

MEDIA RELEASE



Monday, 15 September, 2008

Football umpires see abuse as normal, research finds

Anyone who has heard the abuse hurled at football umpires would not be surprised to know some sporting organisations struggle to get enough people to wield a whistle.

But, strangely enough, the insults and profanities usually are not the problem. Dr Pamm Kellett, a senior lecturer in the School of Management and Marketing at Deakin University, has researched umpire abuse and found that the sorts of comments most of us would find distressing are like water off a duck's back to the men in the middle. Rather than get upset, football umpires tend to accept the abuse as part of their lot.

"We knew there was something about the culture that allowed these people to understand the abuse quite differently from the way other people would," Dr Kellett said.

Twenty-two people who umpire Australian Rules football professionally or semi-professionally were interviewed about what they find rewarding about the role despite the abuse they receive.

The results indicated it is how the umpires themselves interpret the abuse - not how we see it - that counts. And those attitudes appear to be learned. "The umpires seem to learn from the culture of their environment," Dr Kellett said. "There are important lessons there for all sorts of managers that culture can play an important part."

Some research participants even held the view that, when a person pays to see a game of footy, part of the deal is the right to abuse the umpire. There also is evidence that the administration contributes to umpires' attitudes towards abuse. "We found that in many cases the administrators help set up the culture," says Dr Kellett. "They set up the expectation that it is normal for other people to abuse umpires."

The research indicated that interacting socially is very important to umpires. Training, match days, social gatherings and accreditation courses all provide them with the opportunity to mingle and it is that kind of social interaction that holds the key to them learning ways to deal with abuse, and therefore continuing their involvement in umpiring. These gatherings allow umpires to share experiences and they act as a positive reinforcer.

Previous research on umpire abuse has tended to focus on the negative aspects of the role such as stress and burnout, Dr Kellett found. Researchers have assumed umpiring is a negative experience, and therefore those who take up umpiring are flawed in some way. Much of the previous research has tried to identify what sorts of characteristics are deficient in their personalities or what characteristics they possess that allow them to cope with such abuse.

Shortages of umpires and officials appear across the board in sports. For example, Hockey Canada loses 30 per cent of its umpires every year. While Australian Rules football has

MEDIA RELEASE



Monday, 15 September, 2008

reported a small increase in the number of umpires, supply still does not meet demand because the sport is increasing in popularity and more people are participating.

“Until now, we have known little about why umpires take up the role and what factors dictate whether or not they stay but, if we want people to be able to participate in organised sports, we need to find out,” Dr Kellett concluded. “We need to optimise the strategies and tactics by which we recruit, train and retain umpires.”

Media contact: Dr Kellett is available for interview. Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.