course, a theory exam is taken, which includes questions from the Training Program and a test to assess one's physical condition according to a standard approved by the RC at the BFU. The organizer notifies each candidate of the date, place, and time of the test at least three days in advance. The exams are taken in front of an exam committee consisting of three members, determined by the RC at the BFS. A candidate who has successfully passed the theory test and the physical fitness test receives a certificate of completed refereeing course. A candidate for a judge is registered in the relevant District / Zonal Council of the BFS (RRC or ZRC) based on a written request. The certificate for completed referee course is attached to the application.

Refereeing has the following categories in descending order:

1. International judge;
2. International Assistant Judge;
3. Referee or VAR in First professional league;
4. Assistant Referee or AVAR in First professional league;
5. Head referee in the Second Professional League;
6. Assistant referee in the Second Professional League;
7. Head referee in the Third League;
8. Assistant referee in the Third League;
9. Head referee in Elite youth groups U-19, U-17 and U-15;
10. Assistant referee in Elite youth groups U-19, U-17 and U-15;
11. Judge, supervisor or assistant in Zonal Championships;
12. Judge, leader or assistant in District Championships.

Candidates for the respective categories should meet certain conditions, such as mastering the rules of the game, having knowledge of the English language, as well as to be physically and mentally prepared. In this aspect, an electronic questionnaire aimed at Bulgarian football referees has been developed.

The study purpose is to reveal some peculiarities in the training of football referees in Bulgaria.

The study subject is the football game.

The study object is the signs characterizing some peculiarities in the training of football referees in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Contingent of the study is about 48 football referees.

A survey was conducted with over 50 football referees in the period of February 2023—May 2023. Their participation in the study is voluntary and anonymous. 48 survey cards were filled incorrectly.

To achieve the study purpose, the following tasks were set:

- create a survey card in an electronic environment;
- conduct a survey with football referees;
- summarize and analyzing the obtained results;
- disclose conclusions and recommendations for practice.

In addition to the proposed answers, it is possible to formulate one's own opinion, as well as to select more than one answer to some of the questions. This is also the reason for the total

percentage of a question to exceed 100%.

The first part of the survey card contains questions bearing information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed persons—age, educational level, experience, type of settlement. The second part groups questions that explore difficulties in relation to the physical and theoretical training of the respondents, and the third set of questions completes the profile of the football referee in terms of motivation for self-training, search for opportunities for realization and relations with the members of the colleges.

Results

The results of the answers to the questions related to the socio-demographic status of the respondents (from the first to the fifth question in the questionnaire) show the following - the age of those who filled out the questionnaire varies from 24 to 50 years, with the largest share being 30 of them between 20 and 30-year-old, 50% of respondents live in settlements under 50,000 residents, five have master's degrees, seven of them have completed secondary education, and the rest have bachelor's degrees.

An important part of the practice of refereeing is communication. Given the entry of a large number of foreigners into the Bulgarian championship, as well as the fact that the command of the English language is a mandatory condition for moving to an international category, the poll has included the proposed question “What level do you speak English at?”. The answers to this question are depicted in Appendix ([Figure 1](#)).

As can be seen from the figure, the largest percentage—38% of those surveyed share that they have an “average” command of the language—this answer leads to the conclusion that they most likely did not attend a training course and accordingly do not have a document certifying the corresponding level, this applies to all who answered low, good and excellent, i.e., in our opinion only twelve of the respondents have a certificate of completion.

Figure 2 illustrates the respondents' answers regarding their current development as a football referee. As can be seen from the figure, 32 of them serve amateur football (AL), the remaining 16 are in professional football (PL), 20 are referees (R), and 28 are assistant referee (AR) ([Figure 2](#)).

The real difficulties of refereeing in football are to a large extent the high dynamics, the rapid change of game situations where referees are expected to make absolutely impartial and error-free decisions, to the great physical loads that referees have to endure during the match, as well as the psychological tension and responsibility for the decisions made. “The mental load that a football referee endures during a match, and often after it, is huge. He can never become a crowd favorite. It quickly forgives and forgets even the most incredible mistakes of her idols—the football players. Having unlimited power on the field, the football judge has done his work best when he has exercised it almost unnoticed.” ([Rusev, 1998, p. 11](#))

Some sports experts argue that the sports referee should be able to put himself in the place of a player or coach, which will allow him to correctly assess their behavior in each specific case, considering all the nuances, maintaining objectivity, calculating pros and cons and finding the optimal solution.

A variety of referees' responses was observed regarding the following questions from the second group of the questionnaire, informing about the difficulties in the process of

refereeing practice. Regarding the specifics of football refereeing, one of the most important criteria is physical training, and it is subject to inspection by the Refereeing Commission and the fitness instructors of the Refereeing Commission four times a year.

To the question “How many times do you train a week?”, six referees answered one, two and five times a week, at most—16 of them train three times a week, and only two of them—six (*Figure 3*).

Related to this question is the inquiry “In what manner do you train?”, the answers to which are shown in Appendix (*Figure 4*). The analysis shows that 34 referees train alone and 24 do in a group. The number exceeds 48, as some of them specified both forms of preparation.

According to G. Ignatov “The physical training of referees solves two main tasks: 1. Comprehensive development of the motor system; 2. Improvement of specific motor abilities” (*Ignatov, 2021, p. 140*). The test of Cooper is the main criterion for determining the physical fitness of the judges until 2007. Later, before the actual test, a shuttle run of 4 x 10 meters is held for 12 minutes, then another change comes 4 x 10 meters, 1 x 1400 meters, 2900 meters in 12 minutes. At the time of research, 2 x 50 meters (each run in 7.5 seconds, 2 x 200 meters (each run of 200 meters in 35 seconds), 2900 meters in 12 minutes. Since the 2008/2009 season, 2 tests have been introduced by FIFA—sprint 6 x 40 meters in 90 seconds walking and returning to the starting position and endurance—150 meters smooth running and 50 meters walking in the execution of the tests, norms with different values for men and women, as well as for profiling the referees, have been adopted. 2020/21 year, judges cover the following physical standards: R—2 x 40 meters and SDS, and AR—CODA, 2 x 30 meters and ARIET.

The next question “Do you have difficulties meeting the physical standards?” provides evidence that six of the respondents have difficulties every time, the answer “sometimes” was chosen by four referees, two—mention that if they are injured, they cope with difficulty, and all the others indicate that they do not encounter any difficulties. None of the interviewed referees have trouble in covering the theoretical exams—question 10 of the questionnaire, and all declare that they monitor the changes in the rules of the game.

The next group of questions provides information about the mastery in the theory of the rules for the game and their application on the field. Of interest are the answers to the question “How often do you enrich your theoretical knowledge?” (*Figure 5*). The respondents indicated the proposed options almost equally. The fact that 29% of the respondents remember the rules of the game only before the theory exams announced by the judges’ committee is alarming. The information provided by the answers in the next question “Do you participate in training seminars?”, is also related. As can be seen in Appendix (*Figure 6*), ten of the referees never attend seminars, 18 of them attend all the ones announced, and the rest choose the answer “sometimes”.

The most difficult rule to interpret is rule 12 “Foul play and misconduct” (16 respondents indicated this in their answers), rule 11 “Ambush” was noted by ten of them, and the rest did not encounter difficulties (*Denev, 2018, pp. 87-88*).

These data also correspond with the results obtained from the question “Are you provided with enough information regarding the knowledge of the rules of the game?”, as on this the referees almost unanimously gave the opinion that they receive regularly accessible information, only two have a contrary judgment.

According to V. Zhechev, “the general values and norms, patterns of thinking and behavior characterizing the culture of modern society are manifested in a wide variety of specific features valid for certain social groups and are expressed in their style and way of life” (*Zhechev, 1998, p. 12*). “Personality is considered in the process of its development in a specific group in interpersonally and intergroup interaction, and the social group is considered as a small meso- or macro-group” (*Aleksieva & Kirov, 2019, p. 72*). According to one united classification of social groups, the group is considered as the association of human individuals with the same or the same social position, equal social status or approximately equal, the same object of activity or the same interests that usually unite people in groups (*Markov, 2014, p. 47*). It is therefore inevitable to examine the relationships within the Football Referees Guild. Forty of the people surveyed choose the answer “friendly”, while the rest stop at “professional”.

The training of soccer referees is one of the key issues guaranteeing the adaptation of the soccer player subject to the specific requirements set by the soccer game. The professionalism of the judge largely determines the level of performance of the contestants during a match.

“The bidirectionality of the stress-satisfaction relationship has been proven. Stress in the work environment causes a decrease in satisfaction, and dissatisfaction becomes additional source of stress. In this sense, satisfaction should be considered as a consequence factor of stress” (*Gecheva, 2015, p. 180*). The next question from the questionnaire “Do you think you have reached the maximum in your development as a judge?” is also in this aspect. The answers given are 20 positive, two respondents answer that they have no opinion, the rest indicate that this maximum for them is yet to come.

The position of those surveyed about the profiling of judges is almost categorically the opinion that they like it – 38, eight did not give a positive vote, and two have no opinion.

In relation to the question “Do you have difficulty meeting the physical standards?”, there is also the question “Which aspects of your training do you find weakness and where do you find the necessity to direct your attention in?” After a graphical analysis of the previous question is presented in Appendix (*Figure 8*), from the review of *Figure 9*, it is clear that despite the respondents’ statement that they do not encounter difficulties in meeting the physical standards, 56% of them understand the need to increase their workload during training, four each indicated other topics as – mental, theoretical preparation, diet, etc. (*Figure 9*).

A large part of the referees surveyed (56%) do not encounter any difficulties during a football match, 15% point to the team headquarters as the biggest difficulty, as well as the behavior of some of the football players, hand play makes judgments difficult for four of them, and quick decision-making is not a strong point for two of them (*Figure 10*).

Conclusion

From the summaries made in the text, some basic characteristics can be deduced regarding the socio-demographic profile, the physical and theoretical training of the interviewed football referees, as well as the difficulties they encounter during a football match:

1. The respondents are mostly between 20 and 30 years old, most have a university degree, and English language proficiency is a skill documented only ¼ of them.
2. The physical training of the referees is unplanned and without a clear training plan

structured according to the stage of the football championship.

3. Participation in seminars to increase theoretical training is not a priority for 63% of them, which naturally leads to difficulties in the conversion of the rules of the game into decisions during a match, with the most complicated being Law 11 “Ambush” and Law 12 “Foul play and misconduct”.

Based on the formulated conclusions, a discussion can be sought to prepare and provide an appropriate training programme according to the sports calendar for holding the football championship under the “autumn-spring” model, which is tailored not only to the training load and its management, but also according to the profiling of referees.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

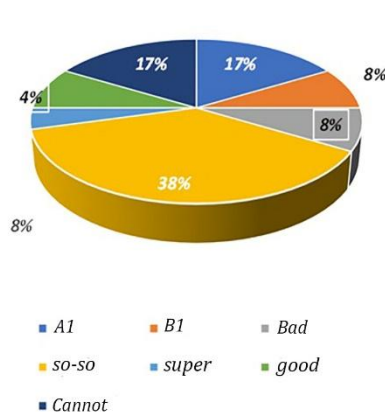


Figure 1. What is level of English proficiency?

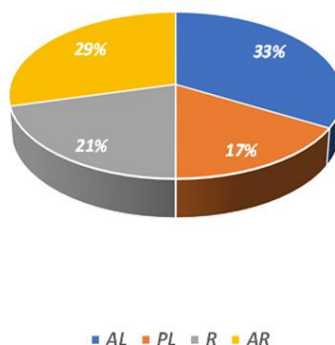


Figure 2. Which referee rank are you?

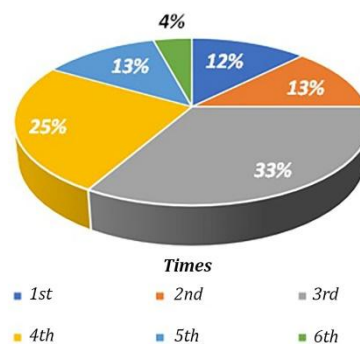


Figure 3. How many times do you train during the week?

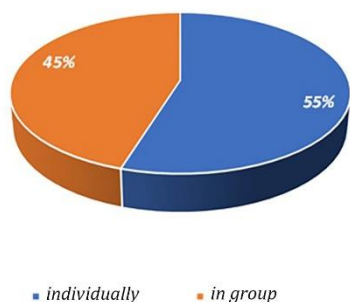


Figure 4. What manner do you train in?

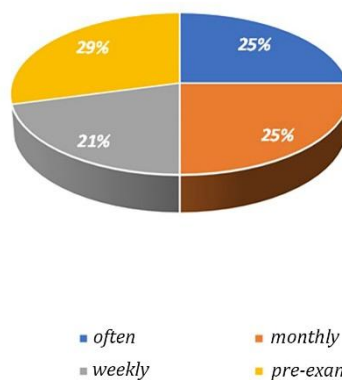


Figure 5. How often do you enrich your theoretical knowledge?

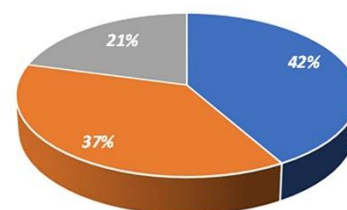


Figure 6. Do you participate in professional development seminars?

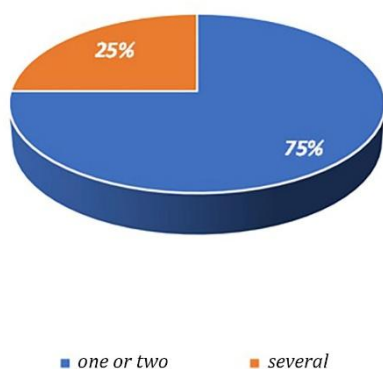


Figure 7. How many assignments do you get per week?

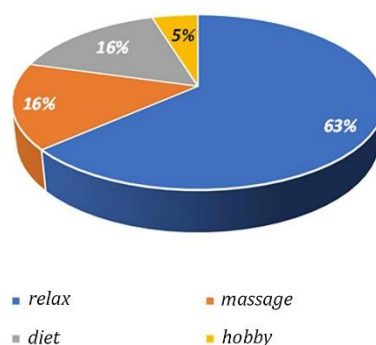


Figure 8. How do you recover?

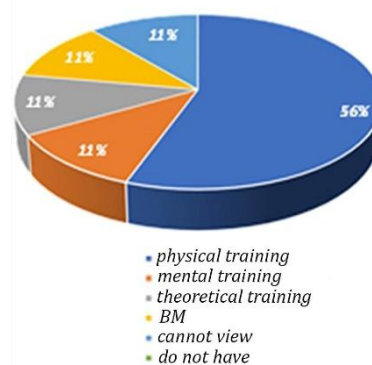


Figure 9. In which aspects of your training do you find weakness and where do you find the necessity to direct your attention?

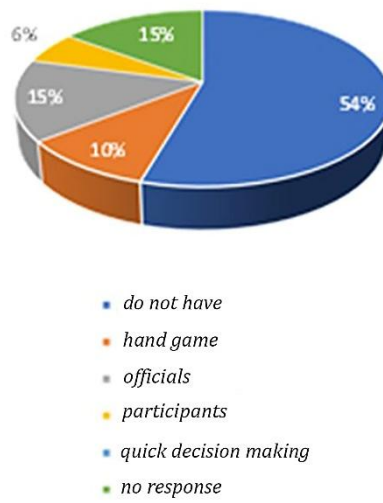


Figure 10. What difficulties do you encounter most often?