“Get Back in the Kitchen”:
The Lived Experiences of Women Football Referees

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ABSTRACT

Women in sport have historically experienced exclusion, abuse, and under-representation. In the Australian context, barriers to participation in sport for women and girls have slowly been removed, however many women face persistent difficulties in accessing roles that are usually dominated by men such as coaching and officiating. The last decade has purportedly been a 'boom' period for women in sport, including sporting organisations actively trying to increase the numbers of women in coaching and officiating. It is in the context of the 'boom' in women's sport that this thesis employs a qualitative methodology, including autoethnography, fieldnotes, observations, and interviews, to explore the experiences and journeys of women refereeing football in Victoria, Australia. This thesis explores the experiences of referees who have achieved 'success' as a professional referee and has tackled the hardships faced by junior referees navigating their first years as an officiator. Using the voice of experienced referees, data collected by a novice referee is juxtaposed to explore 'what it takes' to make it as a woman in refereeing.

STUDENT DECLARATION

“I, Rebecca Patrick, declare that the Master by Research thesis entitled ““Get back in the Kitchen”: The Lived Experiences of Women Football Referees” is no more than 60,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.”

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University’s Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Signature:  Date: 30/07/2024

Ethics Declaration

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval ID: HRE22-037.

Signature  Date: 30/07/2024

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FV: Football Victoria

WPL: Women's Premier League

NPL: National Premier League

VPL: Victorian Premier League

FA: England's Football Association

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Personal Story

As a young girl who loved sport, I actively engaged in a variety of activities and enjoyed chasing after my older brother and aspired to do exactly what he did. The younger sibling gene had given me the urge to try and do better than my brother so sports were an activity where we could freely compete against each other – this continued throughout my childhood. Sport was something I was passionate about, my first dream job as a child was 'Olympian' after reliving Cathy Freeman's historic win at the Sydney Olympic Games. My sport of choice was athletics, I loved competing on my own merit and being praised for my efforts. I continued in Little Athletics until I started high school.

The consensus at my high school was that sports were 'uncool' and competing in sports as a girl was simply unacceptable. After leaving Little Athletics, my love for sports was still a defining trait as a young girl, I still loved sports even with the constant resistance from my closest peers. Even though I had left my organised sport outside of school hours, I still actively joined and participated in each inter-school sport competition whenever possible and eagerly donned my PE uniform for every class. My love for sports and eagerness to participate in Physical Education was challenged by a male teacher that vehemently disliked girls actively playing sport, let alone being good at it. By my second year of high school, the incessant bullying began. Classmates would verbally abuse me about my body, being masculine, being a man, being a lesbian, because I liked to get involved in a variety of sports that were offered each term. My friendships suffered, and girls playing sports were challenged about their sexuality and gender identity.

Participating in an individualistic sport such as athletics at an early age made joining a team sport nerve-racking, and with the continued attack on my personality, sexuality, and gender, I slowly lost my perseverance to participate freely and whole-heartedly. My love for sport never died during this time, but my willingness to participate was severely hindered – I watched on the sidelines as an avid spectator and the narrative of "I cannot" began, I started to believe that I could not possibly participate meaningfully in sports, and I was better off on the sidelines. The societal pressures and bullying that lasted years, finally won and sports ceased to exist in my world. I found havens such as volunteering to be school sports captain as the gendered representation was required and three friends said they would do it, if we all did. I loved sports but the damage had been done during the formative years of my life – I

lost key developmental years in the sporting space because of my *friends*, my peers, my teachers who believed that I did not belong.

The lack of participation in sport gave me an opportunity to pursue a love of theory, the science behind sport and physical activity, and ignited a passion that was safe to participate in. As I left high school to pursue a sports degree, I was no longer surrounded by those people and that environment. I was among people who loved sport and actively participated in it, but I came to quickly realise that those years I had missed, created a gap between myself and the girls my age that did not stop participating. Women's teams in sport do not have a beginner's program, these women's teams in a variety of sports, rely on juniors to gain the fundamental skills and fine tune them to then enter the women's division as a semi-developed, if not fully developed, player. The gap of physicality was vast, and I felt left behind, but the lingering mentality of having to accept traditional femininity and avoid being seen as masculine was an enormous barrier that took years to overcome. These barriers and this story gave me the drive and passion to pursue the exploration of the football space and investigate the barriers women have faced, how they negotiated their identities, and the experiences of women who actively participate in a domain that, traditionally, does not want them there nor welcomes them in.

'Boom' time and refereeing

We are currently in a period often described as a 'boom' for women's sport (McLachlan, 2019). This boom includes not only greater opportunities for participation, but also greater recognition, remuneration, and access to leadership positions in sport[1]. The boom, coupled with the meritocratic logic of neoliberalism posits that historical barriers for women's participation in sport are no longer relevant. To put it simply: anyone can achieve anything if they want to.

However, McLachlan (2019) cautions against a wholesale acceptance of the linear progress narratives that sport likes to adopt. Such progress narratives are generally ahistorical, and ignore the resistance, setbacks, indeed the 'busts,' that have followed previous booms. If this contemporary moment is 'booming' for women in sport, then what

[1] FIFA's 2023 Member Associations Survey Report states that the number of women and girls playing organised football has increased substantially from their previous 2019 report. FIFA reports that up to 16.6 million women and girls are actively participating in football worldwide. However, FIFA also reported that women make up 9% of referees and 5% of coaches worldwide – a discrepancy that needs to be addressed.

about women who take on officiating roles in traditionally male sports? The experiences of women and girls are largely unknown and even more so for smaller represented roles within sports such as coaching, volunteering and officiating.

Football Victoria, and the wider Australian Footballing body, operates with many leagues and divisions. The A-League Men's and A-League Women's are the highest performing teams in the competition. Below the A-Leagues, are National Premier Leagues (NPL and NPLW). In Victoria, the divisions are ranked as NPL Victoria, Victoria Premier League 1 and Victoria Premier League 2. Below the Premier Leagues are State Leagues. State Leagues are separated by location and rank: Victorian State League North-West 1-3, Victorian State League South-East 1-3. Then, Victorian State League teams in division 4 and 5 are separated further by North, South, East and West. The A-League Women's competition recently underwent a name change from the W-League to the A-League Women's to rebrand and bridge the gendered gap in football. Throughout this thesis, A-League Women's and W-League will be used interchangeably, as interviews with participants took place prior to the name change and participants have used the W-League terminology in their retelling of their own experiences.

For junior divisions, football begins at Mini-Roos which is typically parent/volunteer led and officiated up to under 11s. From under 12s, referees are trained, paid officials who are allocated to games from Football Victoria through their scheduling platform, Schedula.

Football Victoria also host several special programs such as the Women's 7s social tournament, the All-Abilities Gala, Go Soccer Mums and Walking Football. These programs are usually officiated by paid referees or club volunteers if required.

In 2018, Football Victoria (FV), the governing body for football in Victoria made an explicit commitment in its annual report to try to achieve 50/50 gender equality in all aspects of the sport by 2027.This was a particularly ambitious goal considering that in 2019 Victorian playing numbers were 20/80 (Women/Men) and referees were 9/91 (W/M).

To achieve this goal, FV would need to radically change aspects of its operation, especially in providing supports and pathways for women and girls to become referees. Thus, at the end of 2022, I decided to become a football referee as part of a broader set of research questions about women refereeing in football, namely:

1. What is the process of becoming a referee?
2. What ‘makes’ a ‘successful’ referee?

3. What can be adjusted by organising bodies to allow for greater retention of current women referees and increase the recruitment women into refereeing?

My motivation for doing so stemmed from my past sporting exit, my hesitation on joining organised sports again and my experience as a research assistant within the university. Helping clubs build their women's and girls' programs, aimed specifically at player populations gave an insight that progress is challenging, time-consuming, and takes a lot of people and a lot of effort. This research task showed that an outsider perspective trying to solve a problem can be beneficial, a fresh take on an ongoing issue. However, the motivation to become a referee was to try to find the barriers, the challenges, and the hardships from the very start of this process. The true novice and their take on *becoming*. Playing football and participating in non-playing roles like coaching had quickly become oversaturated in the research market, I wanted to investigate something niche and find a new angle that had yet to be explored.

While literature has grown in recent years on the experiences of women and girls in sports, and girls in football (for example: Player Development: Emmonds et al., 2023; Intersectionality: Martos-Garcia et al., 2023; Truskewycz et al., 2023; Injury and Injury Prevention: Bolling et al., 2024), we know less about the experiences of women and girls in the football space and refereeing. The research project aims to contribute knowledge to this gap by exploring the process of becoming a referee from a novice perspective, while engaging with experienced women referees and their own experiences throughout their junior and senior years on the pitch. This thesis not only aims to fill the research gap of this niche area of sport but also find solutions to the current problems facing football clubs with referee retention, representation of women and girls and developing their programs for inclusivity, equity and to adapt their training and mentoring programs to target demographics more effectively. These target demographics for clubs wanting to expand their community would include true novices to the sport, inexperienced referees and people who may not have playing experience but want to be involved in the community. The existing literature covers referee experiences, but none thus far have detailed the very beginning of the process of becoming a referee and leave out the initial barriers that can stop people from continuing in their own journeys. As such this thesis aims to understand the processes, barriers, and facilitators, for women who become football referees and further suggest solutions to these problems from a former referee’s standpoint, who happens to be a women.

The thesis will:

- Trace the existing literature of women who have taken on officiating roles in traditionally male sports
- Describe my experiences of becoming a football referee
- Examine the personal accounts and trajectories of three successful women referees
- Juxtapose and theorise my experiences in comparison with the successful women referees
- Propose strategies and guidelines for creating more sustainable and positive experiences for women and girls who want to become football referees.

Chapter two explores the current literature of women in sports and refereeing. This chapter investigates common themes relating to the experiences of women in football such as tokenism, implementing survival strategies, retention of current referees and marginalisation. This chapter aims to highlight the current state of women in refereeing and explain something about the environment I was entering as a novice.

Chapter three explains the methodological choices implemented to obtain the data for this thesis. This thesis uses a combination of autoethnography with interviews and observations of experienced women referees. Data collection took place over roughly six months and autoethnography was determined to be the best method to more deeply understand the processes of trying to become a referee.

Chapter four highlights the journey from an autoethnographic perspective of the very start of a referee's career to an untimely end. The trials and tribulations are stated throughout an intense rollercoaster of events, emotions, experiences and learning opportunities – chapter four highlights the experiences that have shaped this thesis, the outcomes of attempting to become a successful referee and have informed the recommendations addressed to FV and other sporting bodies in chapter seven.

Chapter five explores the life journeys of three experienced women referees who retell their stories of becoming a referee and the events that have led them to become 'successful' in their role. Chapter five data have been framed by the themes of family support, the transition from player to referee, relationships, and community, developing a thick skin (normalising abuse) and the positive feedback and progression which is evident in each of their stories.

Chapter six uses the data from chapter four and five to discuss the similarities and differences between the failed referee attempt and the successful career of the chosen participants. Iris Marion Young's (1980) contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence is utilised to juxtapose and understand how different personal accounts and gendered socialisation restrict or empower women in refereeing.

Chapter seven concludes the thesis through stating that increasing gender equality in refereeing requires addressing deep-rooted gendered norms and creating supportive environments, as the current masculine culture remains hostile to women and novices. Additionally, chapter seven provides an insight to the limitations of this thesis, such as participant recruitment and data. I suggest the need for action towards creating an environment in which women are welcomed, encouraged, and supported. Finally, chapter seven provides recommendations addressed to FV and other sporting organisations that wish to grow and retain women, and more specifically referees, within their sporting codes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is considerable research and literature that identifies sport as a site of male privilege (Piggott et al., 2024; Kidd, 2013; Birrell, 2000) and for the reproduction of masculinity (Piggott et al., 2024; Birrell, 2000). Similarly, research on the history of women in sport has identified persistent barriers to access (Forsyth et al., 2019), inequalities (Spaaij et al., 2015), and negative experiences. Whilst most sport has traditionally been seen as a masculine space, a particularly unchallenged domain (Silva, 2018; Adams et al., 2010), sporting spaces have also been a site of contest to the point that most sports are open to equal participation for girls and boys, and the 'boom' in women's sport in Australia (McLachlan, 2019) is mirrored in other national contexts[2]. While sporting codes are vocalising their goal for a gendered balance in their codes, clubs, and organisations – very few have been able to achieve this figure. The International Olympic Committee has been able to create a 50/50 gender balanced board, which is a feat to celebrate, however, this international board of members is an isolated exemplar of international equality.[3] Locally, the Victorian Government's Change Our Game initiative, enacted in 2019, aims to balance all sport and recreation communities to have a minimum of 40% of women on the board. This initiative ensures that only clubs adhering to this policy are eligible to apply for grants. Change is not universal, indeed there are persistent inequalities that seem almost impossible to shift (for example Media: Pocock & Skey, 2024; Kavanagh et al., 2023; Salaries: Munro-Cook, 2024; Leadership: Baxter et al., 2023). All the research underscores the complexity and

[2] The recent boom of the WNBA in the 2024 season, due to the sensational performances of Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, among others drafted in 2024 season showcased the boom of women's basketball in the United States. However, as argued by Jemele Hill in The Atlantic, the male commentary that is now centre stage is lacking the depth and knowledge that the WNBA requires. Furthermore, the respect of these elite athletes is still lacking the tact that the men in the NBA are shown, as highlighted by Darvin's 2024 Forbes article titled 'Caitlin Clark's Uncomfortable Encounter With A Reporter Reignites Calls To Respect Women Athletes'.

[3] The IOC released an objectives document in 2021 stating their goals for the 2021-2024 Olympic season and their aims to create gender equity within the IOC as both a sporting body and organisation, as well as a sporting arena for athletes. The IOC's objectives are yet to be assessed to know if their goals were reached but as of the report in 2021: 37.5% of IOC members are women, 33.3% of IOC Executive Board Members are women, 48% of IOC commission members are women and 37% of IOC commission chairs are women. The IOC have made it clear that they wish to make the Olympic Games equitable and have achieved a 50/50 gendered split at the participant level, however, their executive branches still have work to do.

multifaceted nature of achieving gender equality in the sporting world, shaped by diverse contexts.

In this literature review I focus specifically on the research that has been conducted on women in various leadership positions in sport, particularly those of coaching and officiating. In what follows I discuss coaching, the leadership 'grass' ceiling, and officiating, and the ways in which women have negotiated these contexts. I discuss the impacts of Iris Marion Young's research on feminine bodily comportment and the three modalities in which women navigate spaces, this literature will specifically inform the data analysis of the participant interviews and subsequent discussions in chapters five and six.

"Well, Angela Merkel runs a whole f-ing country."

This quote comes from Swedish born football coach Pia Sundhage[4] when asked in 2014 by a reporter if she thought she could coach a men's football team. What the reporter's question really indicates is the persistence of gender norms that reinforce the male dominance in most sporting domains, especially those requiring decision making abilities. Schull and Kihl (2019) explore the imbalance within the coaching domain and decipher what it means to be a 'credible' coach. Within the gendered power dynamics, it was argued that men's inherent knowledge is more powerful and viewed greater than a women's elite playing experience.

These unequal dynamics based on 'traditional views' contribute to the reproduction of sex segregation in sporting communities in non-playing roles that parents take on and unconsciously reinforce the sex-segregation seen by their children (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). The common narrative of fathers assigning themselves as coach and assistant coach while mums are assigned the role of team managers and administrators reinforce the gendered roles seen in larger domains in society where women are more likely to partake in administrative roles for work while men are typically seen and visualised as the CEOs, managers, and bosses (Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2018; Burton, 2014; Norman, 2010).

This narrative is so common among community sports that team managers have been renamed as 'team mums' and are so gendered towards women that coaches, when asking for

[4] Sundhage is a women's football coach that is a standout amongst the footballing community. Sundhage is currently hired to lead the Switzerland women's football team in the European Championship in 2025. Sundhage's career has been outstanding, boasting two Olympic golds whilst coaching the US football team, as well as taking the US, Sweden and Brazil to a variety of Women's World Cups. FIFA voted Sundhage 'Best Women's Coach' in 2012.

volunteers for team managers, must emphasise that fathers can also be team managers or 'team mums' (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Furthermore, a coach within the 2009 study stated that he has "[never] heard of a team dad... you know, the coach is a male. And the mum – I mean, that's the housekeeping – you know: assign the snack" (pp. 58). In the Australian context, Shona Thompson (1999) identified the concept of Mum's Taxi in relation to the maintenance of junior sport. Thompson highlights that junior sports rely on the free labour of women to facilitate participation, however decision-making roles such as coaching or club committees are generally gendered towards men. Women are expected to provide stereotypically nurturing functions in the background whereas men take on the visible, leadership roles.

Whilst the above type of gender-based visibility/invisibility is grounded in grassroots and mundane sports, it is reinforced in media spaces and elite-level sports which are televised and promoted on mainstream media platforms, along with the gender-bland language and gender marking of women's sports (Messner et al., 1993; Musto et al., 2017). These combined factors have made it difficult for women to break the glass ceiling in multiple domains across the masculine sporting industry and are usually seen as tokens in their roles and noted as the 'exception to the rule' (Musto et al., 2017).

The Grass Ceiling

The grass ceiling is a phrase used to describe the barrier to progression in sporting organisations and bodies, as players, officials, coaches, and leadership positions. This grass ceiling in sporting organisations that are male dominant are fuelled by the belief that the board or hiring manager only hired the right person who had the skills, experience and 'fit' what they were looking for (Sisjord et al., 2020). Homologous reproduction is a key factor in the rehiring of men, by men and what limits women in leadership roles (Regan & Cunningham, 2012; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007). There is a naturalised perception that women are under experienced, lacking skills or not up to the standard to compete with men for sport related roles (Messner, 2011). Homologous reproduction perpetuates women's subordination beneath the grass ceiling, as hegemonic masculinity constrains their opportunities to shatter this barrier. This dynamic hinders their progress and attainment of higher roles and goals within the realm of football, perpetuating systemic gender inequalities and limiting their potential for advancement. (Silva, 2018; Surujlal & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2015).

Soft essentialism is defined by Messner (2011) as “a currently ascendant hegemonic ideology of the professional class, this view valorises the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women, while retaining a largely naturalised view of boys and men, a view that is especially evident, I will argue, in youth sports.” (pp. 155). The soft essentialism that is present in current sporting authorities and wider societal domains offer women and girls an ‘opt-in’ standard for sport while boys and men have the natural and assumed pathway into sport with few contests or barriers to continue their hobbies long into adulthood. Another explanation for the differences in opportunities and experiences in sport for women and girls compared to boys and men identifies specific gendered pressures and commitments during adolescence and early adulthood that cause women and girls to focus on lifestyles that don’t involve sport (Messner, 2011; Mullins, 2015).

The experiences of women working in elite sport reflect deeply ingrained gender disparities that extend to multiple aspects of their professional lives. Cowan et al. (2024) reveal that women Sport and Exercise Medicine (SEM) practitioners in Australia face significant challenges, including reduced paid hours, frequent harassment, and systemic inequities in recruitment processes. Despite their vital roles in elite sport, women are often subjected to infantilisation and gender policing, undermining their professional credibility (Cowan et al., 2024). This parallels the experiences of women referees, who also contend with limited opportunities and pervasive gender bias within male-dominated sporting arenas.

The lack of formal recruitment practices further exacerbates these issues, as positions are often filled through informal networks, privileging male candidates. These systemic barriers reflect broader inequities faced by women across all levels of sport. Addressing these disparities requires structural reforms, including transparent hiring practices, equitable pay, and robust policies to counter workplace harassment. For women referees and officials, such measures are essential to fostering an environment where their skills and contributions are valued equally, enabling them to thrive within the sport.

Young’s Three Modalities

Iris Marion Young’s seminal work on feminine bodily comportment provides a critical lens through which to examine the lived experiences of women in male-dominated spaces, such as sports officiating. In her essay ‘Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality’ (1980), Young outlines three modalities of

feminine bodily existence: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity. These modalities, rooted in the intersection of phenomenology and feminist theory, articulate how societal expectations and gender norms shape women's relationships with their bodies and their environments. Young argues that women are socialised to perceive their bodies not as tools of agency and empowerment but as objects of constraint and limitation, resulting in restricted bodily movement, diminished spatial awareness, and a fragmented sense of self.

For women referees operating within male-dominated sporting spaces, these modalities offer a framework to understand how gendered dynamics manifest as barriers to their professional practice. Ambiguous transcendence, where women experience a dualistic relationship with their bodies, can be seen in the tension referees face between asserting authority on the pitch and managing societal expectations of femininity. Inhibited intentionality which describes the internalised hesitations or self-imposed limits on action, aligns with the experiences of women referees navigating self-doubt and the fear of criticism that often accompany discrimination and abuse in sporting environments. Finally, discontinuous unity, which highlights the fragmentation of women's embodied experiences, reflects the challenges faced by referees who endure tokenism—being celebrated as 'exceptions' in their field while simultaneously being marginalised or devalued.

Young's modalities provide a lens to explore how societal and institutionalised sexism impact women referees' ability to fully inhabit their roles. The discrimination and abuse they encounter, ranging from overt verbal attacks to subtle undermining of their authority, reinforce the constraints Young describes. By situating these concepts within the context of refereeing, this study delves into how women navigate these barriers, highlighting the broader implications of tokenism, resilience, and resistance in transforming gendered sporting spaces. The analysis of participant interviews in later chapters will draw directly on these modalities to unpack the nuanced ways women referees contend with and challenge these limitations.

The current state

The challenges faced by women in Australian community sports extend beyond cultural and structural barriers, encompassing spatial injustices that limit access to resources, facilities, and equitable opportunities. Both Spaaij et al. (2024) and Bevan, Jeanes, and

Truskewycz (2024) emphasise the intersection of systemic inequalities with gendered dynamics in sport, highlighting the ways in which women's participation is constrained by entrenched practices. Spaaij et al. illustrate how Afghan women soccer players leverage informal spaces to counteract cultural expectations and limited support, underscoring the importance of flexible and community-led initiatives. In contrast, Bevan et al. focus on the institutional barriers faced by a newly established women's football team in Melbourne, revealing how pre-established clubs often monopolise resources, forcing marginalised groups to navigate complex systems for minimal access.

Together, these studies underscore the persistence of spatial injustices in Australian sport, where resources are distributed inequitably and dominated by traditional power structures. Women referees, like players, face similar barriers, particularly in gaining equitable access to pathways for progression and the cultural acceptance necessary for their roles. These spatial and systemic inequities not only limit opportunities but also perpetuate exclusionary practices that hinder women's participation in male-dominated spaces such as football. To achieve genuine gender equity, there is an urgent need to address these injustices by redistributing resources, restructuring policy implementation, and fostering inclusive environments where women can thrive as athletes, officials, and leaders in sport.

By integrating the insights from these studies, the broader implications become clear: community and organisational practices must evolve to challenge systemic inequalities and create spaces where women's contributions are valued equally. Efforts to promote inclusivity in sport must consider the intersectional experiences of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors, ensuring that all participants, including referees, are afforded the opportunities and support necessary to succeed.

Despite growing participation rates, systemic inequities persist in Australian football, particularly in environments nurturing female talent. Lyons et al. (2024) revealed stark gendered differences in the design and perception of talent development environments (TDEs). Boys consistently rated their environments higher in aspects such as long-term development, preparation, and coach commitment. These disparities stem from systemic biases, resource allocation, and the cultural underpinnings of soccer as a male-dominated sport.

For female referees and players alike, these systemic inequities manifest in limited access to resources and supportive infrastructures. While women's football has seen tremendous growth - bolstered by events like the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup - the

findings of Lyons et al. (2024) suggest that deeper structural changes are required. Addressing these gaps involves redesigning talent pathways with an emphasis on holistic development and aligning goals across stakeholders. This transformation is critical not only for advancing women's football but also for challenging entrenched gender biases within the sport.

Women in officiating roles

Officiating in football, and sports more generally, is a site for discrimination, abuse, harassment (Ju, 2024; Glynn & Brown, 2022). Officiating in football, like many areas of sport, reflects broader societal issues, serving as a space where discrimination, abuse, and harassment can manifest. While sport is often celebrated as a tool for social inclusion, Oliver and Lusted (2014) highlight its darker side, where some of the most blatant forms of exclusion and prejudice persist. Their study examines how cases of discrimination are managed in grassroots football across Australia and Britain, shedding light on the evolving nature of discriminatory behaviour in these contexts. Drawing on their combined professional and research expertise, the authors explore how national sporting organisations respond to incidents of abuse and prejudice. The article contrasts the differing strategies employed in Australian grassroots sports and English grassroots football, providing insight into the challenges of combating discrimination at a community level. By analysing these approaches, the authors underscore the complexity of addressing deeply rooted biases within sport, even in systems that aim to foster inclusivity.

Referees, both men and women, require the cultural capital to be accepted within a sporting community and be a dominant force on the pitch, field, or court – starting as a true novice, capital is hard to come by and hard to develop as an outsider (Easmin, 2023[5]. Easmin examined the experiences of women immigrants who found connection, community and developed cultural and social capital through playing cricket in Sweden. Easmin (2023) explored the barriers of women participating in sports in their homelands while also

[5] Bourdieu (1990) theoretical concepts: Habitus and Capital. Cultural capital is defined as ‘a form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills, and awards. Within the field of education, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002: Huang, 2019, p. 45). Within the footballing domain, people can gain capital through their patterns of engagement, skills as a player or referees or awards such as refereeing levels, playing levels and participation within the club/sport.

highlighting different barriers when migrating to Sweden, such as the challenge to interest enough women to form a team when cricket is not a native sport in their new homes. Easmin (2023) used Bourdieu's concept of capital, field, and habitus to "'understand participants' involvement in sports and different socio-cultural factors that influenced a participant to continue or discontinue a sport." (p. 52). The research highlights how cricket serves as a medium for female immigrants to build cultural and social capital within their host communities. By engaging in cricket, participants developed bonding social capital through connections with teammates who shared similar cultural backgrounds and bridging social capital by forming relationships across diverse social and cultural groups. These interactions fostered trust, cooperation, and a sense of belonging, enabling participants to navigate societal norms in Sweden. Additionally, cricket offered an avenue to challenge gender norms and reclaim agency in sporting spaces, contributing to the participants' cultural capital by enhancing their skills, confidence, and visibility as women in a traditionally male-dominated field. This underscores the transformative potential of sports in creating inclusive spaces that empower women and promote equity. However, being a referee or official is also a site for social support, friendship, and community as women band together to tackle the hegemonic barriers of getting a foot in the sporting door (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023; Wedgwood, 2005).

Discrimination in football remains a significant issue in Australia, particularly affecting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, Indigenous Australians, and women. Racial abuse, both on and off the field, continues to hinder the sport's inclusivity, with players from minority backgrounds often facing barriers in grassroots and elite pathways. For women in football, the disparities are stark - historical underfunding and limited access to facilities have significantly impacted their participation and progression. Pay inequality, though improving with campaigns like the Matildas' fight for equal pay, persists, particularly in domestic leagues like the A-League Women. Gender stereotypes, media bias, and a lack of representation in leadership roles exacerbate these issues, creating an uneven playing field for women in the sport.

Despite these challenges, progress is being made. The Matildas' success and Australia's hosting of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup have shone a spotlight on women's football, inspiring young girls, and catalysing discussions on equity. Football Australia has introduced initiatives like the Equaliser campaign and the Women's Football Strategy 2027 to promote gender equity and address harassment and abuse. Grassroots programs are fostering inclusivity by creating safe and welcoming spaces for girls, particularly in culturally diverse

regions. However, continued advocacy is essential to ensure equitable funding, improved facilities, and greater representation of women in coaching, refereeing, and leadership roles.

Women referees and officials face significant discrimination within Australian basketball, as evidenced by the gendered barriers embedded across multiple levels of their roles. Research by Marshall et al. (2023) highlights systemic inequities, including the unequal allocation of resources, limited representation of women in senior leadership, and concerning instances of sexual harassment. These barriers, while not explicitly prompted in the study, were found to permeate every level of the officiating experience, reflecting broader societal and organisational patterns of gender discrimination. Such challenges not only hinder the career progression of women officials but also contribute to unsafe and inequitable workplace environments. Addressing these systemic issues requires a critical examination of organisational practices and a concerted effort to foster inclusivity and safety within sporting governance structures.

Whilst discrimination remains in the sporting industry, the implementation of explicit support can aid in the role's recruitment and retention (Sunde et al., 2023; Tingle et al., 2023). Without this support, women can be pigeonholed and underrepresented within their roles due to the stereotypical values of traditional masculine sport (Roberts et. al, 2022; Stavig, 2019). Actions taken specifically to address the inequalities in sporting spaces allow for women and girls to take part in the games they wish and hold accountability for organisations and clubs who do not wish to participate in holding space for them (Eime et al, 2021). Without change from an organisational standpoint, a societal shift in traditional views and participants willing to try something unknown, women and girls are likely boxed into roles and responsibilities that are familiar and have been deemed ‘safe’ by those who currently hold power.

Social support, a key finding within Guillén and Feltz’s 2011 research, is imperative to the success of referees. Having a meaningful support network within officiating, whether that is family, friends, or coaches, can influence the perceptions of referees. Support networks can encourage quality of refereeing and influence the stage progression from novice to high-level and elite (Guillén & Feltz, 2011). Most importantly, supports networks can aid referees with emotionally coping with the negative experiences that may occur on and off the pitch, field, or court (Guillén & Feltz, 2011).

Officials are crucial for the continuity of organised sports, yet their roles are often marked by abusive behaviour from players, coaches, and spectators. Kellett and Shilbury (2007) explored how umpires in AFL perceive such behaviour and examined factors contributing to their retention in the role. The study revealed that umpires frequently

normalise and reframe abuse, viewing it as an expected part of their duties rather than a deterrent to their participation. Importantly, the findings challenge the notion that abuse directly leads to attrition, instead emphasising the significance of the social aspects of umpiring. Social interactions within the umpiring community were identified as a key motivator, with umpires valuing camaraderie and support from their peers as a primary factor in their ongoing commitment. The study underscores the importance of integrating the social dimensions of umpiring into recruitment, training, and retention strategies, highlighting that fostering a powerful sense of community can help mitigate the challenges associated with abuse in officiating roles.

Officiating within youth sports can be challenging and has been explored in depth by a number of studies. These studies found themes including the phenomenon of drop-out rates among officials and a decreased quality of referees due to burn out and subsequent termination (Ridinger, 2015; Rainey & Hardy, 1999; Goldsmith & Williams, 1992). A common theme was also found between Ridinger's 2015 study and this thesis: referees who enter the sport without support, mentoring or the confidence to successfully officiate and continue long term (and subsequently terminate their role) (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Sex segregation and socialisation in the junior years of women footballers can limit the potential to transition into refereeing roles during their adolescent and young adult lives – being excluded from competition under the guise of safety or inexperience can impact the longevity of a girls' playing career let alone venturing into officiating in the sport that inhibited growth. Current literature on sports officiating is broad but is missing the perspectives of novice women and initial barriers from the very beginning, this study endeavours to fill the gap on women football officials in Victoria, Australia (Hancock et al., 2021).

Discourses of Competence and Gender

The concept of ability, or perceived lack thereof, is a theme in discussions of girls and women in sports. This notion can be juxtaposed with the assumed competence and fitness of boys and men. Women and girls consistently display their skills and capabilities across various sports, frequently surpassing expectations, even in the workplace (Cowan et al., 2024). However, when competing in traditionally male-dominated arenas such as AFL, football, and rugby, their achievements are often undervalued or fail to receive the same level

of recognition as those of their male counterparts.[6] This disparity highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women in these spaces, where proving their competence is not always enough to achieve equitable accolades or visibility.[7] In contrast, boys and men are readily accepted in these arenas. Despite the traditional dominance of masculine men in sporting environments, women are increasingly entering these spaces to assert their agency and accumulate social capital. This dynamic is particularly evident in officiating, where discourses surrounding ability and inability are prominent, especially concerning women referees in male-dominated sports.

These discourses and negative assumptions of women referees in football starts at the beginning of the journey. Törner (2018) explored initial referee training programs finding they enforced the gendered norms of football being a 'man's game'. Törner's (2018) participants stated that they felt equally respected and treated the same as the boys in the educational training programs for referees, but a few women referees also shared scepticism of the educators mentioning "you don't know what they're saying behind closed doors" (pp. 23). This stance was maintained as none of the women participants within the training course were selected to take part in the match at the end of the weekend. Following the selection of one of the woman referees during the educational training segment, male colleagues were noted to 'visibly disagree' with the decision (Törner, 2018).

Discourses of inability continue throughout a referee's career as investigated by Forbes et al., (2015) and Reid and Dallaire (2020), both studies reporting women referees having experiences that revolved around their gender, abilities as an athlete and referee, and unwarranted advice from others. Women referees who encounter these experiences likely

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[6] AusPlay data (2022-2023) identifies football/soccer as one of the most prominent sports among Australian women, ranking as the second most participated organised sport, just behind tennis. While recreational activities such as walking, running, swimming, Pilates, and yoga dominate overall participation rates, soccer is emerging as a significant national sport, with many women choosing to lace up their boots and take to the field. Despite this growing interest, a substantial gap remains in participation rates between men and women, reinforcing the argument that women often need to excel at higher levels to achieve comparable recognition to their male counterparts.

[7] Many media franchises in the UK, as well as sporting idols, spoke about the excitement of the Men's English football team making it to the European Championship Finals in mid-2024. Media outlet, 'The I', highlighted the disparity between men's and women's football in England – stating that people dismiss the accomplishments of The Lionesses "once men take centre stage." Some sporting bodies highlighted the fact that the Women's English football team has won the Euro Final in 2022, the Arnold Cup in 2022 and 2023, as well as making it to the World Cup Final in 2023 against Spain.

start to question their own abilities and judge their own competence and performance as highlighted by Reid and Dallaire (2020). Consequently, many new and upcoming referees feel the pressure to perform to the exemplar standard of refereeing and exude ‘the soccer referee’ as a performance and personality. This standard of refereeing is heavily promoted in teaching materials to ensure players, coaches and spectators respect referees who perform the role. If the novice referees are able to perform well and act in the intended behaviours, it reinforces their motivations, efforts and willingness to continue, however, if those standards are not met by new, inexperienced referees, it can lead these novice participants to feel dejected and create a new line of thought, with doubts on their performance and belonging as a referee in this sport.

Referees who experience the hardship as a novice, can begin to question their dedication to the role and determine if it is feasible to continue or if termination is a more likely path to take. Women entering football contest gender norms as it is still seen as a highly male-dominated field. This is pronounced when women officiate men’s football as it is even more contentious and attracts abuse, harassment, and endless discourses of inability. The discussions of incompetence continue from the field to social media posts and forums. The discussions continue in silent conversations in the stands and in the locker rooms behind closed doors (Forbes et al., 2015). Sporting commentators, who were unaware their microphones were recording, stated that “It is bad enough with the incapable referees and linesman we have, but if you start bringing in women, you have big problems” (Forbes et al., 2015, pp. 522). These sentiments highlight the unspoken, ‘silent’ conversations that plague women’s sports.

These narratives of perceived inability, often framed as concerns for the quality of the game, expose entrenched traditional beliefs that football is inherently a "man's game" and should exclude women. Such perspectives reflect the enduring dominance of masculinity within the sport, perpetuating existing power dynamics that resist the inclusion of women. Reid and Dallaire (2020) highlight that some women referees actively distance themselves from the stereotype of the "incompetent female referee" (p. 771), striving to prove their worth to their male counterparts. This need for validation not only reinforces masculine ideals but also isolates these women from others within their cohort, further entrenching gendered hierarchies in football.

The persistence of traditional norms in football creates a cultural narrative where women’s presence is seen as disruptive or exceptional. Women who reject femininity in favour of assimilation into masculine norms inadvertently reinforce the notion that femininity

- and by extension, women - have no legitimate place in the sport. This perpetuates the perception of women in football as anomalies rather than integral contributors, maintaining the sport as a space dominated by masculinity and resistant to true gender equity.The separation of identities, and the need to prove themselves to be good enough, is a consistent theme within the literature (Reid & Dallaire, 2020). Some women want to be accepted into this space and therefore are adopting a 'me versus them' mentality (Reid & Dallaire, 2020). This mentality of creating the sense of individuality can provide the idea that one woman referee who conforms to the masculine, traditional ideals of football is more capable, knowledgeable, and respectable when compared to women referees who retain their feminine traits. These feminine traits are frequently rejected and stigmatised by the football community. In a sense, these women who embody the masculine traits of male referees want to blend in and become more palatable to the masses, to be seen as a counterpart (Reid & Dallaire, 2020).

Wasend and LaVoi (2019) argue that women who have been coached by female coaches are more likely to pursue coaching roles themselves. This highlights the importance of representation and support in empowering women to see themselves as equally capable of occupying positions of authority and influence in sport. Rather than conforming to masculine stereotypes of coaching, women can embrace their own identities, celebrating their femininity without compromising their credibility. Such shifts in representation and empowerment have the potential to disrupt traditional norms and stereotypes, paving the way for broader societal changes in expectations and values surrounding leadership and sport.

There were women that feel additional pressure to perform well and create a long-lasting, permanent pathway for future women and girls. Women who feel the pressure to provide the same opportunities to the next generations. To ensure that their performance does not dictate the end of women and girls refereeing at elite- and intermediate-levels of football (Reid & Dallaire, 2019). The persistent cycle of discourses surrounding referee incompetence, the abuse directed at officials, and the male-dominated focus within training courses and media representation acts as a barrier to the inclusion and retention of women referees within the organisation. This issue extends to the broader community, discouraging women and girls from engaging with football altogether, thereby perpetuating gender imbalances within the sport.

The current literature highlights the harsh environment of officiating and the reality that women are facing intense power imbalances to achieve equal footing in this sport. These discourses and physical environments can affect potential and current referees in physical,

emotional, and psychological ways. A lack of resources and access to a sport that they love harms not only women and girls, but also football as a sport, culture, and community.

Tokenism

The reality of being a token figure can be daunting. Being in the minority can be a stressful position – especially when calling for change and action. Refereeing and being a woman in sport embodies tokenism and, in the case of officiating, means being an individual facing a mass of men. Tokenism in football has been researched and explored through the lens of women footballers tackling the masculine stereotypes. This research delves into the masculine world that football is known for and the nasty reality of abuse that comes with being a marginalised group.

Jones and Edwards (2013) explored the sexist beliefs that exist in elite men's football, specifically, about women football referees. The outward, public comments made by commentators and media presenters have changed over the decades to include women and present a united front in line with the FA's gender equality scheme. However, many examples of sexist views and discriminatory language has been documented in media outlets and social media posts. Jones and Edwards (2013) highlighted quotes from commentators speaking their unfiltered thoughts about women referees while believing their microphones were turned off. As emphasised in this journal, the English Football Association (FA)'s scheme to reduce the gender gap and enhance women and girls' participation in the game is a step in the right direction. Having said that, when initiating actions to 'tackle discrimination and harassment in the game,' it can be difficult determining the 'line' that has to be drawn and what exactly is classified as harassment (Jones & Edwards, 2013, pp. 204). As some forms of sexism can be disguised in modern language and be hard to identify, the battle of stamping out harassment and discrimination in football is a challenge that is difficult to conceptualise and understand (Allen & Frisby, 2017; Musto et al., 2017; Jones & Edwards, 2013)

Welford (2011) explores the concept of tokenism in non-playing roles in football such as team managers, club administrators, coaches or 'team moms' (Messner, 2000, 2011). Welford's (2011) research highlights the techniques employed by women in these behind-the-scenes roles such as accommodating masculine norms and constructing women's work as inferior. This construction ultimately aiding in the hegemonic masculinity within football and the non-playing roles in sport (Welford, 2011). An example of this, Imogen, a coach within

Welford's study changed her behaviour during the coaching qualification course. Imogen employed the aggressive and loud techniques taught in that educational session and gained acceptance from the coaching staff and fellow male counterparts. In contrast, other women within the study found that the exemplar coaching standards shown were too aggressive and did not have the flexibility that these participants would want when coaching their own teams. These women felt they did not belong to most of the group who actively coached in an aggressive manner. Many of the women in this study were also found to be diminishing their efforts and labelling their administrative and organisational work as inferior when compared to their male counterparts' contributions to the team.

When assessing the needs and outcomes of these community sporting leagues, it is often seen that the administration and delegation work of 'team mums' and managers is crucial to the efficient operation of the teams. These roles are mostly overlooked from an outsider perspective but can be argued that these positions and their responsibilities are as important, if not more, than the role of coach and assistant coach on game day. Some examples of non-playing roles that women typically managed included collating information and making 'decisions' for the club, however, it was also stated that many decisions were passed onto male members of committees and boards. The silencing of these women and relying on their male counterparts to get the tick of approval, only reinforces the power imbalance of women on sporting committees (Welford, 2011). This phenomenon was created and upheld under the guise of inexperience, even when many of the women in this study had more years within a club's administration than their male counterparts who had recently become a coach to aid their children's sporting ambitions (Welford, 2011).

These cycles of excluding women based on 'lack of experience' are formed due to the exclusion of women from participation in sports as athletes and spectators. In conjunction with their physical exclusion from sporting spaces, misinformed commentary on women's knowledge and abilities to coach sporting teams still exist, unchecked in the media (Welford, 2011). These cycles of exclusion continue due to the biases created in grassroots to elite-level sporting arenas who tend to the masculine ideals in sport, sporting participation and non-playing roles such as coaching and officiating. When women are excluded from these spaces, they are left to coach other teams such as younger boys' teams or girls' teams where the skills and merit are considered *less than* (Welford, 2011). However, the participants in this study also exercised agency in these roles using techniques such as emphasising women superiority and creating women-dominated spaces. This was highlighted through a women-only football

team, coached by a woman where their unique needs could be met. Whereas the trainee women coaches in Welford's study suggested that the male coaches that they had witnessed or worked alongside, would not be able to make the accommodations that women coaches could or recognise the specific needs that women players have (Welford, 2011).

The idea of labelling marginalised groups as tokens highlights the stark reality that women in football and more specifically, women in refereeing roles stand out in the crowd and can attract unwanted attention, abuse, harassment, and discrimination. The unique standpoint of women referees in football provides a small but important aspect of football and shines a light on the work yet to be done for equity within this space.

The demand for referees

The risk of termination in refereeing is an ongoing battle for sporting bodies and community sports clubs. These clubs, now experiencing a shortage of match officials, face widespread impacts on grassroots levels, forcing junior matches to rely on parents and volunteers as referees. These volunteer officials would likely only have the basic knowledge to conduct a match, thus risking lowering the standards of the match that is played and effecting the players who participated. Unsurprisingly, research indicates that a substantial portion of referees leave after their first year of officiating (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Kim & Hong, 2016). Furthermore, statistics provided by FA (Football Association, UK) show that up to 7,000 referees leave per year due to abuse from players, coaches, and spectators (Kim & Hong, 2016). Referee turnover is still an issue that sporting bodies worldwide are experiencing. Many factors can inhibit the longevity of a refereeing career and keeping referees interested after the first few years is the biggest challenge. Rullang et al. (2017) explore German football referee termination rates, stating that 39% of former referees in the study said that their end of their career could have been prevented. These statistics highlight the current state of refereeing, regardless of gendered experiences – referees: men, or women, are leaving in droves due to the insidious nature of football and the abuse that occurs on the pitch. The current climate of refereeing is abusive and not welcoming, which is even more pronounced as a woman. Becoming a woman referee directly challenges the societal norms perpetuated through sport, which often reinforce male dominance and female subordination (Nordstrom et al., 2016).

Surviving the role

For women that continue in their position as a match official, it is necessary to create survival strategies to succeed and maintain a healthy relationship with the sport. It is essential to create a balance between the professional role and the human individual behind the stripes that must deal with the abuse that they face during each match. Schweitzer (1994) outlines survival strategies for women officials in sport and lists role models, networking (social support) and mentoring. In this thesis, Schweitzer (1994) detailed that women match officials found having role models within the sport helped them negotiate the barriers they faced such as the feeling of being alone and ostracised (Kim & Hong, 2016). Furthermore, potential networking and social support can offset some of the discrimination and abuse that officials are confronted with. Having support networks from a similar environment can ease the pain and lower the risk of feeling isolated, and therefore, terminating their role. Rainey and Hardy (1999) found that time pressure and interpersonal conflict with players, coaches and spectators contributed to the feelings of burnout in the study participants. The study highlighted that the burnout then became a contributor for the individual to consider termination of their role as a match official. The ongoing efforts to support young referees, women referees, and referees more broadly are limited in their impact when the role demands quick judgment, confidence in decision-making, precise time management, and resilience. These challenges are compounded by insufficient initial training and a lack of comprehensive support from organisations and local clubs.

This chapter has outlined the current state of women in refereeing roles. Refereeing is difficult and women must negotiate extra issues including being a token on the field, being discriminated against or abused and tackling strategies to limit the termination of referees.

In chapter three I explain the methodological tools that I used in order to understand the process of becoming a referee and the methods of data collection to delve into the successful world of three women referees in Melbourne, Australia.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

One of the aims of this thesis is to understand the process of becoming a referee. Indeed, in a purported time when 'anyone can do anything,' what is it like to become a referee with no football or refereeing history. Refereeing is a simultaneously physical, psychological, and social role. Becoming a referee is therefore an embodied journey and experience. Rather than rely on the reporting of other novice referees, I decided that the ideal method to understand this embodied experience was to become a referee. To record this experience, I adopted an autoethnographic approach. Further, I wanted to understand the experiences of those women who had successfully embodied the role of refereeing. What can the stories of those who have made it tell us about the facilitators needed to become a referee, indeed, to identify as one? This thought process was made as I, truthfully, had no prior knowledge of football and truly little experience watching or participating in the game. I wanted to explore the hidden, unseen barriers that people within the industry look over or take for granted – I wanted to unearth the hardship that someone would face if they wanted to become a referee. Someone, like me, who had left sports behind for a number of reasons and decided to come back in a non-playing capacity – what barriers existed for us that do not pertain to the experience of others? To truly 'understand' this thesis, my research questions and the outcomes I envisioned for myself as a researcher, I wanted to get involved and somewhat lost in this world, I wanted to become a part of this research entirely and bare the bruises and emotional scars that tatter women globally from a game entrenched in masculinity and manhood.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the practice, or technique, that employs the researcher as an active participant while recording their own findings and perspective to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography allows the researcher to access cultural understandings and inside knowledge to produce meaningful insights of groups that are not well known, and to "deepen our capacity to empathise with people who are different from us" (Ellis et al., 2011, pp. 274). Previous studies had used autoethnography to collect data and experiences in reference to women participants in male-dominated sports, identifying and exploring the hardships that women face when in those spaces (Morton, 2018)

Autoethnography was the chosen for this research for its ability to bridge gaps and shine a light on unseen avenues and experiences. This methodology was chosen, selfishly, as

a gateway to re-entering the sporting space myself, yet it also provided an opportunity to view the officiating process that is seen as ‘easy’, ‘quick’ and ‘informative’ through eyes that had not grown up in these settings, been immersed in these rules and had grown a thick skin to the expectations of not only women and girls, but referees and officials who accept the hatred and disgust of those around them. This methodology gives space for reflection and growth, an insider lens with outsider perspective, while also allowing the time to explore the experiences and opinions of those who grew up in these spaces.

Initially, the research aims included producing a thesis that only contained autoethnographic data and analysis, however, after only lasting a fleeting time in the role of referee and not being able to continue, I wanted to further develop my research by implementing interviews of others to contrast and compare the findings. The research then shifted to a discourse of success and failure, after my own epic downfall while watching women rise to the top of their game. It was my own shortcomings as a referee that lead me to using experience and perspective to juxtapose my short season against women who have dominated their chosen fields.

Boll (2023, pp. 2) states “doing autoethnography is less a matter of writing up, than of *writing into existence* the self”. To write myself ‘into existence’ as a referee I utilised several techniques including keeping a reflexive journal, fieldnotes, voice notes, observations, and other artefacts that I collected during the process such as photos, referee evaluations, and communications with FV. I tried to document the entire process of becoming a referee. This began with individual activities such as online training and getting physically fit, various forms of contact with the refereeing department at FV and in person training events and eventually refereeing official matches on the FV competitive calendar in 2022. Voice notes were recorded (usually in my car) either immediately prior or immediately after games and events. These proved to be an efficient way to record free-flowing thoughts and emotions and a quick method to capture my experiences. This was especially apparent when refereeing night games as Melbourne headed into winter and my hands were unable to hold my steering wheel, let alone a pen and paper. These voice notes were transcribed and thematically analysed in collaboration with written fieldnotes that were recorded later in the day of these events occurring.

In total I produced almost two hours of voice notes and 23 pages of journal and fieldnotes. I retell my story primarily in Chapter four in chronological order. Concluding my short season of football, I had experienced turmoil – the emotional rollercoaster of becoming a referee, feeling accomplished and successful, having those positive moments be whisked

away from abuse, and coming to terms with my research being cut short by my own inhibitions to continue that path. It was difficult to grapple with everything that had happened, it was shock and processing the grief of my past self – if this research was my gateway to re-entering sporting spaces, did this mean I was no longer welcome in sport at all? My failure hit hardest when I realised that I would not have enough data, enough meaningful information, to create the thesis I wanted to create. It was difficult to truly process the experience and only once the thesis took shape and I was able to re-listen to all my voice notes and re-read my data entries did I realise that those experiences have shaped me into the person I am today, and helped me gain perspective on the interviews with my experienced participants and, more broadly, in my everyday life. I realised that I did not have a thick skin, I was actually quite emotionally fragile, and I gained a newfound respect for referees, officials, umpires, and anyone who wishes to control and demand respect from sportspeople in the heat of the moment.

Referee Voices

To better understand being a woman referee I also interviewed three experienced, and successful, referees. Success can mean different things to different people, as it's deeply personal and subjective. Generally, it involves achieving goals or fulfilling aspirations that are important to an individual. Success could be measured by numerous factors such as personal fulfillment, happiness, financial stability, career achievements, making a positive impact on others, or reaching a state of contentment. Within this thesis, success is defined as passing the Level 4 training course, refereeing for at least a minimum of five years, and feeling comfortable on the pitch. Success means to progress, to become better as a referee and make ‘good’ calls and decisions on the pitch in line with the Laws of the Game. While there may be other terms that denote a more adequate understanding, I have chosen success as it encapsulates the ongoing passion and pursual of greatness from these women – “experienced” referees can be used however, these women are still enthralled by their roles and the game and are not merely going through the motions of experience on the pitch. Success is a broad term, and I believe that that term can be used to define these women when discussed properly.

Due to the relatively small number of experienced women referees in Victoria the three women were recruited using purposive sampling. The initial contact with each referee occurred through networking at volunteer events and gala days organised by FV, after the

first participant provided an interview, further sampling was conducted through their networking system. Further I attended at least one match that they were officiating to add some context and observations of their performance as referees.

The average age of these participants was 27 years old, and all three participants lived in Melbourne and officiated games within the greater Melbourne area. The participants had an average of nine years of experience as referees, two would be considered 'high level referees' while one participant would be considered 'elite.'

Each participant consented to their interviews being recorded and were informed of their rights within this study. The interviews lasted 45-50 minutes and each participant was asked the same sets of semi structured questions however, the interview schedule was used as a guide and follow up questions were prioritised to gain further information and insight into the referees' narrative and experience. Subtle differences between the participants required an adaptable path of interviewing that allowed the participants to share their own experiences that made them into the referees they are, whilst still highlighting their journeys and the overarching aims of the research: what fundamental aspects of their lives, whether physical, mental or emotional, created a being that was capable of refereeing at the highest level.

I had ceased refereeing before the first interview, however my status of an ex-referee and awareness of the aspects of the game, the rules, and the entry level processes of refereeing guided my interview questions and allowed me a deeper understanding of some of the stories that were told during the interviews. Having an insider/outsider perspective was advantageous. After the recording of all three interviews, I discussed (as they were interested) my own experiences of refereeing with them. This provided some further insights into aspects of the process of being a referee. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis is a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2022) outline six key phases that guide the process of reflexive thematic analysis, each stage building towards the development of rich, meaningful, and well-defined themes. The first phase, data familiarisation, requires researcher to immerse themselves in the dataset by reading and re-reading it, actively engaging with the content to note potential ideas, insights, or patterns of interest. This is followed by generating initial codes, where sections of the data are systematically labelled to capture significant aspects that relate to the research question. Unlike more rigid approaches, reflexive thematic analysis allows codes to evolve as the researcher's understanding of the data deepens. In the third phase, searching for themes, the researcher identifies patterns among the codes, grouping

them into broader, more abstract themes that reflect shared meaning. These themes are then subjected to refinement, a process of critical reflection to ensure each theme is coherent, distinctive, and meaningfully captures an essential aspect of the data. The next step, defining and naming themes, involves clearly articulating the central idea that underpins each theme, ensuring it is conceptually precise and easy to communicate. Unlike more positivist approaches, where themes are seen as objective discoveries, reflexive thematic analysis emphasises the active role of the researcher in constructing themes through ongoing reflection and meaning making. This approach recognises researcher subjectivity as a resource rather than a limitation, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced analysis.

The transcript from each participant was read multiple times as Braun and Clarke's recommendation. Once the whole body of work had been understood as a piece, each question was broken down. The questions asked were typically focused on the participant's playing history, transitioning into refereeing, their junior and senior refereeing experiences, specific negative and positive moments, and general comments about the training program, mentoring and progressing through the ranks. Responses were categorised in the first round of coding as 'gendered,' 'key experiences,' 'abuse' and 'support.' These themes emerged as the transcripts were read and naturally became a notable and ongoing commentary. Following the initial coding, the data was then re-read thoroughly and coded further using themes such as 'gendered experiences', 'gender' (obvious gender differences in spaces, moments, conversations etc.), 'abuse from the sidelines', 'abuse from players', 'abuse from people within the football domain: coaches, managers', 'junior support: travelling, mentoring, feedback' and 'senior support: friendships, becoming a mentor, progressing through ranks'. Additionally, coding of general information such as participant name, age, club history and current rank were noted. . After each transcript was coded using both broad and specific themes, the participant data was compared to each other (junior and senior experiences, levels of support, gendered experiences, abuse) and used to highlight similarities and differences between themselves as referees who have been in the industry for many years and the autoethnographic data of a novice. As the semi-structured interview schedule relied heavily on follow-up questions, much of the transcripts differed in the order of ideas and thus, using thematic coding to uncover similarities and differences amongst the interviewed referees allowed me to delve into each journey as unique experiences while also connecting comparable encounters.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical preparation for this research involved completing an ethics unit to understand the requirements for conducting research ethically and navigating the ethics application process. The unit covered the workings of the application process, the components of a written application, and strategies to address potential issues proactively. Key aspects of research ethics were outlined, equipping the research team with effective mitigation strategies prior to submission.

Ethical considerations for this project included obtaining informed consent from participants involved in the interviews and observations. Proactive measures were taken to address potential challenges, such as ensuring the researcher's psychological well-being during the autoethnographic data collection and analysis. Additionally, care was taken to manage sensitive discussions about abuse and hardships during participant interviews, ensuring both ethical compliance and participant safety throughout the research process. Furthermore, it was of the utmost importance to maintain confidentiality of the participants through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifiable information (club names, suburbs, exact dates). These mitigation strategies were spoken at length to each participant, and during each interview participant rights were addressed and reinforced.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Part 1: Learning the Ropes

The idea of becoming a referee had been planted and the beginning stages of my data collection had begun – I would become a football referee, officiate some games and experience what it means to be on the field and in control. The timing of my coursework finishing aligned perfectly with the approaching football season, allowing me to dedicate time to learning the rules of the game, getting physically fit over the summer, and stepping onto the football pitch to take on local community games. I was both nervous and confident... sports had always been my passion, so how hard could it be?

Learning the rules My experience was limited, I had been involved with the university's football research program for only a few months when training started and had gained some insight into the workings of grassroots clubs. I watched the memorable games that were on television with friends and had watched a few games televised from the UK with an ex-boyfriend. I had even attended a tour of Wembley stadium and walked the halls with framed memorabilia without the sense of how important each jersey was. I had participated in almost every sport that my school and local community offered, yet my football-hating family's opinions of the game meant that football was rarely acknowledged or played as I grew up, it was the one sport where the rules dumbfounded me.

The very first step to this journey of becoming a referee was to learn the rules of the game. Football Victoria required referees to create an account and complete registration to access the content, but I encountered technical difficulties during the registration process. I made my online account, paid for my course, and waited for confirmation – nothing arrived and when I logged in, it asked for another payment for the content I required. My first interaction with FV was emailing their team for advice on registration at the end of August 2021. Thankfully, the reply was prompt, and I was given a code to process the second payment request, and I was let in to the online learning platform.

COVID-19 meant the training was implemented online through a series of modules and PowerPoint slides, it was self-paced but estimated that most participants complete the course in about eight hours. As I had limited experience watching, playing, or refereeing football I knew the coursework was going to take me longer than the average football novice – the actual time to complete the course was far greater than most could have predicted. It

was expected to take most people eight hours to go through the content when completing this course and the participants I interviewed stated that they completed the theory within one day (5-8 hours).

I did not expect the theory to take so long, as I am usually a quick learner, however, the knowledge presented was tailored to ex- and current footballers who had an assumed foundation of knowledge prior to completing this theory work. Therefore, my expectations were blown out and it took much longer than expected to complete what was required.

As a complete novice, I took extensive notes on each concept and drilled the knowledge into my head – only for it to be contradicted in the next slide or challenged by the need to personally determine the severity and intention of an action. The content, clearly made by referees for referees, had the assumption of foundational knowledge that most football lovers and players would have. The rules and nuances of the game would be embedded in those that have witnessed the game firsthand or had enough time watching it from the sidelines to take on an officiating position. My experience was so limited that the rules were nonsensical, and my small playing experience of high-school soccer was purely for participation's sake and the coaches did not push us to learn the rules of the game, just to run out on the pitch and have fun.

> *The coursework is very technical, very wordy and shows that most people who become a referee, start as a player or with a decent amount of knowledge – the basics are all over the place and feels ridiculously hard to keep up with what they are explaining.* (Journal Entry, December 2021)

> *The training slides are convoluted and confusing, with minimal examples to solidify this knowledge – very much meant for people with experience with the game and playing.* (Journal Entry, December 2021)

The confusing content amplified my self-doubt, which grew stronger as I progressed, leading me to question my abilities. Juggling part time work and other aspects of my master's degree, it took more than a month to get through the prescribed pages and make sense of the never-ending conditions. The slides that were presented gave me a brief overview of the rules and the technical definitions of what needed to be learnt, however with no practical training sessions lined up, I was worried that the training I completed in my room would not translate onto the pitch.

Getting fit

While the mental training to become a referee was occupying a lot of my time, another priority was ensuring I was physically fit enough to get on the pitch and keep up with play – I assumed that my physical fitness was not at the level that would be expected of a referee. This was something that filled me with dread but was also one of the greatest parts of this training protocol. Having a goal in mind and being able to work towards it was the motivation I needed to consistently hit the gym and run further than I ever have as an adult. Most nights of the week, I was completing interval sprints and long distance runs in an attempt to not look incredibly unfit during my first season as an official. It was something that, at the time, was a more stressful thought than grasping the rules and the mentality of refereeing. In January, I ran my first 10k and the feeling of euphoria was indescribable, something I never thought I could do and something that made me believe that refereeing was okay, and a feat that I could accomplish.

Days after completing the 10k, I was struck down with COVID-19 and my capacity to run was slightly diminished, but I still endured to hit the 5k mark once again and continue training. My goals to become fit were highly motivated by the possible embarrassment and shame of not being able to keep up with play. I had begun to put more pressure on myself to do well and to represent the people like me – women, novices, referees that are starting out later than the norm – and I could feel the mounting sense of responsibility to do this perfectly, to not make any mistakes and to avoid those feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt, and disappointment.

Official training and other issues

The issues with the online learning platform continued when my last assessment was yet to be marked off. This delay was due to my late registration – I had registered for the course in late August and commenced the online training in September. In the months of learning that followed, the regular season ended, and the organisation moved its sights into the upcoming 2022 season. This meant that when I did complete my final assessment in late December, the administration did not ‘tick’ it off until I reached out weeks later to ensure that I had completed everything I needed to. I waited and waited to no avail and the unfinished status of my learning made me feel uneasy.

The learning course is still unfinished and waiting for my last certificate to be approved… makes me question if I'm doing the right things, if my learning is actually correct or if the previous effort I've put in, is worth it?" (Journal Entry, January 2022)

By February, I received a call from the referees' department at FV with the offer of officiating my first match – a social tournament aimed at women wanting to get into football without the pressure of joining a community club. A modified half-pitch, modified rules, seven women a side and "the perfect environment for referees starting out." The call continued explaining that a practical training session is scheduled later in the month, but this social women's event would be a great starting point. I would receive my uniform and equipment and have the support of FV representatives at these games. My nerves settled at the thought of getting out on the pitch and doing what I intended to do, the months of online training and physical effort to get fit enough had arrived.

Feeling motivated to get started now that I have some information – feeling nervous but excited because it sounds like a good starting opportunity within football and something to dip my feet into, time to get serious about training, fitness levels and mentality with a practical session coming up – the need to perform has now started. (Voice Note, February 2022)

The shopping list had been given to me over the phone: black running shoes, black football boots, black shirt, and black shorts – the rest will be provided on the day. I promptly went to ASICS to purchase two pairs of all black shoes that made me feel like a referee, and someone who actively participates in sports, while the shirt and shorts were easily found and would be quickly replaced by the appointed uniform on the night. I found a gym bag at home and filled it with everything I could possibly need: Band-Aids, lip balm, extra pens and pencils, deodorant, extra socks, a spare pair of shorts and a towel. An overthinker and an over packer means the gym bag quickly filled with 'just in case' items.

The day had come, my game was allocated via email and the event was in my calendar, it was something I looked at almost every day and as the days counted down, the heart palpitations got stronger, and the fear was becoming overwhelming – I was ready to start this next chapter of my journey, but my body was telling me to run in the other direction. I was already the type of person to be shy and nervous in new situations, but to place myself

in a kind of situation where I was in direct spotlight and expected to control a game of football was terrifying. The days ticked over and finally, I was packing my bag and triple checking that I had everything I was told to bring over the phone all those weeks ago.

Part 2: Blowing the Whistle

I packed everything in the car, filled my water bottle, took out my jewellery, tied my hair back in a slick ponytail and got dressed – I could feel my heartbeat in my ears. I hadn't eaten on the chance that it might come back up during the match. I was running through the basics of the game, rehearsing my speech to introduce myself to FV representatives and the players I would be officiating. I planned to arrive early and watch the game before to get a sense of what the hell I was meant to do and get the lay of the land.

The drive was long enough to settle the nerves but short enough that my mind was still racing at 1,000 kilometres an hour. I found a car park directly in front of the pitch and was greeted by the sight of people everywhere – spectators standing and watching by the fence, by the club rooms and by the side of the pitch. My ears were ringing, my hands were shaking, mouth dry and my body felt heavy. I was not ready to exit my car and step into this environment, but I had an appointment to attend, and I had to get my gear sorted before even thinking of refereeing this game. I stepped out of the car – it was on the cold side of summer and with the sun slowly touching the horizon, the chill became more pronounced – I made my way to the side of the pitch, behind the fence, and called FV's Head of Referees. The phone rang out and I shakily left a voicemail – the nerves spiked at this moment. If they were not here – who would I speak to? Where do I get my uniform? How can I referee without any of my things? I didn't even have a whistle. My heart rate was through the roof as I watched the game unfold in front of me and observed the other women referee take up space on the pitch and make call after call. After a tense few minutes, my phone rang, and it was the Head of Referees, Jeff, more specifically. It was a quick conversation to meet somewhere visible and get the ball rolling.

I found Jeff on the side of the pitch, watching the game in front of him. I introduced myself, spoke about my motivations, my studies, how I'm feeling and asked a few questions about himself and the department. We then went into the clubrooms and got my gear from FV: a whistle, a book with formatted blank pages, yellow and red cards, shorts, long socks, a neon green shirt, a black shirt, a set of flags, a rule book and a badge that grants access to

higher level games for free.[8] My gym bag was filled to the brim, and I took the time to get changed into my uniform. I donned the black shirt, copying the other woman referee on the pitch, pulled up my football socks and filled my pockets with the essentials. I was alone in the quiet change room for a moment and my heart was beating as fast as it could, my hands were cold and quivering, I was grateful that I hadn't eaten earlier in the day as my stomach flipped relentlessly until I finally stepped out of the clubrooms and onto the pitch.

I felt like I was out of control... being thrown into the deep end.

I got some last-minute tips from FV representative, and he laid out some expectations before taking the pitch such as 'have fun' and 'see how you go.' Having him there to supervise and provide feedback eased my nerves but it was still a daunting experience.

I introduced myself to a couple of players and got on with it... I feel like I missed some calls... it was a social round so it wasn't entirely competitive but some of the women were getting mouthy about whistle calls and decisions, I think they thought I was experienced.

Throughout the game, some of the players would shout at me – either to make a call or against a call I had made – while the comments were as expected through experiences watching other sports, reading into football and the normalisation of abuse on and off the pitch and the general knowledge that sporting fields are somewhat exempt from the common courtesy of respect, it was still displacing to have women yell at me to make a decision.

Ref, make a call!

Ref, that's a handball! Handball!

[8] The bright green shirt I was given, was verging on neon. This is a part of Football Victoria's Green Shirt Program which is used to help spectators, players and coaches identify a 'new' referee and to promote patience and kindness to referees who are still developing. This is the case in other sports, such as Basketball Victoria who uses green whistles, instead of classic black, to help crowds identify referees who are under the age of 18.

At half-time, the Head of Referees gave me some pointers like blowing my whistle with more intent, sticking to the middle of the pitch instead of hugging the sides and to keep enjoying it which, surprisingly, I was.

> *Overall, it was a very positive experience, it was just riddled with anxiety over wanting to do well but it was very supportive... [Jeff] was very supportive in terms of constructive feedback, what I missed, what was good, so definitely in terms of development, it was a positive, but it's still a very nerve-racking thing.*

The feedback was helpful, and I made a more mindful effort to stick to the centre of pitch. It was something that I had to constantly remind myself to do, as it felt natural to get out of the way of playing and stick to the sidelines to avoid the women or the ball. An older referee stopped me at the end of the day to give me some advice:

> *you're the boss, they have to get out of your way.*

The advice stuck with me and popped into my head countless times afterwards when I found myself sliding to the side, away from play. The night ended quickly after I blew the whistle, most of the spectators had left and everyone was ready to roll out once the game had finished. I debriefed with Jeff and enjoyed my time on the field once the initial dread had subsided. I collected my cash for the game[9], grabbed my bag from the clubroom and got in the car to give myself a moment to settle my mind.

> *It was fun, physically, it wasn't a big struggle which was good, it definitely was not terrible... now I can cry and get it all out because it's done, it is over, it happened.*

The social tournament continued, and FV made an effort to rotate the first year referees to give each of us a chance to officiate a few games, however, with COVID-19 lockdowns still shutting down community sporting events and knocking out multiple players from the same team, two of my scheduled games were cancelled and the social season was

[9] Each football club in Victoria must pay the referee on the day of the match. FV has set fees according to the age group and position (central or assistant referee) that is officiated. Cash was usually given in envelopes from the canteen, occasionally it was handed directly to me from the team managers on the field.

then finished. Having only refereed one social game, I still felt new and raw and unprepared for what was to come... the regular community football season.

As the season approached, FV had organised a practical training session for Level 4 referees, an in-person skills day to provide a practical learning environment with experienced referees. I immediately responded to the email and booked a place, I wanted to immerse myself in these experiences and gain as much knowledge as possible – I did not want to be unprepared, and I had hoped this opportunity would provide some ease to my fears.

The practical session was held at Ridgley High School, in the Southeast of Melbourne, on the 27th of March. It was a scorching day, expected to hit 34 degrees by the afternoon so I was grateful that the practical session was scheduled in the morning. While travelling across town, I was nervous, but I was committed to seeing this through and gaining some skills and possibly making some friends. I was hoping to find other girls to connect with but as I arrived, I quickly noticed that was not the case. As the session started, 13 men and boys and I stood in a circle, greeted by the referee trainers. There was a quick introduction, sharing some sunscreen around the group and our names had to be ticked off – my name was not on the list. I had emailed my RSVP and even spoke to one of the organisers on the phone and yet, I was missing from the list. It felt like it was the physical sign that I did not belong, or better yet, I was not wanted. Once signed in, everyone was given their green shirts and equipment which I had already received from Jeff, and we were asked to change into our green shirts for the day, I was in black. We made our way around the field to the clubrooms where multiple change rooms lined the wall. The men quickly walked in and started to get changed, some even taking the women change rooms for themselves and within seconds, every room was occupied by a man, and I was left to source a space to change. The rest of the building was closed and as time ticked by, I had to opt to change around the corner, in public, and hope the people on the adjacent football field walking their dogs did not glance up. It was humiliating to have the spaces designed for women, to be used by men at all let alone when a woman was present.

After changing into my green shirt, the group gathered on the pitch and started the session. It was a basic practical session where the main focus was on whistle blowing, correct flag technique and the offside rule. It was a short session due to the incoming heat of the day so a basic run down of blowing the whistle and the differing strengths according to the call, as well as body language, using the flag correctly when you are allocated as an assistant referee and then a larger drill where the instructors imitated offsides and the assistant referee running on the line must call it correctly. The drill was useful and put a lot of online content

into perspective. I felt accomplished but alone as most of the men had formed groups to chat amongst themselves and found commonalities to bond over – I stood to the side and waited for the day to be over.

> *I was definitely nervous going into it and I feel like I was too scared a lot of the time to actually voice my opinion, on what I thought something was, or a decision just because I feel like I... didn't know that much about the game.*

It was clear that many of the participants during the session had similar motivations to be a referee, most of them said that they could no longer keep playing due to time or physical constraints, but they still wanted to be a part of the game. Others had said that their children played, and they wanted to participate and be active in their child's sporting community. A few had spoken about their passion for the game as a spectator and wanted to take part without having to play. Then, there was me. I said my motivations were research based and trying to increase the number of women in refereeing. The day had finished, I quickly packed up my bag and left the venue – I felt out of place as an individual and while the day was successful and I learnt a lot, I did not enjoy the experience of isolation. I started the session with hopes and expectations of other women referees being there and making friends which did not happen.

> *The training itself was good, and it was confidence building just because I knew some things and then the things, I didn't know were shown to me, so I think that was a real positive as well... I think I can watch games and know what's going on a bit better as well, I think in terms of a learning experience it was really good.*

It was now April, and the community season had begun, I hesitantly entered my availability into the scheduling system, Schedula, and blocked out space in my calendar on Sundays for refereeing. Allocations were sent out on Tuesdays, and it was not long before I received an email stating that I was allocated to a game and to accept the allocation promptly. My stomach dropped – this was the moment where my physical and mental training mattered, this was it. I looked at the allocation, two games, 13-year-old boys and girls in a low division at a ground about 25 minutes away. Along with my own allocation to these games on a Sunday morning, was another referee with the title 'mentor,' someone experienced to attend

these games and provide support and feedback to new referees to help them transition into the role.

This mentoring program was mentioned consistently throughout the training modules online and reiterated by FV representatives at the social tournament games, I was eager to have my questions answered and have someone there to give me the essential feedback I needed to make sure I was on the right track. By Thursday, that referee had rejected the allocation for my games, and I was left with a pit in my stomach – was I going to be alone? Was I going to be able to do this? Did I have the knowledge and skills to referee without someone as a support? I did not know what to do, I did now know who to contact or if it was even something worthy of talking to someone about. My worries which seemed overwhelming, felt small when voicing them aloud and embarrassment stopped me from reaching out to the referee department. Of course, I can referee two games of 12- and 13-year-olds...

I had accepted my lonely fate as the week ended but as the nerves ramped up for the actual day, I realised that the questions I had been saving for my mentor were going to be unanswered and left me in the lurch. I had several queries about game day procedures, what the referee does before a game, as well as logistical questions like pitch sizes, game time for different age groups and the traditional rules of football that I continued to confuse with the modified rules of the women's social tournament. I sent out an email on Saturday in a final effort to gain some clarity before stepping onto the pitch – it was left unanswered until the following week, and I was left confused, alone, and unsupported for the first time.

Sunday morning arrived, it was a beautiful day, and the games were not scheduled until 11:30am which meant I could sleep in, have breakfast, and take my time before having to arrive at 10:30am. While the morning was peaceful from an outsider's perspective, I felt dizzy with anxiety and my heart fluttered as each hour passed. I packed my bag and ticked off each item from my mental checklist, I did a last-minute search online to try to answer the questions I had circling my brain with no luck, even the referee resources on the FV webpage did not have the answers I was looking for.

> *So, I'm about to leave for my first refereeing appointment... and I am... terrified, I mean, that's sort of the general theme of this experience but I think the fact that I don't have a mentor has thrown me quite a bit to be honest... which sucks because that*

was meant to be, like, the support system that I have for that day and obviously that doesn't exist so... yeah, that's a bit hard, a bit confronting knowing that I'm doing this on my own, truly on my own.

I had planned to ask a club manager once I got to the grounds and admit to myself and them that I did not know everything. With my ego already bruised and my confidence wavering, I got in the car and drove to Gregors Football Club. The commute was short from home, and I found a car park right in front of the main field where older girls were playing.

I feel oddly calm, I think it's, um, it is sort of like the calm before the storm sort of thing... this is just my new normal, I just have to get used to it.

I walked into the clubrooms and asked the first official looking person that walked past where referees go and what the usual process was... *"it's my first day."* The man worked at the club as a manager but was also new and quickly had to grab another person to point us both in the right direction. Once shown the referees room, I found a corner to place my bag and take a moment to breathe – I was here and about to referee my first games. The room, which was quite small, had already accumulated multiple referee bags and plenty of game day books laid out on every flat surface. I had never seen this before, and I looked at how it was filled out to get an idea about what I had to do. Without my mentor, I was lost on the procedures. I changed into my football boots, filled my pockets with my whistle, pocketbook, red and yellow cards, a pencil, and the little confidence I had left, before exiting the room. I found the same man once again and asked where the grounds were that I had been allocated to – I was escorted out of the door and to the fields, it was a half-size pitch yet again, something I was grateful for as a full-size pitch is a daunting task let alone as my first game.

Figure 1: A timed selfie in the changerooms on the first community game day, I wanted to ask someone to take a photo of me, but I was too embarrassed.

I stood warily at the sidelines, watching the current game that was refereed by another green-shirted, young-looking referee. I think we were both terrified in those moments. Being at the field an hour early was the expected procedure for referees, however, without a mentor or guidance, I did not know what had to be done in that hour before my game. So, I stood and watched, observed and held my breathe until the other referee had blown his whistle and walked off the pitch – my game was next.

I found the team manager when making my way back into the referee's room, who was a mum of one of the boys and was incredibly friendly. She had the books sorted and already in the room for me, she led me to the pitch, and I was able to ask her some of the questions I had such as "how long are the halves for this age group?." I situated myself on the pitch and made my way over to what looked like a coach of the green team. I introduced myself to the coach and assistant coach, I explained that this was a new experience for me, and *"if anything goes wrong, please just tell me."* I checked the equipment of each player on that team and then moved over to the opposing team, dressed in red. I introduced myself again to the other coach and announced my disclaimer that I was very new, and some grace would be appreciated. This coach was also incredibly kind and stated that most of these boys had never played before, wanted to have fun, and did not take it too seriously. I felt some relief having a nice interaction with both teams and soon enough, it was time to start the game.

The teams had organised their own marshals to escort me to and from the pitch to the locker rooms and linesmen to help me on the pitch. One linesman was an older player of about 15 or 16 years old, while the other was a parent that was switched on. I stood in the middle of the pitch, tossed the coin that I had chosen from my bedside table before my first women's social tournament game and started the match. It was quick, fun, and the boys were indeed not competitive, and purely wanted to score goals for their team. With the help of the linesmen, a few handballs were called and throw ins were completed – the green team had much more experience than the red team and scored a total of eight goals to one over the course of the game. When the red team scored their only goal, the sidelines erupted and the boys looked ecstatic, and I silently cheered to myself – this is what sport is about, this is what participation and having fun is about. After two 20-minutes halves on the pitch, I blew my whistle and ended the game. I had three parents come up to me and congratulate me on the job I had done, and both coaches had said *"well done"* on their way out of the field. It felt like a success. I was taken back to the referee rooms to fill out the match book, it was lucky

that a team manager had come in with me and we worked it out together, she had told me coming off the field that this was her first game as the team manager so we would figure out the books together. It was simple enough but on reflection, some signatures were missed. The break between games was short lived and I made my way out of the rooms onto the same pitch to greet the fresh players, coaches, team managers and marshals.

The second and final game of my game was Under-13s Girls in a B division, higher than the boys' game but still young and wanting to have fun. I walked up to the first cohort of girls dressed in red and introduced myself to the coach. After providing the disclaimer that I was new and nervous, he assured me that most of the girls on his team had never played before and truly just wanted to have fun. The girls looked enthusiastic, I checked each of them for jewellery and correct equipment and then made my way across the fields to the other team. The purple team had two coaches, as I walked up, the assistant coach made his way to meet me in the middle and introduced himself to me. As he walked closer, I heard the young girls behind him exclaim:

it's a girl referee!

we've never had a girl referee!

The assistant coach echoed those sentiments, saying that the girls were excited to have a woman referee and that we are not seen all that often. I spoke to the assistant coach briefly, checked the girls' equipment, and made my way to the side of the pitch, taking a minute to breath, centre myself before bringing everyone onto the pitch. The linesmen for this game included a dad of one girl, and a sister of another.

The game started with a blow of my whistle, I turned on my watch and watched from the middle of the pitch as the game progressed. The linesmen were noticeably inexperienced compared to the pair I had earlier in the day, the sister had never played before and stood to the side, while the dad on the opposite end had started a verbal fight with a spectator over boundaries and caused a commotion. My attention turning to the men screaming across the pitch at one another rather than the girls in front of me. The coach from the away team had yelled at me from their bench "focus on the game ref, don't let anyone change your decision," it was an adrenaline rush of fear, being yelled at by a coach, even if it was meant as encouragement.

The purple team had much more experience and dominated the home team, but by half time, had yet to score a goal. I blew the whistle for half time, and immediately parents raised voices about the length of the half. This was one of my concerns, without a mentor I did not know how long these halves were meant to be, and I relied on a team manager from the game before to tell me. However, it seemed as though, the halves had changed from last season and were five minutes longer than what I had anticipated. Parents and coaches approached me and questioned the time limit, and I told them it was the same time that the boys in the prior match had just played. The coaches decided to play the same length for the second half and move on, some parents were not pleased.

A short intermission at half time trying to escape the sun's rays, I stayed by the fence and drank water, observed the parents, coaches and players fussing about their performance and wondered if I had changed the outcome of the game in any way. It was time to start the second half, and another blow of the whistle signified the kick off – I was almost done. The purple girls continued to dominate and scored their first goal, and continued to score six consecutive goals, it was a bloodbath. The home team, with the support of the sidelines, still held their heads high and played harder than before, scoring their first goal in the closing minutes of the game. The entire team celebrated and once again, I was reminded of the motivations I had to become a referee and participate in this sport. The final whistle was blown with an obvious win to the away team in purple, the teams congratulated each other, the girls dressed in purple were pulled together by their coach to give three cheers to the home team, and then turned to me to *"give three cheers to the referee."* My throat felt heavy as I tried to hold back my emotions, it was a moment to remember. Quickly, everyone was grabbing their bags, the equipment was being wheeled away and the crowd filed out of the sidelines to their cars. I wrangled the team books from the coaches that still required some details to be filled out and made my way to the referee rooms with another set of "congratulations" and "well done" by two mums. I filled out the books, now feeling more confident in doing so, and returned them to their managers. I had completed my first refereeing appointment at a community club. I changed out of my bright green shirt into plain attire and found my way back to the bar, greeted by the same man that I saw earlier in the day. I was pointed in the direction of the club manager and collected my cash in two small white envelopes titled 'Referee: 13C Boys' and 'Referee: 13B Girls'. I was ready to leave and walked back to my car, I threw my overfilled bag onto the passenger seat and began to record my fieldnotes for the day, fresh in my mind.

I began to cry merely 30 seconds into my recording, the relief of the day being done and the emotional release from those girls saying that they had never had a woman referee before made me sob.

> *When I first walked up to get the match record book off the Williams Landing girls team, the assistant coach came up to me and said, 'they just said, oh look, a girl referee, we never have one of those' and I think... I think that's such a driving force for why I am doing this, and it really just reminded me of why I started my Masters in the first place and I wanted to look at women participation in sport and encourage that and cultivate something that changes the current stigma of girls in sport and even just having that, that small acknowledgment really means so much to me... they gave me three cheers and it's just a small act that honestly makes such a difference and such a significance in my day.*

I collected myself after recording my fieldnotes and drove home to decompress – it was a day that I would never forget and a moment that I thought would have pulled me through the challenges I would face.

Part 3: Yellow Cards

The following weekend was the Football Victoria All Abilities Gala, a day of football for people playing with physical or mental disabilities and for new referees to gain more experience. I had replied to the email requesting first year referees instantly, I wanted to improve, and I also wanted to give parts of myself to communities that may be lacking in officiating help. The allocations were simple, a spreadsheet was sent out the day before to confirm each game and field, and six referees had volunteered. I was given games in the second and third timeslot of the day, consisting of one junior's game and one senior's game at lower, more 'social' playing levels. I was more at ease knowing that the players were there to have fun and participate in the gala rather than the A division teams that were there to win. I was packing my bag for the gala the night before when I received an email from FV – a referee had dropped out and they needed someone to fill in for the first timeslot of the day, I was the only referee to not have an early allocation, so I accepted and changed my alarms, aiming to get there much earlier than what I had originally planned.

I arrived at the venue after a 40-minute drive and was surprised by the amount of cars and people crowding the fields – every parent must be in attendance along with support staff, team managers, coaches, and FV representatives, it stunned me to arrive to a mostly filled car park an hour before any game was scheduled to start. I found a FV representative by a table and asked her where the referees change rooms were and I was pointed in the right direction and found a group of referees circled around the referee coach, Matthew. I recognised one male referee from our practical session a few weeks earlier, it was nice to see a familiar face even though we did not know each other well. We dropped off our bags, changed into our gear and got ready to exit. I had luckily worn my referee uniform to the venue and only had to change my shoes as, yet again, there was one room for all referees and, yet again, I was the only woman referee at this tournament. Matthew explained that the allocations had been changed (there had been a forfeit) and that everyone's games were re-allocated. I no longer had a game to referee in the first timeslot, so I sat on the bench to observe before my first game.

The first games went over the allotted time, so I was late to get started. My first game consisted of five children on each team ranging from 6-7 years old to early teens, all with differing needs and abilities, the coaches and team managers made sure that each child got the ball, were encouraged, and included in the game. It was a heart-warming experience to be on the pitch and see young girls be passed the ball and their faces lighting up with enjoyment. One team had dominated the first half, and the coaches had approached me to disallow any future goals unless every member of their team had touched and passed the ball, trying to make it fairer for the other team. The scores were not recorded for these junior games so disallowing goals did not make a difference to the kids; they were excited to score regardless of the outcome. The game was wrapped up and I made my way back to the referee meeting area to find out the next allocation. I was given a social senior game on the full pitch. I was nervous but ready to give it a go.

I made my way to the back field with my water bottle and jumper, it was a wintry morning, and the first game was a short pitch so running to warm up was not an option – my hands felt numb. The players made their way onto the pitch, half of them confused due to the last-minute reorganisation of the fixture, some asked me if they were in the right spot. I met the teams, spoke briefly to the coaches but had to start the game to stay on time, I blew the whistle, and the ball went flying. This social game was a mixed bag of skill, some clearly played football and others, were there to enjoy a social event and be encouraged by onlookers to try to kick the ball. One standout player, in my mind, was a boy who started the game with

his hands in his pockets and hood over his head. He seemed completely disinterested and walked towards the ball whenever it came near him, I could hear his mum on the sidelines cheering for him to go for the ball. It took almost the entire game of relentless encouragement from the crowd that his hands came out of the pockets and he broke into a jog, kicked the ball and passed it to a teammate who scored – a smile erupted on his face and his hood came down, he started to run for the ball and finished the game with a skip in his step.

While that boy on my pitch had experienced a turning point, I also experienced a monumental moment of my refereeing career – I gave out a yellow card. Throughout the game, one boy who was enthusiastic and vocal, started to push players when they had the ball, and then when they did not have the ball. I, surprisingly, did not hesitate to walk up to him and give him a warning. It subsided for only a few minutes before the ball approached his opponent and he shoved the ball handler, I blew the whistle hard and grabbed my yellow card, shoved it high into the air and spoke to the footballer - *"one more, and you're off."* I felt a rush of adrenaline and replayed the incident in my head. I had given someone a card! The game ended shortly after the yellow card, and I got a few handshakes from the players as I grabbed my water bottle and headed back to the group of referees who had also just finished their games. I was keen to speak to Matthew and discuss my performances, although I did not see him during the day at any of my games, I wanted feedback to improve and to finally have someone to discuss things I may be missing. I arrived at the circle of neon green shirts, some referees had to leave for other commitments and one game was remaining. The two referees left, the familiar face from the practical session and I, were the only options for the senior final game, two competitive teams that took this gala day seriously. Matthew said that he had to leave to officiate his own match and appointed me to officiate this last game. Not only did I feel like this was out of my depth, but my mentor and coach for us that day was leaving. My support system was, yet again, not there when I needed them the most. The coaching mentor, the other referees for the day and most of the crowd from the junior games left the venue – no linesmen were used in any of the games, including the A-grade seniors final. The isolation of that moment was something I was not prepared for. I arrived at the pitch, not long after the news that I would be the only referee at the venue, placed my water bottle to the side, met the coaches and stood in the middle of the pitch, waiting nervously for the teams to situate themselves.

The game started and I immediately felt out of my depth, the players were rough, aggressive, and hard to differentiate if the aggression was fair play, careless or reckless and when to blow the whistle. It was difficult to make calls at a level I was not prepared for nor

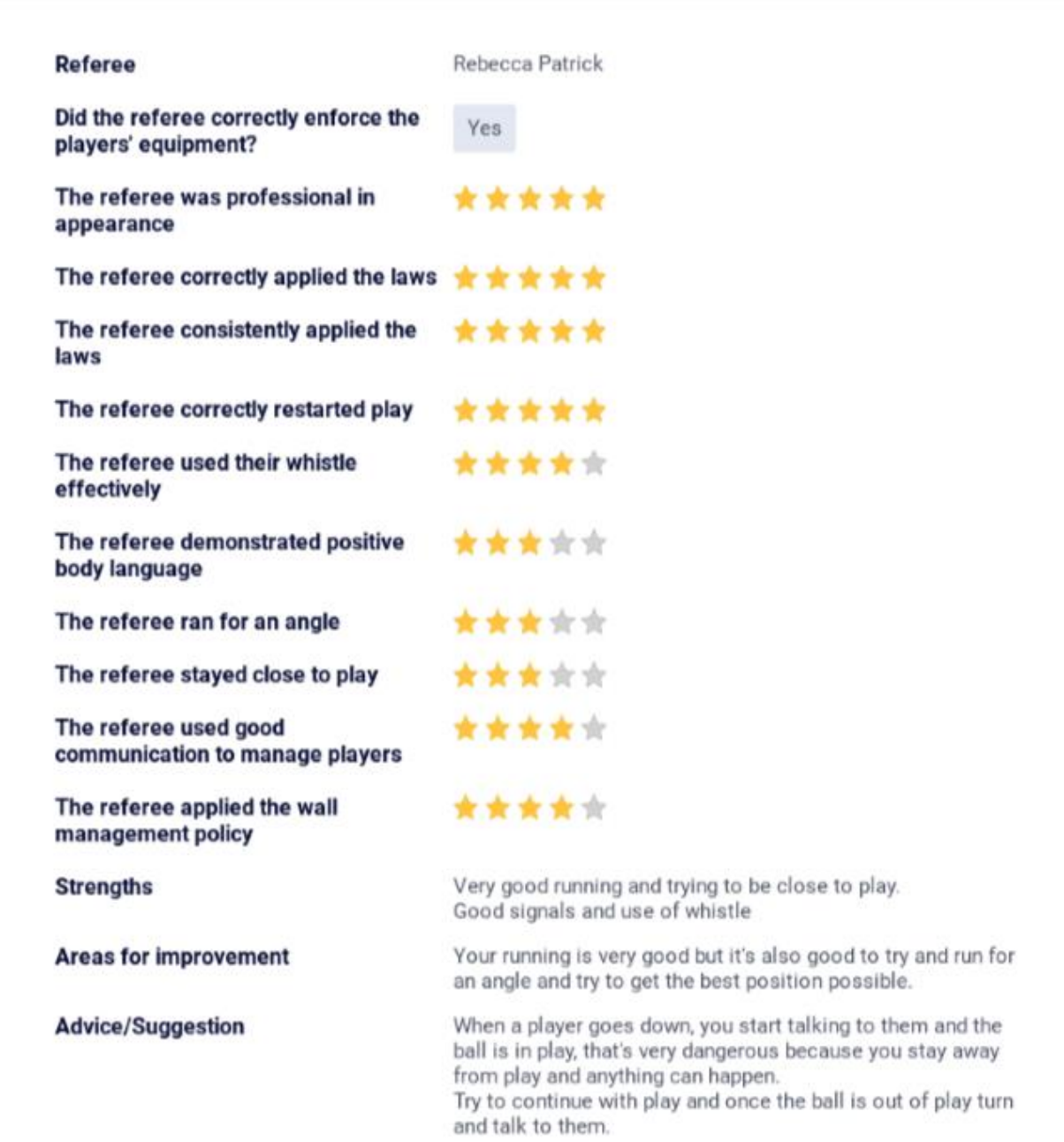
have the support there to aid me in my decisions. The game was well played, and I only intervened when players yelled at me to make a call. I began counting down the minutes until I could blow the whistle to finish the match, and felt I was making numerous errors. One team dominated the field and scored numerous goals, but by the end of the match, the winning team let up and allowed the other team to have some attempts on goal. A shot went in on the closing minute and the team celebrated hard. The player who scored, ripped his shirt off and ran around the field, this would normally constitute a yellow card. I was hesitant to give another card out – modified rules were in place, and giving out a yellow card would go against the spirit of the game in this circumstance. This day's purpose was to give men, women, boys and girls with mental and physical disabilities a chance to participate in football and have fun – I felt as though, stopping their celebrations as the game had ended, and delivering a yellow card would not have aligned with what that day was about, so I let it go and blew the concluding whistle of the game. I was ready to leave swiftly but was quickly approached by the goalie from the winning team, who was readily available to give his opinions on my refereeing:

> *You know, next time, you should really card someone as it's a yellow card if they take their shirt off, I know the rules, I'm becoming a referee, I'm not a level 4 but I just wanted to let you know but I know the rules.*

Figure 2: A photo published to FV's Facebook page; this photo is capturing the Seniors game that I officiated at the end of the day without a mentor.

It was frustrating to hear, as I was a Level 4 referee and had a pretty good grasp of the rules for a novice – I knew the rules and decided to not hand out a yellow card to align with the spirit of the game, I felt annoyed to be berated by someone who specifically said that they were not qualified. It was a quick conversation, but it made me question my being there, my belonging and if I really knew what I was doing. I was ready to exit the pitch and as I walked towards the clubrooms, three mums stopped me and said thank you. They said that "it was lovely to see so many women referee out today and participating." I responded that I was the only woman referee here and I had just been moving from pitch to pitch after each game, that the representation that they had noticed and appreciated, was one person. The gender disparity was evident on this day – one woman referee out of six, six women players across the entire competition, one woman team manager and every single coach was a man. I felt isolated as a referee and as a woman. I left the pitch, pulled on warm clothes in the changerooms and got in my car, the car park was significantly emptier than when I arrived in the morning. The fieldnotes were completed as the player walked past to their own cars and soon enough, I was able to drive away from the venue and make my way home to decompress and try to stop thinking about every call that I had missed.

The mentoring report (figure 3) did not reach my inbox until weeks later and gave minimal insights into my refereeing on the day of the gala. While the report and the feedback could be applied to future games, I needed the reinforcement and feedback on the pitch as it was happening – the reassurance of five stars next to some categories only felt good in the moment but back on the pitch, I was still terrified to blow my whistle and make decisions during the game.



Referee	Rebecca Patrick
Did the referee correctly enforce the players' equipment?	Yes
The referee was professional in appearance	★★★★★
The referee correctly applied the laws	★★★★★
The referee consistently applied the laws	★★★★★
The referee correctly restarted play	★★★★★
The referee used their whistle effectively	★★★★☆
The referee demonstrated positive body language	★★★☆☆
The referee ran for an angle	★★★☆☆
The referee stayed close to play	★★★☆☆
The referee used good communication to manage players	★★★★☆
The referee applied the wall management policy	★★★★☆
Strengths	Very good running and trying to be close to play. Good signals and use of whistle
Areas for improvement	Your running is very good but it's also good to try and run for an angle and try to get the best position possible.
Advice/Suggestion	When a player goes down, you start talking to them and the ball is in play, that's very dangerous because you stay away from play and anything can happen. Try to continue with play and once the ball is out of play turn and talk to them.

Figure 3: Refereeing Report during the All-Abilities Gala Day

Part 4: Left Out in the Cold

The very next day, I was headed to a new football club to referee another two community games. My confidence had been knocked the day before, feeling as though I was left to fend for myself and, even though the game finished successfully, I knew that I had missed a lot of calls, and I felt like I did not know what I was doing. The scheduled games were 14A boys and 14B girls, a significant jump from my last community games that were

more aimed at encouraging participation and enjoyment, these teams were here to play hard and win.

> *I am actually quite scared for this one... I kept waking up during the night and having, almost like nightmares about refereeing... I kept thinking the games were going to be cancelled, called off for bad weather, everything like that but no... I think I just need to reiterate to myself that it's still a learning experience and I'm going to make mistakes and at the end of the day, I am a referee, people are not going to like my decisions but that does not mean I don't make those decisions. It's a lot to process when you're still new, it's quite overwhelming... at the moment, my weekends are full of anxiety and football is full of anxiety.*

I arrived at the fields nice and early, recorded some pre-game fieldnotes and gathered my things. I found the clubrooms and approached the only person I could see who happened to be the team manager of one of the boys' team I was officiating, introduced myself and gave my obligatory disclaimer regarding my newness. Many clubs were not aware of the Green Shirt initiative put in place by FV and the behaviour or attitude towards new referees did not differ from those more experienced. The team manager pulled me towards the group of young boys who had entered the clubrooms, and introduced me, asking them to be respectful during the game as I was still learning – the boys looked nice and calm. After the introductions, I was guided to the referees' rooms, I was alone today, the room was empty, and I chose a bench to lay out my things. I was there early as stated by the referees' game day procedures but, yet again, without a mentor, I was unsure of what to do with this time before the game. I exited the room and headed towards the synthetic pitch and to watch – today was my first full size pitch match, it was something I was dreading since the beginning of this process, was I fit enough to keep up with play?

The MiniRoos were finishing their games on quarter sized pitches to account for the little children running after a ball, they had no control over. The games finished and the assembled pitches were quickly dismantled, the portable goals were removed and soon enough, the pitch was cleared and ready for my two, back-to-back games. Both teams took to the pitch to begin warming up, and I made my rounds to each coach. Both coaches were men, while they were civil enough to shake my hand and listen to me speak, the niceness that I had experienced weeks prior did not exist – these men were icy and serious about their football. One coach noticeably looked displeased to see me officiate, while the other was indifferent.

The boys took to the pitch, I walked out into the centre and tossed my lucky coin that was hidden in my bra, I blew the whistle, and the ball went flying. My first game on a full-sized pitch was worrying but I was keeping up with play and following the ball – the hardest part was making decisions while mentally focusing on too many things at once. It was a rough game, a degree of intensity which I had not experienced before and wished I had had a mentor to help me make those crucial decisions between fair play and careless intent. A goal was scored by the away team donned in yellow at the 21st minute, which was then followed by two goals from Wembley Park from the same player at the 31st and 35th minutes – the first half was hard, I missed plenty of calls and the panic had started to set in. The boys were getting increasingly vocal towards me as the minutes went on, the throw-in technique from boys dressed in yellow was not correct, something which I did not notice. I heard whispers throughout the final ten minutes of the first half, disapproving of me as a referee and my competencies. One boy had muttered to himself that *"the referee is a dickhead"* but happened to be close enough to me for me to hear it – I turned around, and said *"this is a warning, next time it's a card."* That moment was enough to knock my confidence and the moment my watch buzzed for half time, I grabbed my things and beelined to the locker rooms side by side with my club appointed marshals. I took a moment in the change room to reflect on the first half and felt sick to my stomach to continue the match, I did not want to embarrass myself or women referees, but here I was, refereeing above my skill level.

On the way back onto the pitch, the marshals were waiting for me outside of the locker room and I took the chance to ask them a few questions, hoping that they would not judge me for my obliviousness. These two men, dads of the players, were incredibly nice and happy to answer my questions – I asked them about the throw ins and what the problem was, they explained the rule to me, and I felt a weight being lifted off my shoulders. The marshals said to me that the boys needed an attitude adjustment, and their poor behaviour was not a reflection of me. They had said that I was doing a good job, to not worry about the boys on the pitch and just finish off the game, I think they could see the fear in my eyes and the shake in my voice when I spoke to them before making my way back onto the pitch for the second half. The second half was a haze, the boys tackled each other at every opportunity and more goals were scored – the away team in yellow left the venue, winning by one goal. I felt like I had escaped my body, disassociating, to get through the end of the game, I was so overwhelmed by the events of the match that I ended up recording the match details incorrectly.I recorded a 2-2 draw instead of a 3-2 win to Tomesdon. My scribble in my

referee notebook was hard to read due to the cold making my hands feel numb and tight, and my mind racing beyond comprehension in between the end of the boys' game and the preparation of the next game I had been scheduled to officiate.

I stayed in the referee room for as long as possible to avoid the players leaving the pitch, but some were still there as I walked up to start the girls' game. The boys walking past smirked and had said 'thank you' to me, the tone was not sincere and the hushed comments once I had walked past had confirmed to me, that it was not genuine. I tried to shake off the negative energy that was clinging to me, trying to push past the prior experience on this pitch I pushed through the dread building in my stomach and introduced myself to each coach for the under 14s B division girls' teams. Wembley Park, the home team dressed in purple and the away team, River Valley dressed in red were friendly and smiling when I approached each team, I looked over their uniform and instructed a few of the girls to take off their jewellery. The coach of the River Valley was incredibly nice, stating that his girls had moved up a division and were not ready to take on this level of football and were likely to be dominated by the Wembley Park team. The coach was incredibly nice and gave some words of encouragement, I was reeling from the earlier game, and the sight of a friendly, genuine face made me feel less anxious. The game kicked off and the first goal was scored within the first minute, it quickly set the tone for the remainder of the game. Whilst this game was much less aggressive, there was still plenty of pushing, shoving and words being thrown from team to team – adolescent girls getting upset with themselves, their teammates, and the opposition when something did not go their way.

A member of the River Valley had been tackled, and overwhelmed with emotions she ran off the field, screaming obscenities on the way. Her place was taken by another off the bench while more goals were scored. Four goals were scored on the 50th, 53rd, 55th and 57th minute by Wembley Park, followed by a lone goal at the 58th minute by the River Valley . The final minutes of the game became friendly as the result would not change and the girl who left the pitch crying, ran back on to take her place and apologised to me for her outburst when I ran in her vicinity. The final whistle was blown, the end score being 9-1 and my body released the tension I had been building for the past few hours. I did not stay long, I went to the change rooms to fill out the match books, gave them to their respective team managers, got changed and headed to the bar to collect my pay. The lady behind the bar, the team manager of the boys' team I had officiated earlier, acknowledged my presence but did not say anything, I was given my envelope of cash without a word. The club manager who had shown me to the locker rooms had wrangled me before I left and walked me over to the

canteen to give me a bottle of water. He asked me about my games, and I responded frankly – I did not enjoy them, the boys were rude, and I feel like I did not do a decent job. He responded:

> *If you're ever back, let me know and we can coach you through the things you struggle with*

While the interaction was short due to his own commitments, I valued the sentiment and appreciated the effort to encourage new referees, however, in my mind, the damage had already been done.

> *Overall, this weekend has really shaken my confidence... to be honest, I am definitely feeling defeated and really lacking the motivation to put my availability up for this weekend. This is just really sad, I'm quite upset about it, I think these boys that I refereed were just really rude and entitled and while, I do think I missed some calls and some fouls could have been made, it's hard to draw a line of what's acceptable and what's not when you are still learning what is out there, and you know, to be screamed at by 15-20 little boys and hearing their snide comments under their breath... it's not great.*
>
> *I am just really not feeling it after that, to be honest... it really makes me feel like I'm back to when I did not know anything, and the calls cannot be made because I'm not aware of the rules as much as I should be to be refereeing those boys.*
>
> *It's just a lot mentally, especially going from the boys' game where it was terrible, and having snide comments thrown at me for over an hour to then, having to reset and adjust to girls, where it's a different playing style, different level of aggression...*
>
> *I just don't know how to interpret where I go from here and come up, you know, Should I really continue? Because all these comments and judgements saying that I am a shit referee, but then on the other hand, I've had plenty of comments saying that I've done a good job, and it is just hard to interpret and hard to assess where I stand. I'm just mentally, physically, emotionally exhausted from going into these situations every weekend. I know the referee department are so short right now, but I just, I*

think I need to step away and reset because I don't want to... I don't want to resent this sport or my decision to pursue post-grad, I don't want to regret doing all of this training, and I don't want to go into matches expecting the worse, I want to do a good job, and if that means taking a week off and going back to some training, then so be it.

Part 5: Glimpse of Friendship

The following Monday, I had agreed to participate in another women's social tournament held in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. I arrived at the venue, the sun had already set, and the fog had begun to form on a very cold May night. I found a car park and followed a group of women onto the first pitch and found a group of referees huddled together near the change rooms. I introduced myself, genuine warm smiles greeted me, and I felt a taste of the support that I was craving, that I was so desperately wishing for throughout this journey. I met the mentor for the night and the FV organisers, we were given our allocations, and I had to jump onto the pitch straight away due to a referee pulling out at the last minute. I rushed to fill my pockets with everything that I needed and ran onto the pitch to start the game. The women were a delight, a minority were taking the game quite seriously, but the majority wanted to have fun and be social with each other – it was a refreshing shift from the community games that I had just officiated.

The games were short and sharp, filled with laughter across each field. I ran from pitch to pitch and refereed three games in a row. The players, some of whom I had officiated before, tried to shake my hand, or acknowledge my presence when the games were starting and had said ‘thank you’ or ‘good job’ after the final whistle had been blown. I felt welcomed and appreciated, I felt like the people on the pitch were appreciative of the four women referees coming out on a frosty night, it felt like I was meant to be there. The final game concluded, and we packed up the field, took a few group photos to celebrate the outcome of the night and headed towards the club rooms. Pizzas had been ordered, and everyone grabbed some slices, the referees huddled around and chatted while throwing on warm layers of clothing. I spoke to the referee coach that had been appointed about my experiences of the weekend before, and the mindset shift that I had noticed since those events. The woman mentor was incredibly kind and encouraging, she spoke about her own negative experiences and the impact of refereeing young, entitled, rude boys – it was a tough transition for any referee let alone a novice. I spoke about my research and piqued the interest of a few

participants for an interview – networking was a lot easier at an all-women event rather than a sea of men at community games. The conversations were short lived due to the time and the stragglers gathered their bags and headed back into the car park, it was a successful night where I met some women referees, felt good on the pitch, and had a positive experience during this women's social tournament. I felt like this moment was an upwards trajectory and maybe refereeing was not going to be as hard as it had been in the weeks prior. I was hoping for the positive outlook to stick in my mind – I made myself available for a refereeing appointment for the upcoming weekend, to try to maintain the momentum and positivity, and hopefully, push out the negative self-talk that had followed me around for most of the games I had officiated.

Figure 4: A photo taken to celebrate 'Female Football Week', standing second from the right.

When allocations came out on the Tuesday, I was given a Girls under-12s game back at Wembley Park, the ground I had been refereeing at only weeks prior and left feeling utterly defeated. I had nerves immediately after reading the allocation details, I accepted the booking and started to mentally prepare throughout the week, trying to thicken my skin before Sunday. I arrived at the familiar venue, placed my gear into the referee's room and asked an official-looking person where my pitch was located, after being pointed in the right direction, I made my way over to the group of adults holding match books and equipment and introduced myself.

> *When I got to the pitch, the team manager and some parents were waiting on the side and got very excited when I confirmed that I was refereeing their game, as they usually don't get a referee and one of the dad's expressed how much he was glad I was there, so he didn't have to referee the game.*

I moved over to the coaches and spoke to each of them, the away team coach told me that they were expecting a walk-over as the league had not been re-seeded and many teams were struggling against the teams that need to be promoted into higher leagues. The coach then turned to his team of young, excited girls and gave them words of encouragement – it was a stark comparison between the coaches, both were incredibly nice to me, but the home team wanted to win and knew they had the skills to dominate the other girls. The coach emphasised that it was going to be an easy win and insisted that they try their hardest to score as many goals as possible, in the other ear, I heard the coach of the away team asking his girls to try their best and work together as a team. A linesman from each team volunteered and my marshals in bright pink vests were visible on the other side of the pitch, cheering their girls on with the other parents.

The game started just before 11am, it was much more fast-paced than anticipated and the away team did their best to defend where they could but by halftime the score was 9-0. The game itself was fairly calm, with little aggression, so my involvement was minimal. I awarded a few free kicks, and the linesmen assisted with calls when the ball went out of bounds. Overall, I felt like more of a token figure on the pitch, as the girls played their game smoothly without much need for my intervention. The short half time break lapsed quickly and instead of being escorted to the referee rooms, I stayed in between the team shelters and observed the coaches and the players, listening to their encouragement. The coach from the

away side approached me and had requested that I keep an eye on the distances that Wembley Park were given his girls when restarting after a goal – it was something I had missed and had not been paying a lot of attention to but I was grateful for not only having the issue brought to my attention but also having the discussion in a respectful manner, I appreciated the coaches' approach to an issue that I imagine other coaches would have not been so polite about. I made a mental note of it, I made sure to notice it during the second half.

I made my way back into the centre of the pitch to start the second half, the teams finished their breaks and made their way back onto the pitch and in their formations, I blew the whistle, and the start was vastly different compared to the first half. The dominating team did not let up while the away team was showing their disappointment – the sideline picked up on this change of behaviour and every parent, including those of the home team, started to cheer for the girls when they received the ball and made their way up the pitch. A new linesman on the side, a woman, aided me in calling offside for one of the goals – I felt like this space was encouraging for me and I had the support of the coaches and assisting parents to make calls without backlash or fear of making a mistake, the outcome of the game would not have changed if I had made or missed calls so I felt that I could use my growing judgment and use my authority instead of shying away from nasty adolescents. While the encouragement for the away team grew louder and louder with each touch, the domination continued and as the final whistle was blown, the score ended at 18-0. It was a devastating but expected loss.

Whilst filling out the match books with the extensive goals, I spoke to the lineswomen who had jumped on for the second half, she had played professionally before but since having children, was not able to keep playing but loves to participate in a variety of ways – being on the sidelines and helping new referees was something she loved doing in order to support her children and their game that they are playing. I also spoke to another parent, a man, who had played himself, who asked me how I was finding refereeing – I replied honestly about the rollercoaster of emotions it had been. It was comforting to speak to adults frankly about my experience. The match records were done, and I was paid directly from the team managers instead of the club, so I tucked the envelope of cash into my pocket and made my way into the change rooms. For the first time, I was not alone in the small room. A young man was rummaging through his bag as I entered the room, and I said hello – a quick conversation started between us. I asked him about his refereeing, and he asked about mine. I gave a brief overview of my brief history, and his response was something that rocked me:

Do you even know the rules?

I responded that I did but I was still learning the intricacies, by then, it was time for him to leave the room and I changed into warmer clothes to escape to my car. *I did know the rules*. I had asked myself the same question every time I walked onto a pitch, every time I felt my confidence waiver. I thought I knew the rules but when the players turned to look at me, waiting for a decision, I would freeze and panic – nothing would arrive in my brain, and I would look to the players for a hint on what to do next. *Maybe I did not know the rules.* I had studied the rules relentlessly, I knew I had to know the rules. I painstakingly went through each rule countless times, but I still had to think about each play and each moment when on the pitch, nothing was natural to me in this environment. *I think I know the rules.* After each game, I would sit in the car and relay the experience for my fieldnotes, taking down whatever I could remember for later use, but the spiral of thoughts following that would haunt me up until it was time to walk onto the pitch once more – how could I know if I made the right decision if *I did not know the rules.* The question that had been innocently asked, had stuck with me for weeks – would I have been asked that if I was a boy, telling another male referee that I had never played before but wanted to referee?

Part 6: Circling the Drain

The very next day was my final game of football, although I did not realise it at the time. I had been allocated two games on a Monday night for the women's social tournament at Wembley Park, the same venue as the day before. I arrived at the venue, the frost already starting to appear on the pitch and made my way over to the clubrooms – the referee room was locked, and so were the women change rooms. Three of the competing women were standing outside, looking confused – *were we in the right place?*

We apprehended one of the passing coaches to confirm the pitches and the time, as well as unlocking one shared changeroom for all eight teams attending tonight's social round, it seemed like we were an afterthought. No FV representatives were in sight and the responsibility fell on one club manager, Paul, and me. I introduced myself to Paul as I noticed him laying out the cones as boundary lines, he was going to be the other referee for the night as I was the only referee to volunteer for this tournament. We spoke briefly and I recapped my experiences so far, he was a friendly face who gave me words of encouragement and something which I would be grateful for later in the night.

The teams approached the pitches and split into their respective teams, Paul and I chose our pitches, and I ditched my bag along the fence near the goals. It was a dark, chilly night and my fingers were already numb, I wished I could have kept my warm puffer jacket on, but my bare legs, arms, hands, and face were exposed to the late May cold. I blew my whistle to start the shortened first half and the game began; it was more aggressive than the previous women's matches I had officiated but nothing I could not handle – I felt okay. A few free kicks were given out early and some heckling ensued by more experienced players, begging for free kicks to go their way. The frost had settled on the grass pitch and as this tournament required no formal uniforms and therefore no football boots, the girls slipped across the ground in their running shoes, it was a new experience looking after girls who had hurt themselves merely be falling and not being tackled. Some players looked at me expecting free kicks or penalties when they had fallen, many of which did not warrant such action. The halves went by quickly and by the start of the second half, the rain had begun to drench each player and myself. Less than a minute to go, I missed a call – something I would consider minor, but to this woman, it was something horrendously major. I had hesitated to call anything, looking at my watch, there were four seconds remaining, I left it, *I missed it,* and the whistle blew full time – that was then the abuse began.

> *I'm paying for this?! I'm paying a fucking registration fee, and this is the referee we get?! That referee was fucking dogshit! She's getting paid for this?! I'm paying for this!*

The screaming began the moment I blew the whistle – something I could not penalise, something I could not stop. More words spewed out of her mouth as she walked off the field, staring at me, she stood by the sidelines and discussed my performance as loudly as possible. I was already 30 metres from her team, sheltering from the rain, and I could hear the same sentiments being repeated once more.

> *We paid money for this, and this is what we get?! I'm paying a fucking registration fee, and this is the referee we get?! She's getting paid for this?! That was terrible!*

I could feel myself getting smaller with each scream, I wanted to collect my wet clothes and leave the venue – I did not feel knowledgeable or confident enough to approach the team and the player to have a conversation. I did not want to confront an angry person. I

desperately waited for the player to leave the pitch, but she did not. Her teammates left in a group, but she stayed and watched while I took the pitch once more to officiate the last game of the night. I could feel her eyes on me for the entire first half, I did not want to call anything and luckily, there was no need. The second game had barely any intervention and ran smoothly – I felt small and scared, terrified that this woman would be waiting for me in the carpark after the game to 'talk.' The knots in my stomach grew with each minute she continued to stand there, hands on hips, staring me down – I was done for the night. Finally, after a few minutes into the second half, she grabbed her bag and left the pitch, the weight of her eyes had been lifted but the fear and embarrassment remained. I wanted to escape so badly that I ended the second half minutes before I was supposed to, I wanted to pack up and leave as quickly as possible.

Paul finished his game shortly after the players had left my pitch and we rejoined to chat. Paul asked how I went – and I recapped the incident, his eyes went wide, he looked at me like a father would, searching for comfort and apologies. Paul looked worried and said "come and grab me next time that happens, I would have dealt with that for you", it was something that felt meaningful and genuine, he felt like someone I could use for a support in this arena but as the knots in my stomach tightened, retelling the story, I felt myself pulling back from this opportunity – *why I am doing this to myself? What do I have to prove? Why am I doing this?*

I left the pitch, wary of who was lingering in the carpark and quickly got in my car, locked the door and escaped to another carpark down the road to record my fieldnotes, I no longer felt safe refereeing an event designed and implemented for women to participate in a judgement free zone and social space to make friends – I felt betrayed to have been abused by a woman. I had sat with these feelings, and tossed and turned over what had happened, what Paul had said and the discussions that had ensued between my academic supervisor and myself. I felt rattled by the incident, but I still attempted to play it down as 'part of the game' and 'part of being a referee' - I tried my hardest to make my feelings disappear and normalise what had happened.

On the following Tuesday, FV called me, it was a representative who checked in on referees – I was surprised to receive a call, but I had the suspicion that Paul had called FV on my behalf to report the incident, as I did not, or it could have been a complete coincidence. The FV representative asked me about my games and if I had any concerns or issues – I then relayed the incident that had taken place only the night before. Throughout the entire call, I

downplayed my feelings, excluded some parts of the abuse, and laughed it off at the end; I did not want to seem weak or not be able to exemplify what it means to be a referee – I did not want to be a loser. The representative surprised me by explaining that this was not normal, and that I have a right to be upset, that my feelings were justified and that what happened should not have happened. I tried my best to not let tears slip down my face and carried on with the phone call, I reported the team's name and a rough description of the player but could not identify the player any further as there are no numbers on shirts due to the no uniform accommodation provided within this social tournament. The call was ended by the representative saying that the report would be passed on to the referee department and ensuring me that I would not referee that team again. It was a sense of vindication and settled some of my nerves, but ultimately, I knew I did not want to referee another game in the same venue as those women and as I had been the only referee to volunteer for the tournament, there would be a great chance that I would be allocated, once again, to this league.

Lo and behold, the following week, I was allocated to another Monday night at Wembley Park but this time, I was hoping for other teams, I was praying that FV had taken my report seriously and I would not be refereeing that team again – that was not the case. I had been allocated to referee the same team as my first game of the night, followed by a second. I felt sick, but I felt obligated to attend due to the dwindling numbers of volunteers for the women's program. It was a gruelling five days between the allocation emails to game day and I was berating myself as each day passed for committing to these events and putting myself through anxiety attacks. I did not want to attend that game, and I felt like my concerns were not supported, the feelings that I tried to hide, which were comforted on the phone, had not only resurfaced, but resurfaced with a vengeance. The Monday arrived, it was a gloomy morning, and the Melbourne skies had not stopped raining for the entire day, while working in the university office, I prayed that the game was cancelled and as each hour ticked by my dread continued to rise. *Could I lie to the department? Could I find a way out of this situation?* I was desperate to escape this game and this duty that I felt obligated to attend, but I did not want to lie and deceive a department already so strained for numbers – I waited for an excuse to appear in my mind that I was content with, I hoped that the forecast of more rain would be my last effort to having this game cancelled and as the rain pelted the windows harder and harder and finally, at 4pm on the Monday, an email found its way into my inbox stating that the fields and the weather was not suitable for play and the match would be postponed. The anxious shakes in my hands came to a halt, the pounding in my heart shifted

from nerves and dread to relief and the possibility of escaping football. I pounced on the opportunity to reply to the email, almost immediately, stating that I was no longer able to fulfil the volunteer refereeing position for the women's social tournament. I was ready to exit the sport that no longer felt supportive, and frankly never did. I was ready to leave behind a sport that was not a part of who I was and something that I could not commit to long enough for it to become natural. I was ready to go, so I did.

CHAPTER 5: BEING A REFEREE

Whilst my individual journey as a football referee was short lived and could be described as a failure, in this chapter I explore the life stories and interviews with three women who have become successful referees. The three participants within this study, Presley (28), Adriana (30) and Millie (24) (all pseudonyms). By examining their individual narratives in relation to football, and sport more broadly, I identify common factors that have facilitated being a referee. These factors include familial support (fathers and brothers), the ease of transition from playing to refereeing, developing relationships and a sense of community, developing a thick skin to overcome the verbal barriers of officiating, and receiving positive feedback.

Referee Introductions

Presley

Presley (28) is a Level 1, FIFA registered, elite-level assistant referee. Presley has been a FIFA assistant referee since 2019 and an assistant referee for the Women's World Cup in 2023. Presley started playing football at age 11. She loved it. It was her passion and her outlet from the everyday stress and struggles of adolescence. When her team disbanded at age 17, she decided to transition from playing to refereeing. Her dad was a referee, a good one, and encouraged Presley to give it a go. Refereeing was another outlet, could be fun, and gave her the opportunity to earn some money as a teenager. Presley began refereeing with the support of her father, who became her taxi driver, mentor, cheerleader, and protector from the sidelines.

> *So, I started refereeing because my dad was a referee, and he wanted me to get involved.*

To become a referee, Presley's completed the FV level 4 qualification, a two-day course held at a local high school. She started her refereeing career at her local club where she played and refereed alongside people who were part of her footballing family. Presley felt safe and supported for her first games matches, and her first experiences with a whistle in her hand were positive and encouraging. Through the social networks and support systems from her immediate family, Presley's experience of football started in the best way possible.

I felt pretty well supported because I had my dad, and I wasn't driving at that age, he would drive me to my matches, he was there, he was guiding me through the process... I was very fortunate in that sense because I felt supported and had someone there to tell me "This is how you do this and watch out for these things."

The support from her father was instrumental in her progression and development:

I don't think I would have lasted without him.

Presley moved quickly through the refereeing ranks: juniors for two seasons and then straight onto senior competitions. Presley started running lines for the Women's Premier League and then made it to central referee within another year. By her fourth year, Presley was being allocated to Men's Premier Leagues and Victorian Premier League as a central referee and then the National League and the W League as an assistant. Presley worked hard to meet the expectations of those around her. With her father's support and his own refereeing skills, Presley had the opportunity to attend refereeing training as a young woman. Presley stated that, without her father, she would not have had the confidence to attend the training sessions that were predominantly, if not exclusively, male. As she attended more trainings, she would encounter a few women here and there, but she was usually a lone figure in the mass of men on these training nights. Presley's skills became more advanced, and her positive progression continued. Presley's fast upward trajectory led her to National camps and tournaments, academy training sessions, and connections with other referees aiming to reach the A-League goals.

Victorian Champions League... that was probably where [I] formed more of the relationships because it was more regular, the people you would work with over that period... you have that comfort knowing you've worked together before, and you have something in common.

I guess it's kind of like having friends in school but, you are sharing the same journey in the same experience. I think being able to support each other through with tough matches or tough situations within a match, support each other through training in an environment where it's predominantly men... we've all had different experiences, and

we all have slightly different journeys, but we've all supported each other through that and shared and made each other feel comfortable.

Though much of her career as a referee has been positive, enriching, and character building, Presley still encountered hardship. Moving up as an assistant referee meant running near the supporters on the sideline and experiencing the sexist and other verbal abuse that is commonly associated with crowds at a football game. She credited her support systems for being able to deal with this abuse. The challenges she has encountered have been far outweighed by the benefits football and refereeing have provided her. Through officiating, she has built meaningful, lifelong friendships, travelled internationally to referee games, improved her fitness, and honed interpersonal skills such as communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution.

Adriana

Adriana (30) is a Level 2 Football Victoria referee. Adriana began playing at seven years old and continued until she finished high school. At age 17, Adriana's then boyfriend encouraged her to begin refereeing with him, to earn some money as a small part-time job while she continued to play competitively. Adriana stopped playing football after the time commitment for both became too hard to juggle, as well as the financial incentive to prioritise refereeing:

you don't get paid when you play, you get paid when you referee... I didn't think of it as a part-time career, I just saw it as money.

Soon after refereeing began, Adriana and her boyfriend split, leaving her to navigate the officiating world on her own. Adriana found friendship and solace with an older generation of male referees, who treated her like a granddaughter. Her newly found support systems would help her navigate negative experiences within football. One of Adriana's first junior games was "horrible":

I was ready to quit, I had an U13s game, and I made the wrong decision and then I tried to reverse it... it was a really bad experience. I had FV come out and watch me

after that, just to give me some pointers on what to do and what not to do... the first one was horrific.

Adriana lent on those around her to provide the encouragement she needed to keep going. She was quickly assigned to Senior Women's games, but despite a desire to continue up the refereeing ladder, she got 'stuck' at that level for several years. Adriana felt pigeonholed and limited until the change in direction from FV, focusing on gender equality in football, resulted in her being noticed and subsequently she was rapidly pushed up into higher leagues.

Adriana progress through the refereeing ranks coincided with an increase in experiences of verbal abuse. She learnt how to report players to the disciplinary tribunal as well as dealing with common insults from spectators such as "you're a shit ref!" Adriana reflected on types of abuse:

it is what it is... there's abuse and then there's abuse and by abuse, I mean you cop a lot of you know yelling and shouting and disagreements in terms of decision and then there's abuse where like you, you get threatened

Despite the abuse, Adriana highlighted her own personal growth after refereeing for more than a decade. Adriana spoke of her confidence in her decision making under pressure, that refereeing had aided her professional full-time job during the week. Adriana built long standing friendships with other women throughout her refereeing career. Presley and Adriana have been friends for around six years and continue to stay in touch.

she's fantastic she's always supportive if I needed some help, she would just answer my calls regardless of what time it is at night

I would say the past five to six years there has been a lot more women supporting me, when I first started there wasn't many women at all, Presley was around but I never really knew her, I had no idea who she was until my fourth and fifth year

Millie

Millie (24) is a Level 3 referee. Millie started playing football at age ten and continues to play today. Millie had been playing for around five years when FV held a free, referee training night at her club. Millie, along with her teammates and friends, signed up and completed the Level 4 course together. However, Millie was then the only one to be registered as a referee and the only one to start refereeing that season. She started off with a group of friends but started her career alone.

> *I would not say I felt completely isolated, but at times yes, especially going into that referee course with five of my teammates and then just me coming out of it was, was like 'oh alright, I am on my own actually'*

Millie was 15 when she started refereeing and being so young, she needed a parent to drive her to and from games. Her father was the chosen taxi driver, and he attended every single game that Millie refereed. Millie's father comes from an AFL background and did not know the rules of the game, but as both Millie and her older brother continued to play in their community teams and Millie started to referee more, her father became a supporter, spectator, and emotional support system for Millie.

Millie's development was also due to her consistent appearance at local referee branch meetings:

> *We had branch meetings, I attended those as much as I could and that was helpful, the sense of community and, you know, was not just me completely on my own every week. But, in saying that, it wasn't like I went to the branch meeting and was overly vocal, like, I just sat there and just listened to everything that was being said.*

Millie continues to play at her local club and referee each week as she shares a passion for both. She finds that refereeing and playing football provides enough balance from her full-time job during the week and takes the pressure off to fulfil a more demanding refereeing schedule. Millie's start to refereeing was uneventful yet supported and encouraging. She was allocated a mentor for her first two games, however once they were "ticked off" she was "thrown in the deep end." Millie states that those earlier games were positive and can "assume I probably had a really good time for both of those games, I think that's because I had a good mentor and they started me out at a lower level, they didn't just chuck me into a really big game just because I play."

By Millie's second season of refereeing, she was officiating Women's State League games and has continued progressing her skills. She still plays football and because of her positive experiences of being mentored, she now mentors others coming through the ranks to ensure that new referees entering are supported, encouraged, and given meaningful feedback that can be actioned. Whilst Millie has gained friendships throughout her time as a referee, her main support system remains her father who still travels with Millie to each game to watch her officiate, regardless of the fact that Millie got her licence years ago.

Making it as a woman in refereeing

Through an examination of the three narratives of Millie, Adriana, and Presley there are some common themes that facilitated, or at least supported, their transition to, and subsequent success as referees. Success here is defined by their continuous engagement with refereeing, their promotion through the ranks to higher levels of competition, and their overall positive reflections of refereeing as part of their identity and the overlap of skills from refereeing to other aspects (such as work) of their lives. These themes broadly fall under the following categories: embodiment, support, dealing with abuse, and recognition of success. I briefly consider these in what follows.

The narratives of Presley, Adriana, and Millie reveal the multifaceted nature of success in refereeing, defined not only by their progression through the ranks but also by their ability to navigate and overcome systemic barriers. Key themes such as familial and community support, resilience in the face of abuse, and recognition of success underscore their experiences. These findings align with broader research highlighting the importance of mentorship and support networks for women in sport (Wasend & LaVoi, 2019; Spaaij et al., 2024).

However, unique insights emerge from their stories, particularly the role of informal relationships and the interplay between playing and officiating. While the normalisation of abuse and male-dominated environments reflect ongoing challenges identified in previous studies (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007), this research highlights how personal agency and targeted institutional efforts, such as gender equity programs, can facilitate positive change. Adriana's progression following policy shifts by Football Victoria illustrates the potential for systemic initiatives to mitigate structural inequities, reinforcing the need for continued advocacy and reform within sporting organisations.

By situating these findings within the context of Australian football and women referees more broadly, this study contributes to understanding how tailored support systems and inclusive practices can empower women to thrive in male-dominated sporting arenas. Addressing these systemic barriers not only benefits current referees but also fosters a culture of inclusivity that encourages future generations of women to participate in sport confidently and equitably.

Embodiment: From Player to Referee

Presley, Adriana, and Millie all played football as children and transitioned into a refereeing role. This long-term engagement with the game, and the social environment in which it occurs is significant. Learning to play the game at a youthful age, all our referees went through a system that focused initially on fun, modified games, and participation. In Victoria, competitive, full pitch football, starts at the age of 13. Having time to learn how to play, understand the rules, and gradually experience both the physicality, and behavioural characteristics of their teammates and opponents, meant that by the time they were in their teenage years they possessed a feel for the game. This also means they have experienced *being* refereed. No doubt they had also experienced both good, and bad, referees, not to mention the voices of parents, coaches and players contesting a decision, or making a value judgement on the quality of the referee's performance. As Millie discussed, playing and refereeing allowed her to view both sides of the pitch and she drew on this knowledge, the skills, and perspectives, to expand both her playing and refereeing abilities. A 'feel for the game' is paramount for referees. Anticipating the next possible move and the plays that can occur allow referees to position themselves, accordingly, avoid disrupting play with their body and continue to monitor every aspect of football without hesitation.

Playing for years also meant that our three referees understood the culture and idiosyncrasies of club football in Melbourne. Clubs are simultaneously social and physical spaces. Changerooms, carparks, canteens, home and away teams, the cultural history of the various clubs, can make these spaces seem alien to a newcomer, but to our referees these were familiar and provided a place where they felt they belonged. As a result, there is an embodied understanding of where to go, where to stand, where to get changed, that becomes taken-for-granted or natural. For these women, this socialisation into the sport, through a vast playing experience made the transition to refereeing comfortable. It was a natural progression from playing as seen in Presley and Adriana's cases or the transition to refereeing whilst still

playing, like Millie. It was not seen as a notable life event nor a choice involving risk. In all cases the transition to refereeing, and their desire to become better referees, was grounded in a love for the sport that they were passionate about actively contributing to.

The final aspect of their early entry into playing football that provides an embodied understanding of being a referee relates to gender. Football in Victoria is traditionally, and currently, still a predominantly masculine space. As young players Presley, Adriana, and Millie were already in the minority. Significantly more boys play football then girls, AusPlay data recorded in the 2022-2033 financial year highlights that between the ages of 0-14 years old, 522,000 boys participate in football/soccer in contrast to the 245,000 girls. Adult populations show the same split, with 1,007,000 men (15 years and older) participate in the sport whereas 359,000 women participate in the game. While there has been steady growth of participation across the board, there is still a clear divide between men and women participating in football. There are more men's teams than women's. Clubrooms are usually full of memorabilia celebrating the men's history. Many club rooms were designed during a time when women and girls did not play football, and the basic amenity does not even have women's changerooms and other facilities. From this perspective, moving from playing to refereeing, and being a minority, being the only woman at a refereeing course, and the potential isolation that might have been experienced was mitigated in some ways because they had already successfully negotiated years of being in male dominated spaces.

The transition from player to referee is deeply rooted in an embodied understanding of the game, shaped by years of participation in club football. For Presley, Adriana, and Millie, long-term engagement with the sport not only cultivated a "feel for the game" but also instilled the technical and social skills necessary for officiating. This aligns with research emphasising the role of experiential knowledge in developing anticipatory skills and spatial awareness, which are critical for effective refereeing (Bourdieu, 1978). Additionally, their familiarity with the cultural norms and idiosyncrasies of club football—such as navigating clubrooms, interacting with players and officials, and understanding the dynamics of male-dominated spaces—eased their transition and minimised potential feelings of isolation.

These findings complement broader studies on women in sport, such as Spaaij et al. (2024), which highlight the importance of early exposure and social networks in overcoming systemic barriers. However, they also offer a unique perspective by demonstrating how prior experiences in male-dominated playing environments can serve as informal preparation for the challenges of refereeing. While disparities in participation and infrastructure persist

(Cowan et al., 2024), this research underscores the importance of fostering inclusive pathways that leverage the embodied knowledge women bring from playing to officiating. Recognising these contributions is essential for creating equitable systems that value women's expertise and ensure their continued progression in football and other sports.

Support: Family, Mentors, and other Relationships

It is understood that, as the three referees started as players from an early age, their parents were involved in facilitating this engagement. Familial support systems play a pivotal role in sports, often serving as a cornerstone of athletes' journeys (Lundy et al., 2019). Many individuals enter sports following the footsteps of siblings or parents, receiving encouragement and assistance from family members who assume various roles such as spectators, volunteers, coaches, or mentors. Conversely, athletes lacking social support, whether from family or peers, encounter additional challenges that may impede their progress. Human connection and social interaction facilitate participation, especially in challenging circumstances, enabling individuals to learn from mistakes and grow through their experiences (Anderson et al., 2019; Downward & Rascuite, 2011). The continued support of parents, in particular fathers, was central to Presley and Millie being able to referee. Presley's socialisation into the world of football started young and was connected to her father's involvement in football as a referee. As she said:

> *...had it not been for him, I don't think I would have been comfortable to go to any of those things being such a young girl... I feel like throughout the whole journey, I feel integrated because I've had him there*

This was especially true because of the male dominated nature of referee training session where:

> *We used to have somewhere between like 10 and 20 [people] rocking up and majority of the time, I was the only female.*

Millie also found similar support, albeit from a non-football father. As her refereeing progressed, so too did her father's enjoyment and participation of being her chaperone. Whilst Millie's father did not have the social connections nor refereeing experience behind

him in football, for Millie having someone in the crowd rooting for them and being able to discuss the match afterwards was important. For Adriana, whilst her then boyfriend initially suggested taking up refereeing, her support came from old male referees who treated her like a "granddaughter."

To continue refereeing would seem to involve more than just familiar support. Mentors from FV proved important for Millie but were not part of the system for Adriana and Presley. Rather, developing relationships and friendships with other referees was significant. The three referees talked about belonging to a refereeing community, where support, guidance, and advice was provided. Millie offered:

> *I didn't have any friends, like none of my high school friends refereed, none of my teammates were active referees, I didn't have that... I think because I was still playing, it almost helped myself like I was kind of teaching myself how to referee better and the more and more I refereed, the more referees I recognised. For the first few weeks, you just get random people and then once you started to recognise them like 'we had that game a few weeks ago,' then you can make [friends]. Now I can say I have actually got a few referee friends out of it which is really nice, just makes it so much easier because it's like when you rock up with them to a senior game, it is like 'okay I actually know my team*

Adriana stated that many of her refereeing friends were close friends outside of football, relationships that had expanded beyond the football pitch. As Adriana's career continued, the friendships of other women referees became her main source of support. Whilst support came from both men and women referees, as they became adults and moved up to higher levels of officiating, it was the community of women referees that became most important. Indeed, the three participants that were a part of this study had refereed with each other and used each other for support. Presley, being the most experienced, was a strong presence for the other women acting as a type of role model. Having a support system, a support person, or an allocated mentor at games during the initial phases of refereeing can be make-or-break to the longevity of a referee's career. The support provided guidance, instilled confidence, and made them feel they were not alone and that someone had their back. This was particularly significant considering not all refereeing experiences were positive.

The importance of support systems in the progression and retention of women referees is a recurring theme in the narratives of Presley, Adriana, and Millie. Familial support, particularly from fathers, was foundational in their early engagement with refereeing, echoing findings from Lundy et al. (2019) that highlight the pivotal role of family in fostering participation in sport. Presley and Millie relied heavily on their fathers, who not only provided logistical assistance, such as transportation, but also emotional encouragement that bolstered their confidence in navigating male-dominated spaces. For Adriana, informal mentorship from older male referees filled this role, offering guidance and a sense of belonging that enabled her to persist despite early challenges.

Beyond familial support, the development of peer networks and friendships within the refereeing community emerged as critical, particularly as the participants progressed to higher levels of officiating. While men initially played significant roles as mentors and supporters, the transition to relying on women peers underscores the importance of gendered solidarity in fostering long-term engagement. This aligns with broader research on the value of mentorship and community in overcoming barriers faced by women in male-dominated fields (Anderson et al., 2019).

For women referees in Australia, this study highlights the dual importance of structured mentorship programs and organic peer networks in creating a supportive environment. Formalising mentorship opportunities, particularly during the initial stages of refereeing, could address gaps in support systems and reduce the attrition rates of women referees. Additionally, fostering inclusive communities that encourage peer mentorship and role modelling, as seen in Presley's influence on Adriana and Millie, is essential for sustaining women's participation and success in refereeing. These findings underscore the need for sporting organisations to prioritise support systems as a cornerstone of gender equity initiatives.

Dealing with Abuse: Developing a Thick Skin

With many years of playing experience before moving into refereeing, all three women had firsthand experience of the types of abuse and hostile behaviours that players and referees had to tolerate. Their socialisation in football meant that some of this hostility has become normalised over time. The yelling, the complaining, the dissent, becomes a part of

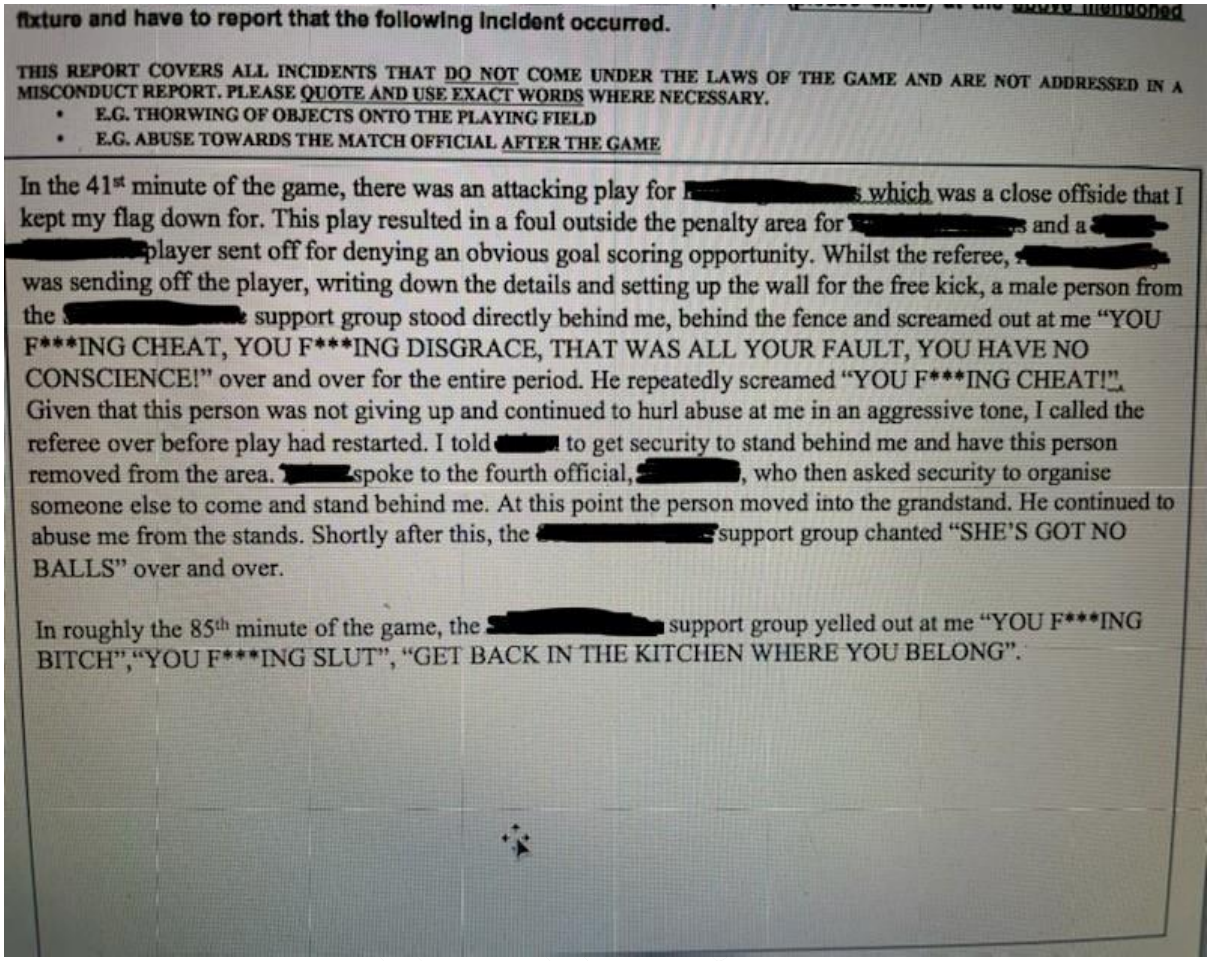
the game and in some ways, expected by both players and referees. This is typified by Millie when she is playing:

> *It is so hard as a player sometimes and it is like I have... I like to think I've got like some reputation to uphold like I can't play knowing I'm a referee and just like hurl abuse at the referee, that's not in my nature, I'm not that type of person anyway but then sometimes like certain decisions will be made and I'm just sitting there like that is wrong, fundamentally wrong...I could definitely argue because I have the rules to back it up but it is not in my nature to be hot headed to pick a fight, that's my other teammates, it's not my style.*

The socialisation from prior playing experience significantly enhances a referee's skill set. Not only does refereeing require dominance on the pitch and confidence in making calls but also the knowledge of the rules and its contextual application. Referees with playing experience possess a deeper understanding of the game and its rules compared to those who have transitioned from other sports or have no prior sporting experience. However, this also means that the normalisation of hostile behaviour is managed through the development of a 'thick skin.' Nevertheless, a thick skin can only mitigate abuse to a certain extent. Adriana experienced verbal abuse from the sidelines and on the pitch but argued that: *"it is what it is."* Similarly, Millie experienced verbal abuse and negative commentary on her appearance: her short stature and her glasses are two notable features that Millie says makes her an easy target for spectator heckling.

> *that's the thing, not that I appreciate heckling at all but if I can, if I can distinguish that the heckling is gender based then that's really frustrating, like that pisses me off, it's almost like I'd rather just be heckled for the, just for being a ref instead of gendered… for example I wear glasses when I ref, there will be the odd "oh Specsavers" glasses joke, like to me that's actually funny… yeah if it's like gender based like "she's hopeless" "what a bitch" yeah then its bad…*

However, there are times when things 'go too far,' and this is where these referees use the disciplinary functions of FV to deal with things they cannot (and should not) tolerate. Figure 5 is an image of a report Presley made to FV after a spectator had verbally abused her for most of the game after a call that was made in the 41st minute.



fixture and have to report that the following incident occurred.

THIS REPORT COVERS ALL INCIDENTS THAT DO NOT COME UNDER THE LAWS OF THE GAME AND ARE NOT ADDRESSED IN A MISCONDUCT REPORT. PLEASE QUOTE AND USE EXACT WORDS WHERE NECESSARY.

- E.G. THORWING OF OBJECTS ONTO THE PLAYING FIELD
- E.G. ABUSE TOWARDS THE MATCH OFFICIAL AFTER THE GAME

In the 41st minute of the game, there was an attacking play for [redacted] which was a close offside that I kept my flag down for. This play resulted in a foul outside the penalty area for [redacted] and a [redacted] player sent off for denying an obvious goal scoring opportunity. Whilst the referee, [redacted] was sending off the player, writing down the details and setting up the wall for the free kick, a male person from the [redacted] support group stood directly behind me, behind the fence and screamed out at me "YOU F***ING CHEAT, YOU F***ING DISGRACE, THAT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT, YOU HAVE NO CONSCIENCE!" over and over for the entire period. He repeatedly screamed "YOU F***ING CHEAT!". Given that this person was not giving up and continued to hurl abuse at me in an aggressive tone, I called the referee over before play had restarted. I told [redacted] to get security to stand behind me and have this person removed from the area. [redacted] spoke to the fourth official, [redacted], who then asked security to organise someone else to come and stand behind me. At this point the person moved into the grandstand. He continued to abuse me from the stands. Shortly after this, the [redacted] support group chanted "SHE'S GOT NO BALLS" over and over.

In roughly the 85th minute of the game, the [redacted] support group yelled out at me "YOU F***ING BITCH","YOU F***ING SLUT", "GET BACK IN THE KITCHEN WHERE YOU BELONG".

Figure 5: Tribunal Report provided by Presley following our interview

One aspect to note about figure 5 is what is the threshold for a referee to make a complaint. These are particularly gendered forms of abuse. Based on the discussions with the three referees it seems they are able to tolerate a considerable level. Verbal abuse becomes 'water off a duck's back,' though after matches they debrief with their support networks. This does not mean abuse becomes condoned, rather each of these referees has developed strategies to turn negative experiences into positive outcomes.

The experiences of Presley, Adriana, and Millie illustrate the pervasive nature of abuse in refereeing, a challenge compounded by the intersection of gender and hostility. Consistent with findings from Kellett and Shilbury (2007), these referees have normalised verbal abuse as an inherent aspect of the game, developing resilience and reframing hostility as "part of the role." However, gendered abuse remains particularly damaging, as highlighted

by Millie's frustration with sexist remarks and personal attacks on her appearance. This aligns with broader research indicating that while general heckling may be dismissed, targeted, gender-based comments elicit distinct emotional responses, challenging referees' ability to remain composed (Anderson et al., 2019).

To navigate these challenges, the referees employ a combination of personal and structural strategies. Support networks, including family and fellow referees, play a critical role in debriefing and emotional recovery after matches. Additionally, formal mechanisms such as tribunal reporting allow referees to address abuse that surpasses their tolerance threshold, demonstrating their agency in seeking redress. These findings underscore the dual importance of resilience and systemic support in sustaining women's participation in refereeing. Addressing the gendered dimensions of abuse requires not only strengthening reporting mechanisms but also fostering a cultural shift in sport to reduce hostility and promote inclusivity.

By situating these findings within the broader context of women in sport, this study highlights the ongoing need to combat systemic barriers and gendered hostility in male-dominated environments. Recognising the unique challenges faced by women referees and implementing targeted interventions is essential to creating a more equitable and supportive landscape for all officials.

Recognition: Positive Feedback and Progression

Progressing through the ranks as a football referee involves manoeuvring various levels of competition and officiating responsibilities, culminating in the attainment of higher certifications and roles within the sport. Receiving positive feedback throughout this progression underscores the referee's proficiency and effectiveness in maintaining the integrity and fairness of the game. The training and preparation, the physical fitness and the mental adaption to the game is part of being a referee. To embody refereeing is to be dominant and confident in your decisions, to be passionate about the game, to want to succeed. It also means to a certain extent, accepting deeply embedded traditions that make football what it is.

When Adriana progressed in her refereeing performances, she was hesitant of the environments that she would encounter, having to navigate the preconceived notions of someone small in stature.

They see they've got a female ref who is two-foot nothing and she has wide hips and then I think when they start watching you officiate and be, you know, showing your power and everything than they change, the respect comes out a bit. I think I came out of my shell when I started refereeing my personality my attitude my confidence just from zero to [explosive], nothing I can't handle, it's helped me in my professional career where I'm really confident in decisions that I make and the pressure, I just I don't feel like I'm under pressure... I mean because in football, you've only got a split second to make a decision, in real life I have more time, I'm not under pressure I can manage it.

Competence in refereeing is rewarded by access to higher levels of performance. Succeeding at the challenge of refereeing at elite levels, Presley stated:

The level of football was obviously higher, I learned a lot just about the whole range of different things but man management in particular over the years, I really enjoy working at that elite level and feeling, especially W league level, you feel like actually like a professional athlete.

With this increase in competency and responsibility comes a variety of positive experiences:

It's a quite enjoyable experience I think it was cool, at some point, probably early days when I started VPL it was like more competitive in this league and I guess it's probably still just that competitive, but I haven't done it for some time... you feel rewarded, just working in a team, it's something really enjoyable about that.

Refereeing at higher levels of performance produce a range of other positive outcomes, for example Adriana noted:

It keeps me fit, and I suppose, football gives you an opportunity, I've been able to travel interstate and be a part of championships for schools, I've been promoted to the A-league as a fourth official so it definitely gives you opportunities you never thought you would do in your younger years.

Progression opportunities for women in refereeing have also increased with FV's focus on gender equality, something Adriana mentioned earlier. For each of these referees they have what it takes to maximise the new pathways that are being put in place to increase the numbers of referees at every level of the sport.

For women referees, progression through the ranks provides more than professional advancement - it affirms their competence and resilience in navigating male-dominated spaces. Positive feedback from peers, officials, and players significantly bolsters confidence, as seen in Adriana's reflections on overcoming preconceived notions about her capabilities. Her experiences highlight how recognition on the field, paired with external validation, fosters self-assurance that extends into her broader professional life. Similarly, Presley's satisfaction with officiating at the W-League level illustrates how higher-level assignments offer not only technical challenges but also the rewarding experience of feeling like a professional athlete.

This aligns with broader research emphasising the importance of recognition and validation in building resilience among referees (Webb et al., 2017). However, the narratives also reveal unique insights into how women use progression opportunities to challenge gendered stereotypes, with Adriana noting how perceptions of her stature and gender shifted after demonstrating her authority on the pitch. These findings underscore the critical role of institutional efforts, such as Football Victoria's gender equity initiatives, in creating pathways for women to thrive in refereeing.

Progression also brings unforeseen opportunities, such as travel and networking, that participants may not have envisioned in their early careers. Adriana's experiences traveling interstate for championships and being promoted to the A-League as a fourth official reflect the tangible benefits of career advancement. These opportunities highlight how structured progression pathways not only elevate women referees but also contribute to their personal and professional growth. By investing in gender-focused policies and reinforcing positive feedback mechanisms, sporting organisations can ensure that women referees receive the recognition and opportunities they need to succeed and inspire future generations.

'Successful' Refereeing

Being a referee, and being a *successful* referee, can be thought of as rising through the ranks and *successfully* refereeing a game – without notable errors and managing the game

well. Refereeing is a role that almost always upsets one half of the crowd and becoming a referee means having to block out the noise from the sidelines and trusting your own decisions and the input from your team. The progressions for each participant were different and unique – their careers are vastly different and reflect each person and their journeys. However, they all have similar aspects of their socialisation into football and their trajectory in refereeing, namely; early entry into the sport as players, family and other forms of support, an ability to deal with abuse, and continued positive experiences linked to their performance as a 'good' referee. Each express an identity as a referee; 'I am a referee' (as opposed to, 'I referee football'). This is best captured by Presley:

Football shaped me [into] who I am today

The concept of success in refereeing extends beyond technical performance to encompass resilience, identity, and social integration. For Presley, Adriana, and Millie, success is reflected in their progression through the refereeing ranks and their ability to navigate the challenges inherent to the role. Their experiences affirm the findings of Kellett and Shilbury (2007), which emphasise the importance of resilience and skill in overcoming the pressures of officiating. However, these findings uniquely highlight the role of identity in refereeing success, as participants articulate a deep integration into their roles: "I am a referee." This framing reflects a commitment that transcends individual matches or competitions, tying success to a sense of belonging and purpose within the sport.

Structural and social support systems also play a crucial role in defining and enabling success. Family involvement, peer mentorship, and institutional policies such as Football Victoria's gender equity initiatives create pathways for women referees to thrive. At the same time, the participants' ability to navigate verbal abuse and assert their authority on the pitch underscores the interplay between personal resilience and systemic reinforcement. These findings challenge the simplistic notion that success in sport is solely a product of passion and commitment, emphasising the need for inclusive environments that address structural barriers and promote equity.

By integrating identity, resilience, and systemic support into the definition of refereeing success, this study contributes a nuanced perspective to the discourse on women in sport. It underscores the importance of fostering environments where women referees can not only succeed but also feel validated and empowered as integral members of the sporting

community. This understanding is essential for shaping policies and practices that ensure the long-term sustainability of women's participation in officiating roles.

Chapter five offers a comprehensive exploration of the factors that contribute to the progression and success of women referees in football, emphasising themes such as socialisation into the sport, the significance of support networks, the normalisation of abuse, and the transformative impact of positive feedback. Drawing on the narratives of Presley, Adriana, and Millie, the chapter situates their individual journeys within the broader socio-cultural and systemic context of football. Their experiences highlight the interplay between personal resilience, the embodiment of refereeing identity, and the critical role of structural and relational support systems in navigating the challenges of male-dominated spaces.

These findings align with existing literature on the importance of family, mentorship, and community in fostering resilience and long-term engagement in sport (Lundy et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2019). At the same time, they extend the discourse by revealing how identity formation - expressed as "I am a referee" - and the embodied experience of officiating contribute to a deeper sense of belonging and professionalisation. The chapter also complements studies on spatial and systemic inequities in sport (Bevan et al., 2024; Spaaij et al., 2024) by illustrating how gendered dynamics shape referees' pathways and progression. By juxtaposing individual agency with institutional efforts, such as Football Victoria's gender equity initiatives, the chapter nuances the understanding of success, framing it not solely as a product of personal commitment but as the outcome of an interconnected system of support, recognition, and resistance to structural barriers. These insights provide a robust framework for shaping policies and practices that foster inclusivity and equity for women referees in football and beyond. In the next chapter I juxtapose my own experience with the narratives of Presley, Adriana, and Millie to interrogate the concept that in the 'boom' time for women's sport, anyone can do anything they want to if they are passionate and committed enough.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This chapter will juxtapose my relatively short and failed experience of trying to become a referee with the three successful referees from chapter five. The aim of the chapter is to explore in greater depth the *gendered* experiences and expectations of refereeing by focusing on socialisation and embodiment. There are examples from the two previous chapters that resonate with other research on women in refereeing: pressure to perform and abuse (Reid & Dallaire, 2020), struggles for credibility (Schull & Kihl, 2019), and the importance of social support (Booth & Pavlidis, 2023; Guillen & Felty, 2011). However, in a period when women's sport is purportedly booming (McLachlan, 2019) and sport organisations are actively trying to enact a gender equality agenda (FV 2018; Jones & Edwards, 2013), how might the data from the previous two chapters provide a foil to the idea that women can achieve anything in sport if they want.

In comparing my experiences with those of the successful referees, it is essential to examine the broader patterns of attrition, resilience, and retention within the refereeing community, particularly for women in male-dominated sports. The literature highlights how gendered experiences and systemic barriers contribute to the high attrition rates among female referees, underscoring the significance of support systems, resilience, and targeted retention strategies to ensure long-term participation.

One of the most significant challenges faced by women referees is attrition, with studies identifying abuse and lack of support as central factors contributing to the departure of female referees from the sport. Kellett & Shilbury (2007) found that verbal abuse from players, coaches, and spectators—coupled with a lack of mentoring and support—plays a crucial role in driving women out of refereeing. This was mirrored in my own experiences, where the constant pressure to perform, compounded by verbal abuse and the feeling of being undermined due to my gender, created a hostile environment that significantly impacted my confidence and desire to continue. While I struggled with the feeling of being unsupported and out of place, particularly as a new referee in a space predominantly occupied by men, Presley, Millie, and Adriana had developed the resilience to face these challenges. They persevered through similar levels of verbal abuse, demonstrating the critical role of internal strength and external support in managing these adverse experiences. The continual verbal challenges faced by Presley, such as comments from the sidelines like "get back in the kitchen," reflect the pervasive gendered abuse that female referees endure, as highlighted in both my personal narrative and the literature.

Webb et al. (2017) explored the concept of resilience in referees, emphasising the importance of support systems, confidence-building, and emotional strength in mitigating the challenges of officiating. Their study found that resilience plays a significant role in referee retention, especially for women navigating gendered expectations. In contrast to my experience, where I felt emotionally drained and unsupported, Millie, Presley, and Adriana exhibited resilience through their continued presence in the sport. Over time, these successful referees built a "thick skin" through their experiences, internalising their roles and gaining confidence not only in their physical abilities but also in their authority on the field. Their ability to "zone out" and focus entirely on the game, as discussed in the previous sections, highlights the mental fortitude they developed in response to both internal self-doubt and external pressures. Their resilience was not simply a matter of enduring abuse, but of strategically navigating a space where their competence was regularly questioned and undermined. By comparing their experiences to my own, it becomes clear that success in refereeing, especially for women, is often a product of accumulated resilience—built through both external support and internal confidence.

The issue of retention is closely tied to the systemic and cultural factors that either support or hinder women in officiating. Football Victoria (FV) and other governing bodies have implemented various retention strategies, such as mentorship programs and targeted training to address gender imbalance in refereeing. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives in overcoming deep-rooted gendered barriers is mixed. In 2018, FV committed to achieving gender equality in all aspects of the sport by 2027, aiming for a 50/50 gender representation across both players and referees (FV 2018). Yet, as noted in my own analysis, there are still significant challenges to achieving this goal, particularly in the recruitment and retention of women referees. The mentorship programs and pathways intended to support women entering refereeing were not enough to address the ongoing struggles with gendered abuse and the absence of sustained, gender-sensitive support structures. Booth & Pavlidis (2023) discuss how the lack of a supportive and inclusive environment, particularly at the grassroots level, contributes to the attrition of female referees, which resonates with my own observations and struggles in a male-dominated space. While initiatives like the Green Shirt Program aim to provide a safe and welcoming transition for new referees, they often fall short in mitigating the emotional toll that gendered expectations and abuse take on women. Thus, retention strategies need to go beyond just recruitment efforts; they must focus on long-term support, mentorship, and the creation of an environment where female referees feel valued and respected, not just tolerated.

By linking my experiences to existing studies on attrition, resilience, and retention, it becomes evident that while there have been strides in promoting gender equality in refereeing, significant challenges remain. Women in refereeing continue to face systemic barriers, particularly in the form of gendered abuse and lack of support, which contribute to high attrition rates. The resilience of successful female referees is a testament to their strength in overcoming these barriers, but it also highlights the need for more comprehensive retention strategies that focus on support networks, mentorship, and creating a truly inclusive and respectful environment for women in officiating roles. To this end, I will discuss the vast differences between my own experiences and those who have been ‘successful referees’ using Iris Marion Young’s (1980) contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence.

Iris Marion Young’s 1980 work titled ‘Throwing Like a Girl: Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality’[10] provides a foundation of work that lends the idea that women are living contradictory lives, namely they are a “free subject who

participates in transcendence but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence" (pp. 32). Young suggests that there are three contradictory modalities that restrict women, and that these are embodied through the process of socialisation.

The first modality is ambiguous transcendence, which "refers to women typically using much less space than is available to them, keeping their limbs close to or closed around their bodies when sitting, standing, walking even playing sport" (Wedgwood, 2004, pp. 140). Ambiguous transcendence is typically observed in the physical limitations' young girls and woman place on themselves, through the physical restriction of how women carry themselves. In the context of this thesis and refereeing, ambiguous transcendence can be seen as the intentional movement on the pitch and staying central to the gameplay.

The second modality is inhibited intentionality which can be defined as the mental limitation of actuating movement, the confidence in decision making and the assumption of inability or incompetence. This can be observed in the officiating space by blowing a whistle correctly (strength and duration depending on the call and severity of the action).

The final modality is discontinuous unity which is defined by Wedgwood (2004) as "[women] typically refraining from using their whole bodies in a task, usually concentrating motion in the part of the body most directly connected to the task, such as the arm while throwing" (pp. 140). Discontinuous unity can be observed in young girls not using their entire body to throw a ball, instead limiting their movement to only their forearm and producing less effort than needed to complete the task well. In the context of this thesis, discontinuous unity is used to refer to the referee using their *whole* body, whilst in a 'flow state' to embody the traits of refereeing: running, making calls, staying in control of the game and being one step ahead of play.

Young (1980) states that women experience a sense of constriction, that our physical space is limited through our own mental limitation due to social, historical, and patriarchal norms that are produced from childhood and reinforced in many aspects of a women's life. Young expands on this notion of limitation – women physically limit their actions and movements due to the constraints that are socially reinforced from a young age.

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[10] Young's publications of 'Throwing Like a Girl' was originally published in 1980 and then republished in 1998 with commentary. Following these publications, the book 'On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays' was published in 2005. Young's original 1980 publication 'Throwing Like a Girl' is the key text that will be referred to throughout this discussion.

I will use these modalities as a framework to explain how my experiences of refereeing were like being a fish out of water, whilst for Presley, Millie, and Adriana they inhabit the pitch naturally. I argue that for the successful referee, the contradictory modalities are not embodied, because of each referee's socialisation in and through football. However, for me, the modalities were apparent both in my attempts to referee and because of my own gendered socialisation through my body as a teenager that reinscribed these modalities. As such I argue that the recognition and examination of embodied social histories are essential to effectively address disparities in the fields of refereeing, coaching, and sports participation.

Ambiguous Transcendence: Being on the pitch

Young (1980) describes ambiguous transcendence as the way in which women often experience a sense of disconnection or ambivalence toward their bodies and physical capabilities. Young suggests that societal norms may encourage women to transcend their physicality, aspiring to ideals of femininity that prioritise attributes such as grace, delicacy, and passivity. However, this aspiration for transcendence can lead to a sense of disconnection from one's body, as women may feel pressure to distance themselves from their physical selves to conform to societal expectations. As a result, women may experience a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty regarding their own physicality and may struggle to fully inhabit their bodies. In the context of refereeing overcoming ambiguous transcendence would be demonstrated by positioning themselves within the game play for the most accurate viewpoint of the game and physically keeping up with play. The disconnection from one's body, as described by Young, can impact how women perceive and interact with their environment, leading to unique challenges in spatial awareness. In the context of refereeing this plays out not just in the context of where to stand on the pitch, but in the complete process from arriving at the club to returning to the carpark at the end of the game.

In my first few games, I stood by the side and attempted to stand clear of the players and the ball's path. I wanted to take up as little room on the field as possible, to stay out of the way. I had the contradictory experience of feeling like an imposter in my referee uniform whilst trying to 'control' the game as the authority figure. After being told by spectators to stay in the middle, and "they have to get out of your way," it still felt unnatural to be in the middle of the game and stand tall throughout the chaos. Throughout my season of refereeing, I wore a bright green shirt to signify that it was first year of refereeing. This act, while the intentions were well-placed, made me feel like I had a neon sign above my head screaming

'she's incompetent.' The intentions of the Green Shirt Program allow new referees a safe transition and hope that spectators, coaches, and players are respectful and patient while new referees learn the ropes, however, many of the coaches and spectators that I spoke to during my time on the pitch, did not know what the green shirt meant. Whilst the Green Shirt Program was introduced for all new referees, men, and women, wearing the neon shirt made me feel like my actions, and my mistakes, were even more on show.

The physicality required to become a referee was a cause of worry. Not being overly physically active prior to undertaking this research I was concerned if I was going to be physically fit enough to keep up with play or embarrass myself by becoming a sweaty mess by half time. Whilst learning the rules of the game, being physically able to do the job was still my number one concern until the first game when I had realised that I *could* keep up, however my mental preparation and confidence in the rules was nowhere near where it needed to be. Fitness was not enough – I did not feel like a referee when I blew my whistle, I did not feel like I belonged in the space that was allocated for me, that my green shirt and football boots allowed me. Being a referee also meant using body language and arm movements to indicate what had to happen next – waving my arms and feeling embodied as a referee and my physical presence on the field was something I could not co-ordinate in any vaguely natural way. These movements are inherently natural to those who have been surrounded by the footballing space, however, as a novice to the sport and the role, these movements were foreign and yet another aspect to mentally think of to referee successfully.

Presley, Adriana, and Millie bodies occupied the pitch and asserted their presence, challenging the traditional ideals of femininity while finding empowerment through their roles. They embraced assertiveness, authority, and physicality and watching them referee they seemed to move and officiate effortlessly. However, they also experienced struggles to do with gendered expectations and their role as a referee. Presley recalled an elite women footballer taunting her on the sidelines, after awarding the opposing team a throw in:

Ref, you can't see with all that make up on

Similarly, Adriana stated that she purposefully changed her appearance to appeal to the non-feminine norm to limit the abuse centred around her physical appearance:

There is definitely an influence when it comes to me walking in [to the locker rooms], it's really shit, I try to avoid wearing make-up, I don't want to beautify anything

which should not really matter in the end. I have seen people laugh at female referees because they've got fake lashes on, and that frustrates me, 'oh you can't see past your eyelashes love' and that frustrates me a lot... we do get judged, every single time I walk into a male room or male game, I will get judged before I can show what I have got – with women's games, I don't get that, they know how hard it is and they respect you.

The key aspect here for the three referees is that their long-term socialisation in football, means that they have succeeded in negotiating their identities in male dominated spaces, even whilst they are aware of the gendered nature of football. I do believe that within the current context of football and its dominant masculine foundations lends to the idea that women must bend their own identities to carve out their careers. It is not ideal and would not be considered 'successful' in an environment where gender does not play such a role, but in the sporting context, I believe that finding strategies to make their careers 'easier' than those that have fought (and lost) their battles in this space, are still considered a success.

Conversely, I felt conflicted in my femininity. I adorned my usual eyelash extensions and braided my hair out of my face but still felt too feminine when surrounded by teenage boys – occasionally, I officiated a football game with a full set of long, coloured nails but tried to hide my hands when speaking to coaches and players, embarrassed by my accidental display of femininity. Feeling too *girly* on the pitch, only enhanced my perception that I did not belong in this space, especially when confronted by hard-faced women in the social tournaments and burly men on the sidelines during my regular community games.

Inhibited Intentionality

This modality involves a mental limitation in women's ability to act with purpose and agency. Young (1980) argues that women may experience a sense of inhibition in their movements, as they navigate societal expectations that discourage autonomy. Women may feel pressure to prioritise the needs of others over their own, leading to a diminished sense of agency. This inhibition can manifest as a reluctance to assert oneself, a fear of appearing too assertive or aggressive, and a tendency to downplay one's own desires and ambitions to conform to gendered norms. In the context of refereeing, overcoming inhibited intentionality would be demonstrated by making confident, efficient, and effective decisions on the pitch.

Being a referee means that decisions must be made correctly and swiftly, as well as loudly so the players, coaches and spectators understand what has happened. The clarity of a call is determined by the whistle and body language of the referee, and drawing attention to myself in this role was something I wanted to avoid but could not. Blowing the whistle loud enough was a task in of itself. I needed to be confident in my skills, I needed to be able to clearly speak to the fouls that had taken place and follow the process aligned with the rules, however I felt panicked, avoidant, and self-conscious about being watched and judged.

Despite my determination to be a referee and complete the season, I was constantly battling the internal whispers of "I cannot," which grew louder with each missed call, each mistake, and each tearful drive home after a difficult game. Football requires both physical abilities to keep up with play, it also requires mental skills that are clear, concise, and consistent. I felt as though my games were an out-of-body experience in which I was never truly grounded in my position, and always thinking about my positioning, the players around me and where I needed to be. I was constantly overthinking where I was and needed to be, what calls had to be made and what would happen if I did not make them as well as the time on my watch, who was on the sidelines, and how many people or players were yelling at me. The regime of gender played out in this self-doubt as demonstrated by both invited and uninvited guidance, advice, and reassurance from men at these games.

> *At half time, the linesmen both came over and said that I was doing a good job, that it was a good game, and it didn't seem like my first game which, again, was a positive reinforcement for what I was doing on the pitch. [Fieldnote following my first Juniors game]*

> *Following the match, I had a male spectator offer advice to "stand in the middle of the pitch", a conversation followed with myself saying that I didn't want to get in the way of the ball and players where he responded "you're the boss, they have to get out of your way", this comment coming from an experienced referee "been doing this for 20 years" really helped me see the perspective of the referee and that my job required me to occupy space and the players have to work around me – not the other way around. [Fieldnote following my first Women's 7s tournament, and first game refereeing]*

Contrastingly, the three successful referees exuded confidence in their bodies and decisions they made on the pitch. Millie took control of an eventful women's game, using her posture, stance, and use of the whistle to ensure the game ran smoothly and finished without complaint. Even though Millie was the shortest official on the pitch, and much shorter than the players running beside her, Millie held herself with incredible power that her demeanour stood out amongst the swarm of women running after the ball. During Adriana's game observation, she took control early on during a Senior Women's final which proved to get heated quickly into the first half. Adriana used her knowledge of the game, and man management skills to reign the aggressive behaviours in. During the second half, the players became even more heated, and Adriana stopped the game and warned them of their behaviours – loudly enough that her words could be heard from the grandstand. Adriana took control of the players actions and was able to hold the mental space to officiate a high-level game whilst still maintaining supervision of the players who had become overly aggressive towards each other. Both games that I was able to observe did not feature any cards being given but both central referees were able to manage their players, de-escalate situations and finish off the games on a high note. I was not able to observe Presley officiating a game as an assistant, however, Presley spoke about her assertive nature on the pitch as she developed as a referee. Initially, Presley was full of nerves when transitioning from junior to senior level football and again moving from senior community football to professional leagues, however, Presley's determination for success gave her the opportunity to progress within the ranks. After many years of professional football as both a central and assistant referee, Presley made the decision to pursue assistant refereeing as her chosen position on the field. After making this decision, Presley skyrocketed through the ranks and earned her FIFA badge through skill, determination and asserting herself as one of the best women referees in Australia. Presley, Millie, and Adriana rejected Young's modality of inhibited intentionality through their socialisation in the football space and their own confidence in their skills on the pitch.

Guillen & Felty (2011) emphasise that women in officiating roles require strong mentorship and consistent feedback to build the mental confidence necessary for success. This is particularly important in male-dominated spaces, where women often face additional challenges in asserting their authority and gaining respect. Effective mentorship can help women navigate these barriers, providing the necessary emotional and professional support to build their skills and confidence over time. This is reflected in the experiences of Millie, Presley, and Adriana, who all benefitted from robust support systems that helped them overcome early challenges. For Presley, the constant guidance from her father - who was also

a referee - was integral to her development, giving her the confidence to attend predominantly male training sessions and advance through the ranks. Similarly, Millie found reassurance in having a mentor and attending local referee meetings, which created a sense of community and facilitated her growth. Adriana, too, drew on the support of a network of experienced referees, which enabled her to navigate demanding situations, including verbal abuse and a lack of recognition, with greater resilience. These support networks not only helped build their technical skills but also contributed to their emotional resilience, enabling them to continue despite the challenges they faced. This contrasts with my own experience, where I lacked consistent mentorship and feedback, leading to self-doubt and a lack of confidence in my officiating decisions. The comparison highlights the critical role that mentorship plays in both the initial stages of a referee's career and in sustaining long-term involvement in officiating.

Discontinuous Unity: Feel for the Game

Discontinuous unity refers to the disjointed relationship that women may have with their bodies and physical movements. Young (1980) suggests that societal norms often encourage women to view their bodies as objects to be scrutinised and controlled, rather than as integrated aspects of their whole selves. As a result, women may experience a sense of discontinuity or disconnection between their physical selves and their sense of identity. This can lead to feelings of alienation from one's own body, as women may struggle to reconcile the expectation imposed upon them with their own lived experiences and desires. In the context of refereeing overcoming discontinuous unity would be demonstrated through a capacity to move on the pitch seamlessly (this includes running angles, staying calm, keeping up with play) and make decisions without hesitation. In other words, one would be in a type of 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), or so into the game that they can almost predict the next movement in play.

Young's discontinuous unity matched my own experiences. Even the training to become a referee had the effect of exacerbating my disembodiment. The approach to learning to become a referee was split into cognitive (learning the rules) and physiological (becoming physically fit) and psychological/social (managing oneself and others' behaviours). While these were all elements that contribute to being a referee, they were approached in isolation and failed to recognise that all these aspects needed to be incorporated simultaneously in the

one person. In other words, refereeing, like all sporting undertakings, needs to be an embodied expression where mind, body, and emotion operate holistically. I found myself feeling unnatural on the pitch due to the constant thought process of running, positioning (when I stayed wide, I was criticised, when I came into the middle I sometimes got hit by the ball), making decisions, and the laws of the game. I did not feel like a referee when on the pitch and having to make decisions on the spot, I felt like a fraud due to the constant reminders that I did not know the rules and that I was a "shit referee", the reiteration of those opinions made me believe that I did not belong on the field, could not make decisive calls and did not deserve the respect.

Conversely, Presley, Millie and Adriana found were able to be in their 'zone' whilst on the pitch: not having to think about the basics of the game such as running, rules, positioning and being able to predict the next movement. This modality did not restrict the successful referees due to their earlier socialisation in the game, their learned behaviours were engrained and allowed them to find their 'zone' and excel at other refereeing skills such as managing players and their behaviours, keeping time, and making efficient and *correct* decisions.

Adriana and Millie speak on 'zoning out' during their games and focusing on the pitch rather than what is happening behind them. Adriana and Millie's embodiment on the pitch, in their uniforms, and controlling the game is a direct rejection of Young's (1980) modality of discontinuous unity. The embodiment of a referee requires embracing the ability to tune out the surrounding noise and become fully immersed in the game. Adriana spoke on her refereeing as her 'alone time,' and finding solace in the control that she could enact on the game once on the pitch:

> *Whenever I go on to that pitch, I like the isolation, I prefer it because for me, when I walk on to that pitch, I've got complete control so it is me in my zone for 90 minutes... nobody else can influence me but I've never really felt isolated [negatively].*

Observing Adriana officiate was a clear indication that she maintained control over the players on the pitch and ignored the shouts from the grandstand. Adriana was solely focused on the game and was able to manage each player and their behaviour. When speaking on abuse in football, Millie stated that she rarely hears any abuse directed at her due to 'zoning out' when on the pitch:

I kind of, like, zone out, I think I don't obviously hear most of the things.

For the successful referee, their movement on the pitch is akin to a skillful player. They can predict the next movement before it happens, run without watching the ground or worrying about running into a player or getting hit by the ball, put their whistle to their mouth and blow it hard without losing breath or having to think about it. In this way they inhabit the game almost below the level of consciousness. My lack of socialisation in sport, and the subsequent gendered socialisation I experienced as a teenager, highlight the reality of Young's modalities in reinforcing patriarchal structures.

Booth & Pavlidis (2023) and Webb et al. (2017) both emphasise that referees must develop an embodied presence - an integration of physical movement, decision-making, and spatial awareness - enabling them to make quick, confident decisions and maintain control of the game. This embodied competence is achieved through consistent practice and exposure to the game, which allows referees to enter a "flow state" where actions feel effortless and natural. For experienced referees like Millie, Adriana, and Presley, their bodies have become finely tuned to the game's rhythm, enabling them to move with the flow, predict plays, and respond to incidents without hesitation. Their ability to officiate smoothly and with confidence is a direct result of years of socialisation within the football space, where their movement, decision-making, and physical presence are all instinctual.

I found myself unable to enter this zone, as I was constantly overthinking my positioning, decision-making, and interactions with players. Rather than moving with the game, I was often disconnected from it, focused on maintaining the mental checklist of where to stand, when to blow the whistle, and how to interpret the rules correctly. This disconnection was compounded by my lack of embodied experience in the sport, as I had not developed the physical fluency that comes with years of participation. My movements felt stiff and unnatural, contrasting sharply with the confident, fluid motions of the experienced referees I observed. This inability to integrate my physical and mental presence hindered my effectiveness on the pitch, preventing me from making decisions with the speed and confidence required in refereeing. The contrast between my experiences and those of successful referees highlights the significance of physical and mental integration in officiating.

For Millie, Presley, and Adriana, their embodiment in the game allowed them to be fully engaged in the "flow" of the match, enabling them to perform their roles efficiently and assertively. For me, the lack of this integration led to a constant battle with self-doubt and

physical discomfort, which detracted from my ability to manage the game effectively. The embodied experience that successful referees have developed over time is a critical factor in their ability to excel and underscores the importance of ongoing practice and experience in achieving mastery in officiating roles.

Navigating the modalities: Policing gender through abuse

In both chapter four and five abuse from others (players, spectators, coaches) was clearly apparent. Even though Presley, Millie and Adriana are successful referees and do not demonstrate any of these contradictory modalities in their refereeing, they are still aware of being evaluated based on gender, much to their frustration. This operates as a double-edged sword. Either they feel that they are regarded favourably because they are a woman, or they are abused specifically because of their gender.

> *For me, I feel like when I would go out to a game, I would think about the added pressure because I was like 'okay, if I don't do a good job than maybe I won't get abused at much but that's because they didn't expect you to do a good job because you are a girl, we aren't surprised' but then I would tell myself I did do a good job and that's when you start getting over-congratulated and I can hear all the extra comments because they said 'oh my god, no offence but we didn't think you were actually going to be good'.* (Millie)

Presley stated that she had had abuse from players and people from the crowd throughout her entire senior career, it was something that she had to ignore, as confronting abuse on the sidelines can quickly turn into a spectacle, which was something she wished to 'avoid as a referee.' Presley has been an elite level assistant referee for many years and spoke about the verbal abuse that occurs meters from the sidelines:

> *There are people in the crowd being like 'get back in the kitchen!' or 'keep up with play' and 'keep up lino, you're not even keeping up.' Even when you are keeping up with play, they still say that, when you are a female, its constant. I think it's a theme that is echoed through all sports to be honest, but particularly for us because we do participate in men's football. There is this sentiment that men have assumed fitness, always! Regardless of their size, regardless of anything, anything at all, to have this*

assumed fitness at that level but when women do that level, its 'oh no they have to prove themselves, they've got to prove that they are fit' and even when we are fit, and we are keeping up, there is always going to be someone saying 'you're not fast enough, you're not keeping with that'. I think that is something that has always happened... always, always, always.

These instances of gendered abuse reinforce the notion that this sporting space is a contested site for women. These successful referees have endured horrific verbal abuse. However, each referee has continued in their roles irrespective of what has been said due to their earlier experiences and socialisations as young women. Their own journeys and viewpoints coming through the ranks of football has meant that each referee has developed a thick skin to abuse (gendered or otherwise) and to some extent, they are able to accept what has been said to them. In my own experience of verbal abuse, and having not experienced that previously, those moments became a defining moment in my early refereeing and significantly impacted my outlook on the continued path of officiating.

While outward abuse remains in sports, directed at officials, there is also the act of praise. Millie, Presley, and I all encountered praise during our games however, this praise felt conditional and can be interpreted as unjustly given. Praise from spectators, coaches, players that felt backhanded due to each of our positions as a woman in football. The question remains, were the expectations already low because of gendered norms that when women referees do a 'normal' job, it is praised more so than boys, is a 'good' job only 'good' because the bar is set lower for a woman compared to a man? While feedback is appreciated and wanted during moments of doubt, interactions can potentially have misguided intentions – was the feedback warranted because skills needed to be improved or because there was a woman on the pitch instead of a man?

My internalised sense of disembodiment reached a head when I had finished refereeing two difficult games on a Sunday morning and went to the unisex change rooms to find a young man preparing for his first game of the day – a quick hello was exchanged, and the conversation shifted to the day's matches where I proceeded to tell him that the games had been difficult, and I was quite new to the role. This young man had then asked me:

Do you even know the rules?

While I swiftly answered that I did know the rules, I could not help but think that if another man had been in my exact position, that that question would not have been asked. Prior to commencing the refereeing role and the research itself, I had felt like I did not belong in sporting spaces, yet I persevered and pushed through until I could not continue any further – succumbing to the belief that *someone* could, but that someone was not me.

Chapter six examined Young's three modalities of feminine bodily comportment: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity in the context of the lived experiences of three successful referees and my own failed career. Whilst Young's modalities were evidently present within my own experience and were reinforced throughout my time on the pitch, Presley, Adriana, and Millie did not accept the modalities within their own stories as a referee. Due to each referee's playing experience, transitional period into refereeing, support systems and positive reinforcement through progression, the modalities that were theorised to restrict women's bodies were rejected by the socialisation of each of these women. These experiences and juxtaposition provide a foundation of recommendations to sporting bodies that aim to aid women who want to become a referee and retain their position within their organisation through avenues of support, adequate training, and mentorship.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis set out to investigate the existing literature on women in officiating, delve into the journey of becoming a referee through autoethnography, amplify the perspectives of accomplished female referees, and critically assess how these insights relate to the current surge in interest in women's sport. The goal of this thesis was, in part, to examine whether the intentional actions toward gender equality in sport have led to a meaningful reduction in the barriers for women entering roles like refereeing. While progress has been made, this research acknowledges that systemic and cultural barriers continue to shape women's experiences in male-dominated spaces. Undoubtedly, at the simplest level of understanding, gender continues to profoundly impact the possibilities of who can and who cannot succeed at refereeing. In other words, the 'boom' has not affected the politics of gender in the way that the media and sport organisations might portray it.

Rather than focus on individual failure to succeed, I have tried to theorise the experiences of referees by thinking about embodiment and gendered socialisation. The capacity to embody, or not embody, the modalities of ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity, I believe directly affect an individual's probability of being successful in any sporting pursuit, but especially in complex tasks such as officiating in historically male dominated sports. What I take from this is that to increase gender equality in refereeing requires more than running programs for women only. It requires a deeper consideration about how, through the recognition of gendered socialisation, sport organisations might think about how they can support the undoing of these modalities to produce potentially transformative embodied experiences that empower women. Without this consideration it would therefore seem that only those who have the social history, and gendered socialisation in these masculine environments, like Millie, Adriana, and Presley, will be the ones to succeed in refereeing.

The current state of refereeing is a hostile environment for novices, women and referees of all shapes and sizes. The masculine environment that is football can create arenas in which women are not welcomed, or placated. Presley argues that the support she occasionally receives from others can feel insincere:

> *There weren't many female referees at the time so it's quite rare to see and when [coaches] did see you and you did a reasonable job, I felt like people would say 'well done' but maybe they wouldn't have said that if I was a boy but because you're a*

female, they're like 'oh yeah she actually did well'... look it's nice but at the same time you think, is this just because I am a female?

Presley is a FIFA assistant referee, and even so she experiences a gendered and condescending appraisal of her performances.

If the requirements to be a referee rely on a life in the sport, and participation numbers are heavily skewed towards boys and men, then the reality is that equality is an unrealistic dream. A life in sport normalises competitiveness, aggression, and abuse, where the thick skin is seen as admirable and required. Therefore, if this is what one needs to embody to be a success, the sport will always be a space of inequality. If I think back on my experiences, it is obvious that I am even uncomfortable in the ruthless competitiveness of junior teams destroying their opposition[11]. The solution to the unequal numbers in refereeing needs to be something other than developing a thick skin. How would FV possibly do this for want-to-be referees like me?

Embodiment and Support

If the solution to gender equality in refereeing is overcoming the contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence, then a focus for change would need to address embodiment and support systems for women referees. Embodiment is expressed through the capacity to officiate on the pitch with confidence, to move effortlessly, be decisive, to be in the zone. In the absence of being involved in football from a young age, how could this be achieved?

To begin with the current process for passing the initial requirements of refereeing rely on an approach that ensures disembodiment. Learning the rules, working on fitness, understanding how to manage groups and individuals, is learnt in a way that is the opposite of embodied. That is, the novice referee is disembodied, compartmentalised into cognitive, physiological, and social/psychological components. This became evident in my experiences as I was consciously compartmentalising my time on the pitch. Over thinking, worrying

[11] Although this sentiment is not based in gender or gendered experiences, this feeling and these negative experiences ultimately can impact anyone taking on the challenge to become a referee. The ruthless competition, the stark reminder that sport is dangerous, passionate and all-consuming can impact men or women that step into a power where they must control players, coaches, spectators and the game.

about fitness, being caught up in the voices of players or parents, meant that in a way I was constantly being pulled apart, and my responses reflected my gendered socialisation into my body.

Support networks and supportive figures in a young referee's life is essential to success and development. It was notable in my time refereeing that any support I received was inconsistent at best. Further when I did receive support, though well meaning, it had the effect of reinforcing certain modalities. Support and advice were almost always from men, either as a form of protection (dealing with abuse) or demonstration of knowledge (you're doing a good job but ....). For Adriana, Millie, and Presley, while they initially relied on men as supports, over time they developed networks amongst other women referees. I think this points to the need for collective networks of men and women to support referees.

Though all the solutions to this problem are beyond the scope of this thesis, creative [12]approaches would be required, for example:

- More time spent in collective referee training in simulated games fielded by referees.
- New referees must watch experienced referees in action
- New referees are paired with experienced referees and their first times on the pitch are running alongside this person. Being on the pitch without needing to make decisions. Seeing the game from the perspective of the referee.
- New referees are paired for another week with the same experienced referee and run the line as an assistant referee.
- At the new referee's first officiating match the experienced referee is their assistant referee.
- Develop a referee-based community of practice that actively engages with new referees (as opposed to expecting the new referee to initiate all interaction)

[12] The term 'creative' is used to highlight those straightforward approaches to tackling the retention of referees such as 'more online training' and 'more skills training days' is currently not working. Creative approaches such as pairing novices and experienced referees for training purposes and switching positions within scheduling (novice is an assistant, experienced referee is then the novice's assistant) can be seen as creative as they require organising bodies, such as Football Victoria, to think outside of the traditional boxes of training new referees and expanding their knowledge and skills besides the expected training days.

These are some possible practices that might work to overcome the modalities, and there would need to be an investment from FV to make this work, but to achieve change, the current allocation of resources requires some redistribution.

I also think it is worth challenging the normalisation of abuse (gendered and otherwise) that seems rife in football. A solution to this would be the incorporation of refereeing in Mini-Roos and early junior learning. Players could be expected to referee their peers at training, or referee Mini-Roos games instead of parents. Clubs could train their junior players to act as assistant referees for older team matches. This could have the effect of creating some form of empathy with the responsibilities of referees and create a greater understanding of the rules and player behaviours. This too would require resourcing.

Limitations

The study itself was gripping to be a part of and witness as a researcher however, there were challenges to get the momentum needed to have enough data for a thesis. Initially, the thesis was centred around my own experiences exclusively, with the intention of lasting an entire season and having a larger data set. My season ended sooner than I expected so a shift in the research direction was needed. Ideally, finding other novice referees would have provided the data set needed to compare and contrast the experiences of referees just starting out. This want was not possible due to the ethical limitations of only interviewing willing adults over the age of 18 and the vast majority of new referees being under the age of 18. I was not able to gain access to willing participants that were over 18 years old (to comply with ethics requirements) so I made the decision to interview other referees to use as a juxtaposition to my own data rather than a side-by-side comparison. This research, and the interview data, was then used to show a failed attempt to make it against women who have preserved and have become 'successful.' I believe that the autoethnography and the data allowed a nuanced view on the very beginning of a journey and enabled a critical lens on what can be changed, the current barriers that some may not see and the interview data showing a figurative light at the end of the tunnel – it can get better but there is a lot of darkness that one must travel through first.

Conclusion

This research aimed to address three core questions related to women's refereeing in Victorian football: the process of becoming a referee, the characteristics of a successful referee, and what adjustments organising bodies could make to improve recruitment and retention of women referees.

Findings from this study indicate that the process of becoming a referee is fraught with challenges, particularly for women entering a male-dominated space. Initial barriers include navigating inadequate training, lack of structured mentorship, and a cultural environment often unwelcoming to novices. These issues highlight the systemic inequities that persist despite Football Victoria's (FV) commitment to achieving 50/50 gender equality by 2027.

Successful refereeing, as revealed through the experiences of participants, involves not only technical competence but also resilience, effective support networks, and the ability to navigate the gendered norms embedded within the sport. The importance of early socialisation into football and continuous mentorship were identified as key factors distinguishing those who thrived from those who left the system.

To address these challenges, this research proposes actionable strategies for FV and similar organisations. These include integrating refereeing into junior training programs to normalise officiating roles, fostering structured mentorship programs that prioritise inclusivity, and creating community-driven networks that support referees at all levels. Implementing these measures requires a redistribution of resources and a deeper organisational commitment to addressing the cultural and systemic barriers that hinder women's progress in football officiating.

The outcomes of this thesis have not only provided insight into the systemic and cultural barriers faced by women referees but have also offered a deeply personal reflection on the challenges of navigating such a complex, male-dominated space. The decision to employ autoethnography as a primary methodology allowed for a rich, nuanced exploration of the process of becoming a referee. This approach bridged the gap between researcher and participant, providing an authentic account of the lived experience, from initial training to encounters on the pitch.

Engaging with autoethnography enabled a level of introspection that would have been unattainable through traditional methodologies. Reflecting on my personal journey—particularly my early struggles with the disembodied approach to training, my efforts to navigate the masculine culture of football, and my reliance on inconsistent support

networks—deepened my understanding of the systemic changes required to foster inclusivity in refereeing. This methodology revealed the importance of examining not just external systems but also the internal negotiations women undertake to reconcile their passion for sport with the cultural and social pressures they face.

This thesis has profoundly affected my outlook, both personally and professionally. It has reaffirmed the importance of representation and the urgent need for structural and cultural reform within football officiating. My experiences have shifted my perspective from frustration over personal challenges to a broader recognition of the systemic inequities that perpetuate these difficulties. This research has equipped me with a greater appreciation for the resilience of women referees and a renewed commitment to advocating for meaningful change within sport. By combining personal narrative with critical analysis, this thesis has demonstrated the power of storytelling in research, serving as a catalyst for both personal growth and collective advocacy.

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The issue of gender inequality in officiating will likely not be solved by better online modules, nor a mentor for one's first couple of matches in charge. Both the literature from the research and the experiences captured through chapter four and five identify persistent problems in football that are the result of unequal gendered power relationships.

A common misconception is that the current state of sports for women and girls is that we can participate and do *anything* we wish, the barriers that existed decades ago are no longer inhibiting participation. Perhaps it is not the barriers per se that are the problem, rather that the taken-for-granted meaning of sport, or the current model of sport, that is at fault. Refereeing is complex – it certainly pushed me to my limit, but what I think emerges from this is that some transformation is required. For FV to achieve 50/50 parity in refereeing involves including women from a diversity of life experiences in this process. Such a diversification would in time challenge many of the normalised behaviours that are currently problematic for not only referees, but also players (for example drop out in teenage years). Referees are responsible for the integrity and safety of the game, for them to achieve this they require respect and safety in return.

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