

Career stages in romanian football refereeing – the path from referee course to the FIFA Badge

ANDREI ANTONIE

Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland, FINLAND

Published online: July 31, 2022

(Accepted for publication July 15, 2022)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2022.07211

Abstract:

Football refereeing has become more demanding in terms of physical and mental preparation. Elite football referees are regarded as athletes these days and the most recent changes have brought major challenges in terms of job and occupation. Thus, top-level football referees have taken the path towards professionalization. The aim of this study is to create a career model for Romanian football referees. The present study uses guided in-depth interviews involving five Romanian top league referees (N= 5) and they were on-line due to pandemic. The proposed career model has five stages and represents the professionalization path from a leisure activity to a full-time job. Each stage represents a certain period in the referee's life, and the required skills for each level will be discussed in this part of the study. *Exploration* represents the Referee Course and Grassroots football. *Implementation* is the second period and is the Fourth League (the highest district league). *Consolidation* is the Third League, the lowest national league. The Second League is represented by the *stabilization* period. *Maintenance* is most important period in a referee's career because they are refereeing at the highest national level and have the opportunity to be selected as an international referee. Concluding, football refereeing cannot be seen anymore as a leisure activity and more as a profession and a full-time job. Football organizations are taking into consideration more and more about refereeing and its importance in the game development. The proposed model can be applied to middle-size football countries, where refereeing has the same features as the Romanian one. Anyhow, elite football refereeing took an inexorable path towards professionalization in most of the countries worldwide.

Key Words: *refereeing, career, professionalization, football, Romania*

Introduction

Football refereeing may also be defined as the art of managing human behavior by enforcing the laws of the game. Officiating is a sequential series of processes and responses including Vision, Thinking, Decision-Making and Value Judgment. An official should be capable of responding promptly to any infringement of the rules and make a prompt value judgement of a player's actions. If we consider a referee as a state official, they could be regarded as a kind of police officer because they are closely following the match, a federal prosecutor about to summarize, a judge making a decision and an executive officer enforcing the law.

Football officiating has seen major changes over the last 35 years. Initially, a referee team comprised three members: a referee and two linesmen. In 1991, a fourth official was designated as a replacement in case a referee was injured and also as an assistant to the referee team, not only in administrative tasks but also on the pitch during the game. From 1992 onwards, referees had to decide whether they wanted to be a referee or an assistant referee. Football has changed dramatically and the speed and intensity of the game has increased, making the referee's job significantly more demanding. In 2009, two more referees, known as *additional referees*, were added to the team of officials. They were positioned on the touchline to the side of the goal in order to detect any infringement in the penalty area. In 2017, one of the most significant changes in football and refereeing was the introduction of Video Assistant Refereeing (VAR). A referee and an assistant referee are now appointed as VARs in order to help the referee team whenever clear and obvious mistakes are made during a match. It is important to mention that these major changes took place in the top leagues of each country, as well as in international competitions and tournaments.

Football studies primarily focus on the social and economic aspects of football. The scientists focused mostly on football players from the junior level until they retire. In their study, Pina et al. (2018) revealed that there were only 267 articles about football referees divided into the following key themes: technical performance (90), physical performance (74), organization (42), psychology (27), physiology (20). The topic of referee career development has started to become the focus of research but is still a relatively unknown field. Horn & Reis (2016) focused on career development in Brazil but one of the limitations of their study is language, because the study was written in Portuguese. Rullang et al. (2017) studied the reasons why referee careers ended from the perspective of burn out and drop out of German referees. Further, Webb (2022) analyzed the career evolution and professionalization of English referees and it might be the most relevant research for my study, but it has

limitations because of the country and number of referees [All big five football countries professionalized their referees (England, Italy, France, Germany and Spain)]. In 2021, Mendes et al. studied the Portuguese football referees from the career development perspective. They have a quantitative approach, focusing more on the personal experiences and not providing a model which might be used by the Referee Associations, contrary to this study which focus more on a qualitative approach and at the end provides a career model not only for Referee Associations but also for referees.

A football referee's career is fairly similar in most countries. The difference is in the time frame and skills needed to be included on the FIFA list. It is harder to be included on the FIFA list in one of the big five European football nations than to become an international referee in any other football nation. Moreover, refereeing might be considered a full-time job in some countries, whereas in other countries, not being included on the FIFA list will result in referees dropping out. Furthermore, a referee's career is unstable from many perspectives: medical (twice a year a referee has to pass a fitness test or may sustain injuries) and performance related (a match in which a referee makes serious errors could ruin their career).

The aim of the study is to determine the career stages of Romanian football referees. Moreover, each stage revealed certain features. The main contribution of this study is to create an ideal career development path and the professionalization stages from the grassroots level to being included on the FIFA list in Romanian refereeing based on the career experiences of five top league referees. One of the limitations of this study is that it only considers referees and not assistant referees, even though they have the same career path until they are included on the FIFA list, at which point they become part of a referee team. Even if an assistant referee is highly skilled, if their country of origin does not have referees at the same level, an assistant referee will not have the opportunity to officiate in any major tournaments. Another limitation of this study is that it only analyses the career path of male Romanian referees.

Research method

My own football refereeing career started in 2002 and my promotion to the elite level of Romanian refereeing (Liga 1) took place in 2017. Thus, I have not had to deal with any red tape regarding working closely with all elite referees. Being part of an elite referees' group, I have come to know the group and establish both a professional and a personal relationship. Moreover, being a football referee helped me to get closer to the studied phenomenon and basically become part of it, although this could arguably cause challenges in terms of objectivity.

Interviews were the chosen research method for this study because a referee needs to be able to clearly describe their career based on their experiences. Romanian referees elite group consist in 26 referees and five of them were chosen using criterion sampling and were informed beforehand about the purpose of the study. All of them have had at a certain moment during their career the FIFA badge. They received detailed information about the study and how the interviews would be used. The referees were guaranteed anonymity and pseudonyms were used in order to protect their identity. It could be that the referees' responses to critical questions might cause them to respond in a "politically correct" way because they might be concerned that an honest response could affect them if anyone were to find out.

An in-depth and guided approach to the interviews was adopted in this study, and all questions were theme based. Bearing in mind that the Romanian FA has no official documents about refereeing in terms of promotion criteria or any other documents regarding referees' careers, the interview themes were constructed based on my own experiences as a referee and were as follows: General aspects of refereeing, Individual career history, Personal development, General social aspects of refereeing, Actual promotion system and Improvement proposals for the promotion system. All the interviewed referees had to answer the same questions based on the above themes. All the interviews were conducted online in Romanian in December 2020 (via zoom) due to the pandemic situation (COVID-19 restrictions). Each of them had to answer the same questions and in the same order. Content analysis was used and the interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded. Each stage of the proposed model was determined by the keyword found in the interviews. Comparing the answers of each question, concluded in choosing the most complete answers, while the most relevant quotations were translated in English and used in this study in order to validate the career development model.

Theoretical framework

In recent decades, careers have been a key topic in people's lives. Thus, there has been an increasing amount of literature on career and career development concepts. Hall defines a career as "the lifelong sequence of role-related experiences of individuals." (Hall, 2002, p. 10) In contrast, Sears considers a career as "the individual's work and leisure that take place over his life span." (Sears, 1982, p. 138) Thus, a career may be defined as the lifelong sequence of jobs or leisure activities experienced by individuals during their life.

According to Sharf, "career choice applies to decisions that individuals make at any point in their career about particular work or leisure activities that they choose to pursue at that time." (Sharf, 1997, p. 3) These days, young people strive to find the right workplace and environment that can offer them personal satisfaction and growth. Not only are they are forced to make decisions about their future career earlier than in the past, they are also forced to make decisions about their leisure activities. The same situation applies to football. Junior

footballers, who do not have many opportunities to become professional players, have to choose whether they want to continue playing at a lower level or become referees, which could take them to a higher level. There are situations in which active players also work as officials (it is accepted although an individual cannot play and referee at the same level) and choose a career only when they are forced to.

Miller argues that career development is “a learning process, so cognitive changes result in changes in vocational behaviors”. (Miller, 1968, p. 18) Career development may be conceptualized as “the lifelong process of managing learning, work, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving future.” (Sears, 1982, p.138) Considering that during our lives we make certain career decisions, the career development process is a lifelong learning process that leads to changes in vocational behavior resulting from personal growth and professional maturity.

Super’s theory

Super’s theory (cited in Ireh) proposed that there are four stages in an individual’s career development: *exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement*. These stages are based on the roles played by each person in society (studying, working, family, leisure activities). The importance of these roles can be seen by a person’s participation in an activity, their commitment, or how much they value it.

Furthermore, each stage is divided into smaller time frames: The *exploration stage* (15 to 25 years of age) – which includes information about different jobs, career alternatives and starting to work – has the following substages: *crystallization* (a person decides what they want to do), *specification* (period when a young person tries to find employment), and *implementation* (a person plans their career objectives). The *establishment stage* ranges from 25 to 45 years of age and refers to the start of working life. The establishment stage’s substages are: *stabilizing* (settling down in a job and getting used to it, meeting the job’s requirements), *consolidating* (being comfortable with the job and becoming more competent in the position), and *advancing* (greater responsibility, bigger salary). The *maintenance stage* is between 45 and 65 years of age (a person maintains their job and position). The substages are: *holding* (keeping a job) and *innovating* (contributing something to the profession). *Disengagement* (65 years of age and above) is the final stage and is divided as follows: *deceleration* (less time at work), *retirement planning* and *retirement*. Super’s conclusion was that career decisions continue throughout life. (Ireh, 2000, p. 32–33)

Super’s theory is complex because it is based on following a person throughout their life. Refereeing can be a lifelong career development process, not only a brief moment in an individual’s life.

Weber’s theory of professionalization

Professionalization is not a new concept and represents the path from an occupation to a profession. According to Vollmer and Mills, professionalization represents “an indigenous effort to introduce order into an area of vocational life which is prey to the free-playing and disorganizing tendencies of a vast, mobile and differentiated society undergoing continuous change. It seeks to clothe a given area with standards of excellence, to establish rules of conduct, to develop a sense of responsibility, to set criteria for recruitment and training, to ensure a measure of protection for members, to establish collective control over the area, and to elevate it to a position of dignity and social standing in the society.” (Vollmer & Mills, 1966, p. 11)

Weber (cited in Ritzer) identified 11 characteristics of professionalization: power, general systematic knowledge, rational training, vocational qualification, specialization, the existence of a clientele, salaries, promotions, professional duties, a distinctive way of life and a full-time occupation. (Ritzer, 1975, p. 631) Each of these elements will be presented in this chapter as part of the professionalization process. However, the most important concept is vocational qualification, defined by the National Council of Vocational Qualifications as “a statement of competence clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment and further learning, issued to an individual by a recognized awarding body” (Norman & Bonnett, 1995, p. 59). According to the same organization, there are five levels to vocational qualification, as many as the proposed referee career model. Thus, each stage of the career model will also be analyzed from a vocational qualification perspective.

Referees’ career development model and professionalization

When I started refereeing, I wondered how many stages I would have to complete, then I set my goals.

There were five stages [from grassroots football to Liga 1] and I dedicated time to them and eventually completed them. (Referee 1)

There are five stages to the proposed model of career development in Romanian refereeing and each stage is specifically based on refereeing in Romania. The career development model proposed in this study is based on Super’s theory. The stages are: *Exploration, Implementation, Consolidation, Stabilization and Maintenance* and are shown in Figure 1.

A pyramid was used to emphasize the low number of referees in Romania who reach the top level of refereeing. This means that out of 4000 Romanian referees, only 25 reach the top league and just seven the international level (FIFA list).



Figure 1. The career development model for Romanian football referees proposed by Andrei Antonie based on Super's career development theory (1953).

Although the model is inspired by Super's theory, in my model does not refer to a specific time frame. It basically represents a football league in which referees are doing their job. Thus, the duration of each stage will depend on the skills of each referee and their opportunity for promotion. Some of them might stop at the *consolidation* or the *stabilization* stage. The ideal situation is when a referee reaches the *maintenance* stage.

Results and discussion

This study follows an ideal referee's career path from the first referee training course until retirement as an international referee, which could be regarded as a professionalization path in refereeing.

Becoming a football referee

I started refereeing because I liked the idea of justice, discipline and honesty. (Referee 1)

People who are not the most talented footballers but who want to be involved because of their love of the game might start refereeing. Young persons who are involved in football as players but who do not have many opportunities to become professional players and want to remain in football could choose refereeing as an alternative option. Refereeing is an alternative option to playing football but still allows someone to be involved in the game.

For me, refereeing is the continuation of an unsuccessful football career. Most referees are poor players who want to reach a certain level and because they are unable to achieve this as players, they choose refereeing. (Referee 5)

All the referees agreed that they realized that a good alternative option for their football career was refereeing because of their limited football skills.

Exploration – Referee Course and Grassroots Football

The *Exploration* stage lasts for around two years depending on the needs of each district football association, meaning the number of registered referees and the number of senior football leagues. The first part of the *Exploration* stage is the referee course, which lasts for around six months; the second part is characterized by grassroots football.

Being a referee means continuing with my playing life because I've been part of football since I was a kid. I've always wanted to be involved in football, and I became a referee because my playing career ended and I felt I only wanted to be involved in football. I'm not interested in anything other than football. Half of my life is dedicated to my family and the other half is dedicated to football. (Referee 3)

Referees' Course

County referee committees should pay more attention to new referees. We don't have proper conditions for them although we have a projector, a DVD player and a laptop. We used to meet once a week before the pandemic, but this was not enough to explain to them what refereeing really meant. Anyway, the first step in refereeing in Romanian is a self-teaching activity. (Referee 3)

Unfortunately, the county referee committees have limited infrastructure for training new referees. The only teaching material is the book "Laws of the Game". Moreover, not many high-level referees are interested in teaching on the referee course and those who actually run the courses apparently do not have teaching skills. Thus, new referees are forced to figure things out for themselves on the pitch, during a match.

Refereeing at grassroots level

The junior [up to U-15] matches are the most difficult due to their strange dynamic, and the referee doesn't know what to call. (Referee 4)

There is no difference between a referee and an assistant referee in grassroots football because the officials do both jobs, depending on their appointments. Also, the matches are not supervised by a referee observer. Thus,

many officials have to do the job themselves without receiving any feedback about their work. Basically, a new official spends the first year after the referee course at the grassroots level, officiating at matches such as mini-pitch and junior football. It is therefore a very emotional period and they can enjoy the game and not feel a high level of pressure.

I remember with great joy and fondness, apart from the first match at which I was supposed to officiate, which I haven't forgotten but which was not very important, because it was postponed, which is not a great memory. I remember a U-14 match in 2003 and the winner went through to the finals. It was a beautiful period when I was refereeing important games that decided the champions. (Referee 5)

Implementation – Liga 4 (Fourth League)

The *Implementation* stage refers to Liga 4 (the Fourth League), the highest regional league. Getting to Liga 4 may be the easiest step in refereeing because there is no exam and promotion is the reward for receiving a refereeing qualification. The only requirement is to pass the physical and theoretical tests organized by each county referee committee. Thus, most referees would officiate for at least some of the time at this level. Liga 4's characteristics is given by the players who run this division.

In Liga 4, football is a contact sport. It's a difficult task for a referee, because all the older and more experienced players from the national leagues play in this league and, of course, they can't run. It's difficult for young referees to make the right decisions. (Referee 2)

Even though it is difficult for young referees to make the right decisions, officiating at this level is usually an easy task because the new referees are just using the skills they have learned from the referee course and grassroots football. Each referee usually starts as an assistant referee and after a certain period (six months) they decide whether they want to continue as an assistant referee or start as a referee. Moreover, it is the period when they do not actually realize what refereeing is all about. The referee team usually meets at the stadium one hour before the match, carries out administrative tasks and then officiates at the match. After the game, the referee completes the match sheet so it can be signed by the teams. Afterwards, the referee team has a brief chat with the observer about the match and then leaves for home.

The referee is unaware of many things when he is officiating in Liga 4. He's like a kindergarten child. He's unable to figure out exactly what's going on. It's a kind of inertia with minimal attention and less than a 50% focus on refereeing. (Referee 5)

The biggest challenge of the *Exploration* stage is the atmosphere created by the fans, who are sometimes hostile in the matches held in rural areas, because they expect the referees to help them win the game. Unfortunately, there are also some situations involving physical violence and this can lead to young referees dropping out.

It was one of my first matches in Liga 4, and the away team was top of the table. In the third minute, a striker for the away team had a goal opportunity and kicked the ball towards the goal. At this moment, the goalkeeper fouled a player in the penalty area. I stopped the game, showed a red card to the goalkeeper and gave a penalty to the away team. Luckily for me was that being in the countryside, there was no fence around the pitch, and the locals always stood beside the away team's goal post, along the side of the pitch, and there was nobody at the home team's goal post. When I showed the red card, all the home supporters started chasing me, as well as the home team players. I noticed that beside the goal was a vineyard, so I headed for it and ran as fast as I could, (I was 21), and the distance between me and them increased. At a certain point, one of the home supporters shouted: "Hey! Wait a second" and they started haggling with me about my decision: "Red card, but no penalty". In the end, they realized that they weren't going to get their way. I sent off the goalkeeper and awarded a penalty kick to the away team. After the game, the home supporters invited me to have a drink and the home team captain said: "Hey dude, you know, you're the only referee that hasn't changed a decision. Until today, we'd managed to get all of them to change their mind. You're the first referee we were unable to persuade. (Referee 3)

Being courageous and stubborn in a positive way can be regarded as a determinant skill when you are refereeing in the Fourth League. Such personality traits are regarded as important for any official, although a referee can show such traits at this level if part of their refereeing involves physical aggression, because verbal aggression will always be present during the entire career of a referee. However, most referees who have strong personalities and enjoy refereeing are able to deal with challenging situations and continue on their career path.

Even though I've been beaten up three or four times, I've never thought about giving up refereeing. (Referee 2)

During the interviews, all the referees agreed that the maximum period for a referee to stay at this level is two to three years.

If you stay more than three years at this level you can easily get tired of the verbal and physical abuse. Getting your car vandalized after a match means you might decide to drop out and follow other interests such as studies, job or starting a family. (Referee 4)

All the referees that were interviewed agreed that physical and theoretical preparation is the most important measure in order to get promoted to the next level. There are two promotion paths: the exam and the intensive course. The exam comprises a theoretical test and a fitness test, while the course lasts for one season. During this

period, the referees are tested theoretically and physically on multiple occasions and those who pass all the tests are given test matches in the Third League.

Although I'm not from Bucharest, before the exam for Liga 3, I moved there in order to thoroughly prepare myself both theoretically and physically. I ran in the park while being chased by stray dogs. And it deserved as I got promoted to the third league. (Referee 4)

Consolidation – Liga 3 (Third League)

The *Consolidation* stage may be considered the most important period from a referee development perspective as this is the first time that a referee starts feeling that refereeing is an important activity.

Liga 3 is the best place to learn to become a referee and is clearly the foundation for the next stages. It's a good place to be because referees can officiate at many matches at this level: Liga 3 matches combined with the national junior matches, which take place two days later. Liga 3 was the most important period; it laid the foundation for the future. This period created the basis for what was to follow. It's clear that refereeing every week is very important at this level. (Referee 5)

If Referee 5 regarded the *Implementation* stage as being a kind of referees' kindergarten, Liga 3 is regarded as being primary school, where the pupils create their own style of learning and development. Moreover, based on the previous quote, the referee had the opportunity to create their own style of refereeing and their own referee personality, as this is the only place in a referee's career when the pressure is not too great.

The most important years of refereeing are in Liga 3. Nobody criticizes you, even if you don't show a yellow card, or you influence the outcome of the game. (Referee 4)

The *Consolidation* stage not only offers refereeing benefits but also personal benefits, such as travelling around the country and meeting new people.

When I started in Liga 3, I'd already begun to feel like a referee. As a national referee, you have the opportunity to meet new people and can therefore make new friends and understand how people from different parts of the country are thinking. You also get to visit new places and meet new cultures and traditions. (Referee 3)

Travelling all over the country and visiting new places means that refereeing has to be taken seriously. Thus, most of the referees' free time is spent officiating at matches. So, this activity can be regarded as a serious form of leisure, as categorized by Stebbins (2001).

Regarding the best period for the development of refereeing, Liga 3 provides good career development opportunities. It is the period when referees have the chance to meet former referees who have international experience. The observers' feedback should be constructive and sometimes it is a hard process for the referees. There are difficult situations but, if a referee is willing to learn and progress, they will benefit from such feedback. The referee's personality, open-mindedness and ability to listen to the observer is really important in order to improve their future performance.

I have learned something from every observer. They mentioned something I had to improve after each game and I jotted this down in my notebook. When I met the observer the second time, I was careful not to make the same mistakes I'd made in the previous game and this helped me a lot. The observers appreciated me because I'd been receptive and attentive. (Referee 3)

All the interviewed referees concluded that a three-year period in Liga 3 was the best period for gaining all the necessary skills for the next stage in their career, the *Stabilization* stage. They also believed that from this level until the top league, the best way to promote referees is through the talent program, where the referees can prove their abilities on the pitch:

To get to Liga 2 and Liga 1, criteria for refereeing skills are a must. (Referee 5)

However, referee 1 considers that human values are among the most important value that a referee should have:

When you promote a referee to Liga 2 or Liga 1, you have to know his social background, to know whether he's the son of a prison warden or a major criminal. Like father, like son. (Referee 1)

Stabilization – Liga 2 (Second League)

Stabilization is the stage when the officials become a name in refereeing at a national level. There is no scope for serious errors when it comes to making decisions on the pitch. It is not only about the level of maturity of the referee but also the preparation period for the top league from a refereeing perspective. Becoming a Liga 2 referee means a lot for an individual referee's career perspective and is one of those first occasions when a referee feels that their perseverance has paid off.

Liga 2 is like a college for students. There's no longer room for mistakes. Now there are certain things that you cannot afford to do because you have greater responsibility. Refereeing in Liga 2 involves new situations like travelling to the game the day before; the matches are covered by the media (online media and sport newspapers); the crowds are bigger (fan pressure), but the most important thing is that most of the matches are broadcast live on TV. (Referee 5)

Referees who have a natural feel for the game are appreciated by the footballing community. This is about tact and instinct, knowing what to do and when to do it.

You have to be able to feel the game, to keep control. When the players are just focusing on their playing, you let them get on with it. But if you start noting unsportsmanlike conduct, you must be strict and try to calm them down. That's what having a feel for the game is all about. (Referee 3)

Good referees are those who can feel the game, although each referee is different. Some referees rule the match with an iron hand, while other referees let the players rule the match. Some referees control a match the moment they step onto the pitch and it is their personality alone that controls the game, while other referees control the game by showing cards.

Michael Vautrot [former French referee] regards a referee as being a kind of airplane pilot. When the weather's good, all pilots manage, but when there are storms or lightning, they must prove their ability because pilots are responsible for their passengers. Thus, a good referee, like a pilot in bad weather, knows how to press the right buttons at the right time. (Referee 4)

However, having a feel for the game does not mean only making decisions according to the spirit of the game. It is also about being able to deal with the most difficult parts of a game when there is a high level of tension. Ultimately, it is how the referee reacts on the pitch that will affect the match.

Management may be defined as “the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling organizational resources.” (Daft, 1999, p. 35) Thus, the manager of a game is the referee.

The referee is like a manager who must be aware of all their employees, allowing someone to drink a glass of wine if they did a good job, but not allowing them to have a second glass because they might become tipsy. At the same time, you shouldn't let someone else drink as much as they like because they might drive their car into a lake. Football players are like children. If they behave well, you give them candy, but if they behave badly, you don't give them candy. In Romania, the pressure comes from the technical side, from coaches who are provocative. So, you need to know how to control them. (Referee 4)

Planning for a referee team means “defining goals and objectives” and “developing strategies and setting policies and procedures.” (Daft, 1999, p. 35) A teamwork meeting before the game is the planning stage in management. The referee is in charge of the game and decides how to act in the various scenarios that can arise during the game. Organizing involves “responsibility and authority relationships, including tasks” within the team. (Daft, 1999, p. 35) Team organization is within the referee’s remit and is also discussed before the game when certain members of the officials’ team may be responsible for administrative issues.

Leadership is part of management and, according to Mintzberg, management has three functions, whereas leadership is part of the interpersonal function. Leaders communicate and motivate their colleagues. (Mintzberg, 1973, p. 92–93) Assistant referees perform better with those referees who have better communication skills and also motivate them not only before the game during the teamwork meeting but also during the game through signals that encourage each member of the team. These days, technology allows match officials to communicate with each other during the game to resolve the various issues that may arise during the match, but also to motivate and encourage their fellow officials.

Thus, a referee should possess some leadership skills in order to motivate and help their assistant referees before and during a game. This might sometimes prove to be difficult as match officials may not have met before. However, it is important to have a good game, make the right decisions and collaborate properly during the game.

Maintenance – Liga 1 (First League) and the FIFA Badge

The top league represents the most important part of a referee’s career. Basically, it is only the most talented officials who reach this level and have the opportunity to prove their skills. At this level every detail counts. If you were to compare refereeing with the education system, if Liga 2 is regarded as high school, Liga 1 would be equal to a master’s degree in refereeing. This distinction is made in order to emphasize the difference between the two leagues.

Liga 1 is totally different. It's equal to a master's degree. Firstly, Liga 1 gives you the satisfaction that you're one of the top 20 referees in the country. It means you have great responsibility. Above all is the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that you managed to reach the highest level. (Referee 5)

Maintenance is the highest level in an official’s career. There is nothing more to learn and officials who reach this level have to prove their skills through good performances on the pitch and their efforts off the pitch.

The first time I felt I was a referee was when I refereed a game which decided the winner of the Romanian championship. The chairman of the Romanian Referee Committee phoned me one week before the game to ask me whether I was prepared to referee the match. Even though my legs were shaking, I was confident and I accepted. When I came out of the tunnel onto the field for the formal pitch inspection before the match, all the home team fans stood up and started yelling the home team's name. This was the moment when I felt for the first time that I was a referee. The referee observer told me that being given this appointment meant that I had the necessary skills to do the job. I knew that all Romanian referees would be watching me and envying me because I was refereeing the match and he [the observer] told me: Now you can prove you're a referee. (Referee 4)

Tactics have started to become very important for a referee in order to know how the game is played, to know something about a team’s tactics on the pitch and to know the individual technical skills of the players. Knowing how to read the game has become a crucial aspect for coaches, but nowadays referees must also know how to read the game.

The game starts as soon as you receive the appointment; you begin training, studying the teams and watching matches from previous matches played by the respective teams. (Referee 5)

All referees agreed that they use different platforms (wyscout.com or refs.sportsmatrix.com) for their match preparation. Watching previous matches played by the respective teams and checking statistics can be very useful. Good tactical preparation tends to reduce the unpredictability of a game, the surprise effect. The next stage for achieving a good performance after tactical preparation is the mental stage.

We (referees) love refereeing and our commitment is 100%. When a game is coming up, you think about it when you're sleeping, when you're eating, when you're on the toilet, even when you're with your family and talking with your kids, you're thinking about the game, which is a shame, but it's the reality. (Referee 1)

Mental preparation is as important as physical preparation. On the pitch, referees should possess certain skills such as communication, leadership, team cohesion with the assistant referees, self-confidence, the ability to withstand pressure and concentrate. All match officials are good at coping with stress even though they are challenged all the time: by the media, players, coaches.

There are moments when the level of concentration is so high; there's just you and the players. There are moments when you practically don't hear the crowd. Sometimes I don't hear the coaches on the bench when they're protesting and screaming, even at 40 meters. (Referee 5)

The game always involves having to make three to four decisions every minute and maybe some of these decisions are close, difficult, based on ambiguous situations, and referees have to deal with pressure, as well as physical and psychological abuse. Thus, from an emotional perspective, the referees are drained after a game.

A referee is physically exhausted after a game and very tired mentally. On the pitch, he has to control 22 personalities [players], plus coaches, and is in charge of everything that happens, including pressure from the fans, coaches and the media. When you finally get home, you're really worn out. So, in order to recover mentally, it's important to go for a walk in the park or forest or go and see a movie. Isolated and quiet places help me to relax. Psychological recovery is very important for me because a massage may take care of your physical tiredness, but mental recovery is essential because refereeing requires a huge commitment. (Referee 4)

Refereeing is a very vulnerable job and match officials have to move on to the next appointment because they have a very tight schedule and therefore cannot afford to stay at a match for too long. Referees are only human so it is always challenging and difficult to ignore a situation where they make a mistake. This is the time when people in the referees' lives, such as their families, have an important role to play.

The role of my family is very important. If you don't have stability, it's very hard to achieve good professional results, and this doesn't just apply to refereeing. Peace is important if you want to perform at the highest level. In order to achieve a high level of performance. I'm lucky to have had the support of my wife and parents, although I know they've often suffered. I would therefore advise referees to make sure they have stability in their life. (Referee 2)

Nevertheless, the family is important during the entire career for referees accepting them and being tolerant to their needs.

They need to understand what you're doing. There are times when you're away from home even though your family wants you to be together. But you always return to your family. It's important to know in your mind that your family is sustaining you: they're here to help you. (Referee 5)

Refereeing in the top league is also demanding from a time perspective. Although Romanian referees are not professional, all the referees agreed that refereeing is their main job:

If refereeing was my passion, my hobby, ten years ago, now it's my job, my business. My approach is 100% pro, although in Romania there are no professional referees. (Referee 2)

Moreover, Referee 5 added:

Right now, refereeing is everything. It's the most important activity and the no. 1 priority in my life. Everything else is unimportant and takes second place after my refereeing duties (Referee 5)

Officiating at the highest level brings social recognition, particularly in small communities, where everyone knows everyone else. Furthermore, it is really pleasing when a referee feels that people appreciate their work, congratulating them after a good performance and also supporting them after a controversial game.

Refereeing is important for your image and financial position. In my town, where everyone knows me and congratulates me, it's very satisfying to know that people appreciate me. When I was suspended after a poor performance, people stopped me on the street and encouraged me; this is worth more than anything I've earned from refereeing. (Referee 4)

Although referees are respected persons, they are not necessarily that popular because some of their decisions upset people. Nevertheless, their social recognition means that they receive people's appreciation:

There are not that many top league referees and such status turns you into a public figure and from this position you can open different door more easily than other people. Refereeing brings you public recognition, social status and consequently some added benefits. (Referee 2)

The high point of a referee's career is when they are appointed as a FIFA referee. The seven best top league referees are appointed as FIFA referees each year to represent Romanian refereeing abroad. Becoming an international referee means recognition of all your work and effort from previous years. International referees are appointed to officiate at all the matches organized by UEFA and FIFA. All FIFA referees that were interviewed recognized that being included on the FIFA list was the most important moment of their career.

The most important moment of my career was when it was announced that I would be a FIFA referee. (Referee 3)

Becoming a FIFA referee from Romania does not mean that a referee will directly officiate in the important matches organized by FIFA and UEFA. UEFA divides referees into three categories and Romanian referees have to start from the bottom, refereeing international junior matches or the first stages of European cups when they first start. Only elite referees and first-class referees have the opportunity to be appointed to UEFA Champions League or Europa League group stage matches and the best elite referees are selected for World Cup or Euro final tournaments.

Conclusions

Football refereeing has witnessed tremendous changes in recent years. Although the pace and outcome of those changes have varied globally, the goal everywhere has been to transform refereeing from a leisure activity into a profession made up of autonomous, well-educated, career-oriented people, particularly at the highest level, such as in European top leagues and in FIFA and UEFA final tournaments. As organizations, referee committees and referees' trade unions are focusing on redesigning educational programs to meet the changing needs of football, implementing standards of practice, and establishing refereeing as a respected and credible profession.

The whole professionalization process is shown in Figure 2. Each stage of the proposed model has certain characteristics that have been adopted in accordance with Weber's theory of professionalization. Characteristics present in more than one stage appear in bold. These features will be present from that stage in the referee's career until they retire. However, the features written in normal text mean that they are specific to that level only.

Exploration is the educational stage for future referees when they receive the general systematic knowledge represented by the laws of the game and the first stage of refereeing – officiating at the grassroots level. At the same time, the laws of the game give referee the power to apply all the rules both on and off the pitch. The clientele are the football clubs, while the salary is the remuneration that referees receive for their work. Power, clientele and salary will be present on all levels of the proposed model. The first level of vocational qualification is characterized by *Exploration*.

Leisure activity is the period when the referees improve their skills (Level 2 of vocational qualification.) At the same time, the *Implementation stage* [Liga 4 (Fourth League) – highest district league] is when the officials decide whether they want to be assistants (linesmen) or referees (specialization stage). In addition, rational training (physical training) starts to become important from this level and remains important until retirement.

Refereeing becomes a hobby during the *Consolidation* period [Liga 3 (Third League) – semi-professional football] when the referees improve their skills (Level 3 of vocational qualification). Moreover, their lifestyle changes as they need to travel around the country in order to officiate at matches. Promotion is one of the most important aspects of refereeing because it represents the transition from a lower level to a higher level and starts to become important from the consolidation stage.

The *Stabilization* stage (Liga 2 – Second League) is the second most important stage and is characterized by a referee's professional obligations which, in turn, are characterized by game management. Furthermore, the officials reach the second level of importance in vocational qualification (Level 4). Refereeing becomes a full-time occupation during the *Maintenance* stage [Liga 1 (Top League) and being included on the FIFA list] when all the details (mental, tactical preparations) become very important.

The top league referees also reach the highest level of vocational qualification and can be considered expert referees. Moreover, FIFA referees, who reached the highest level in a country, have even more domestic and international appointments which makes them to focus exclusively on refereeing and do not give them many opportunities to have another job outside refereeing activity.

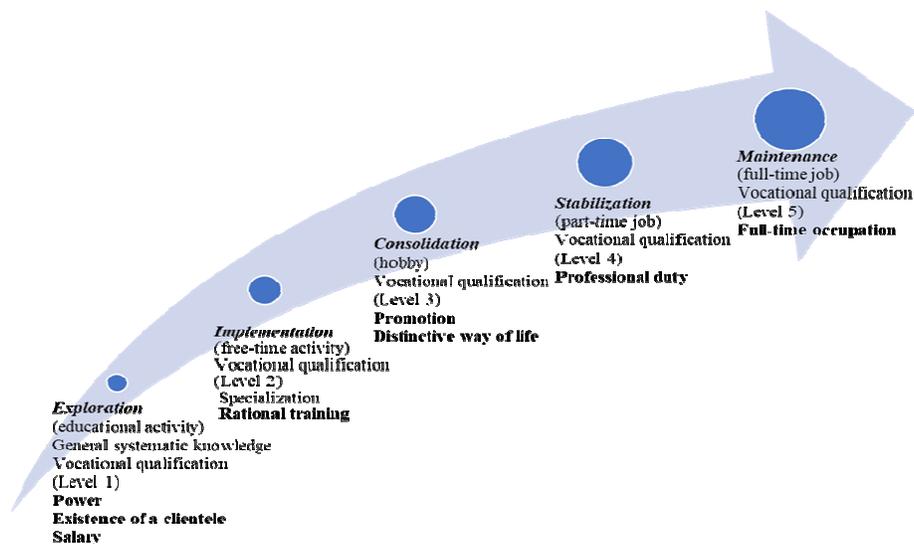


Figure 2. Professionalization process in refereeing inspired by Weber's theory of professionalization.

The Romanian model can only be applied to medium-sized football nations and therefore has some limitations. Further studies about refereeing should not only focus only on the psychological or physiological aspects of refereeing but also on the career models. Although, the big five European football countries (England, Germany, Italy, Spain and France) professionalized their referees from the top leagues. It would also be interesting to study the career perspectives of professional referees from the European top leagues. In the meantime, football refereeing continues along its inexorable path towards professionalization.

References

- Daft R. L., (1999) Leadership. Theory and Practice. Dryden Press. Fort Worth, Texas
- Hall D.T., (2002) Careers In and Out of Organisations, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Ireh M., (2000), Career Development Theories and Their Implications for High School Career Guidance and Counselling, *High School Journal*, Vol.83 (Issue 2), 28–40
- Mendes S., Oliveira E.P., Monteiro D. & Travassos B., (2021) The Portuguese referee performance model, *International Journal of Sport Sciences & Coaching* 0(0), 1-9
- Miller A.W., (1968), Learning theory and vocational decisions, *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 47, 18–23.
- Mintzberg. H., (1973), The nature of Managerial Work, New York, Harper & Row
- Norman P. & Bonnett C., (1995), Managers' intentions to be assessed for national vocational qualifications: an application of the theory of planned behaviour, *Social Behavior and Personality*, 23(1), p. 59–68
- Ritzer G., (1975), Professionalization, Bureaucratization and Rationalization: The Views of Max Weber, *Social Forces*, 53:4, p. 627–634
- Sears S., (1982), A definition of career guidance terms: A vocational Guidance Association perspective, *Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, 31, p. 137–143.
- Sharf, R.S. (1997), Applying career development theory to counselling (2nd Ed.) Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Vollmer H. M. & Mills D. L., (1966), Professionalization, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice – Hall.
- Webb T. (2022), The evolution of referees in the English Premier League, *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4-5, 400-410