RESEARCH ARTICLE

Elite Refereeing Structures in England: A Perfect Model or a Challenging Invention?

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Abstract

The structure employed in England for referees and elite referees is something which has evolved as the game of Association Football has developed over time. This referee promotion, support and management system has changed more rapidly since the inauguration of the Premier League and latterly since the introduction of ‘full-time’ or ‘professional’ referees. The change in the promotion and support for elite referees has necessitated changes to that management structure at the elite level in particular. This article has utilised historical research to analyse the changes to these structures alongside semi-structured interviews as a means of analysing this evolving network for elite referees. Findings indicate that support for the changes which have occurred in elite refereeing regarding the establishment of ‘full-time’ referees are opposed, with alternating views also encompassing the current structure employed for managing elite referees in England and the pathways utilised for referee promotion.

The structure of refereeing in England has developed markedly from that observed before the instigation of the ‘professional’ or ‘full-time’ referee in 2001. There are various catalysts of change that can be identified and have impacted refereeing over a concerted period of time, such as the evolution of the Football Association, the relationship between the Referees Association and the FA, changes in society such as advancement in technological provision, the growth of new media, and the advancement of referee training. There are other mechanisms which can be identified specifically related to football and linked inextricably to refereeing such as the formation of the Premier League, the money associated and the relationships this has fostered between football and media/television companies. Furthermore, there are specific referee-related occurrences which have shaped the landscape in England more recently, particularly the introduction of ‘full time’ or ‘professional’ referees that operate predominantly in the Premier League.

There is little doubt that refereeing evolved at a different rate to the rest of the game¹, there is also a substantive link between more modern occurrences in refereeing and some of the developments that have influenced referees over the past 150 years. This article will consider these important milestones in relation to the effect they have had on the current structure of refereeing in England. The fact remains that currently (in 2014) the system employed in England to manage the elite referees in the Select Group, which officiate in the Premier League, is a somewhat unique system within European football. Leagues that would be considered comparable, such as Serie A in Italy and the Primera División in Spain have referees controlled by the association, the more traditional system which was utilised in England before the professionalisation of referees. The formation of this updated system in England meant a shift away from the traditional system employed and new challenges for the organisations involved in the implementation of this system.

This paper considers the change in the provision of this system for referees, the implication of these changes and the views of the current system from within the refereeing community. In order to achieve this, interview responses from elite referees, ex-elite referees and those involved with the management and training of elite referees are utilised.

Initially it is important to chart where the current system for the management of referees has developed in order to understand fully the system that is currently in place. The evolution and development of Association Football and the referee can provide a starting point for an examination of any developments and adaptations to the structure of refereeing, and more specifically for this article, elite refereeing.

The Development of Association Football and the Referee

There have been several histories of ‘mob’, ‘folk’ and ‘Shrove football’ in England, but what is less evident in accounts of the development of the game is the involvement of an umpire or referee to oversee and officiate on the practices of these early games². In reality, this would have been an extremely difficult challenge for an arbitrator due to a lack of formalised rules and the fact that any rules in existence were not applied throughout the United Kingdom at that time.

Folk football was a game generally played by the lower or working classes, and certainly in its early form is exemplified by ritualised, holy day or annual matches between communities and villages. The form the game assumed tended to vary from place to place, according to local custom and tradition, with regional influences significantly shaping when, where, as well as how games were played and who was involved. Descriptions of the game of ‘hurling’ in Cornwall, demonstrate the range and popularity of basic forms of folk football and there are detailed descriptions of the game in Cornwall containing rules and strategies, involving teams of 15, 20 or 30³.

There is evidence to suggest that organised football matches (as opposed to “folk football”) played using defined and printed rules, as well as an arbitrator, were more common than was previously thought outside the public school system⁴. There were also common features amongst these rules, but crucially they were still local or regional and specifically regulated for the match they were governing⁵. Developed laws and rules inevitably meant there was a need for an arbitrator to apply the laws that had been developed. However, initially, the rules needed to be standardised, routinised and regulated in order for disparate groups to be able to play against each other. The different sets of rules that were used varied greatly and the very nature of the game differed wildly from area to area and from school to school as a form of football gradually moved into the public school system⁶.

The development of rules and the growing seriousness of the game meant that there was a requirement for an individual to enforce these rules rather than the players and captains of the teams. The formation of the Football Association in 1863 saw the Laws of the Game codified, although referees (or ‘umpires’ as they were known at this time) were an afterthought and certainly not central to a process which was envisaged by the ‘gentlemen’ who then played the game as unnecessary⁷. The formation of the FA also led to the birth of the FA Challenge Cup in 1871 and ‘neutrals’ introduced to resolve disputes between the team appointed umpires⁸. 1888 saw the establishment of The Football League and with this competition came the need for an acceptable level of officiating. In order to achieve this, footballing authorities had to give consideration to the assessment, promotion and structures that were in place to support referees.

The Introduction and Development of Referee Classifications

Historically various forms of referee promotion existed and were in operation, largely dependent on the County FA to which a referee was associated; one of the earlier forms of this promotion system was outlined in 1893 with the FA stating that a list of referees would

be prepared by the council of the Association and '*...such referees to be selected from nominations of Associations which are duly qualified for representation on the council*'⁹. The classification process of the referee had begun, but there was little guidance over how County FAs should undertake this classification and there were no guarantees at all that this was not viewed and undertaken differently by separate County FAs in various areas of England. Predictably, there were suggestions and motions put before the FA Council to change this classification and make it more robust as early as 1895.

1895 saw a suggestion put forward by Mr J. A. MacGregor of Port Vale, which was seconded by Mr J. J. Bentley from Bolton Wanderers, to change and update the classification of referees. This suggestion involved the move to three categories of classification, Class A for referees of at least three years' standing, eligible for appointment in English Cup Ties and Senior District Cups; Class B referees, it was proposed, would be officials of at least twelve months' standing, eligible for appointment in Local Cup Competitions, finally Class C was recommended where referees would be eligible for Junior Cup Competitions. The proposition extended to affirm that promotion from Class to Class should be undertaken on an annual basis. The proposal, which was later accepted in a similar format, was discussed at the meeting and subsequently withdrawn as a motion¹⁰. The fact that this proposal was initially rejected and later implemented utilising a similar design, demonstrates the importance which was associated with the grading and classification of referees even before the 1900s.

The Football Association and the Football League had decided a list of referees was needed that could then be appointed to County Cup matches as well as being submitted to the FA for possible use in the FA Cup Competitions. The newly formed Referees Commission at the FA began attempting to classify referees into Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3 referees, with Class 1 designated 'senior referees' and a proportion of these Class 1 referees were recommended by the appropriate County FA for appointment to the first-class type of

match¹¹. This list was compiled by the County Football Associations and these classifications came into use in February, 1902¹². Class 1 referees were required to undergo a special examination, due to the significance of the matches in which they would be officiating; classes 2 and 3 required no additional examinations. The FA believed that this classification system would improve the standard of refereeing because there would be a coherent list of the 'best' referees from all County FAs.

The newly introduced classification system did mean that referees were being selected by perceived ability. The County FAs were making decisions on the quality of a referee and grading them according to their perception of this quality. However, there was no formal, standardised, and uniform approach to assessment. The County FAs were responsible for conducting their own assessments, and producing their own lists, which were then submitted to the FA on a seasonal basis. The lack of agreed criteria meant there was no guarantee that the 'best' referees were in the correct category or class, or that the 'best' referees were indeed officiating in the Football League or in the FA competitions at this time.

In 1909 Charles Sutcliffe, a former player and referee in the Football League, a member of the Football League Management Committee, later to become League President in 1936¹³ and president of the Referees' Union from 1908-1913 and 1919-1920 (As of May 28, 2013 on the Referees Association website), proposed that referees should be appointed to a league on a seasonal basis, rather than month by month, given the amount of work that this entailed for the FA and Football League. In 1909 the Football League Management Committee accepted this proposal, meaning the Football League referee list was set at the start of the season¹⁴.

By 1912 the Football League had ensured that referees had to perform satisfactorily in lower standard matches in order that they might progress to league level¹⁵ in an attempt to standardise the quality of referees. This meant, in effect, that the Football League, through the

League Management Committee, had managed to organise their own classification system and through this system the mechanism to be able to appoint referees to their league matches. Reports on referees' match performance were being received by the Football League Management Committee by 1910¹⁶ and these reports became a necessity (enforced by the Football League) to be completed by football club secretaries in 1920¹⁷.

FA Referees' Committee minutes from 1929 were still considering lists of officials to be nominated by the County FAs, where a special list of Referees was also compiled from which appointments were made. This 'special list' compilation required the formation of a sub-committee to select the recommendations to the Full Referees' Committee, the names of seventy-two Referees which would constitute this 'special list'¹⁸. It could be argued that this was the first step in distinguishing the different classes or categories of referees in a more formal manner. This process progressed further with the introduction and use of the starring system for referees. The County FAs were still required to submit a list at the start of the season of referees and linesmen for FA competitions, and the County FAs were also '*...requested to "star" the names of the nominees whom they particularly recommend for appointment as Referees*'¹⁹. This remained in place until referees were re-categorised according to the recommendations outlined in the FA minutes in 1951²⁰.

However, it is fair to state that little had changed in the promotion and structure for referees until the National Referees Conference was convened in 1946.

Examination, Assessment and Promotion from 1946

The National Referees' Conference was organised in 1946 and this conference focused amongst other things, on the examination, assessment and promotion of referees at all levels. This conference generated a number of recommendations that assisted the organisation of refereeing in the preceding years. The recommendations from The National Referees' Conference, amongst other things, included the formation of uniform examinations

by a central body, accelerated promotion for the most promising referees and instructional classes for referees throughout the country. The acknowledgement that a much needed uniform examination system should be implemented although by December 1947 a uniform examination for referees was still absent²¹.

The FA issued a memorandum in 1948 referring to the appointment, promotion and career pathways of referees, with draft proposals listed for consideration by the FA, the Football League and other senior leagues. Prior to this proposal there was a fragmented system in place with little transparency in terms of referee promotion. Indeed, the memorandum itself recognises this fact and states the need to ‘...outline a new procedure of the appointment and advancement of Referees, which will overcome weaknesses in the present method’ (FA Council minutes, 13/12/1947). Questions over how referees were graded, and inconsistencies over their subsequent promotion and placement at matches, were starting to be addressed. These grading re-classifications suggested that referees were split into Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3 categories with the lists submitted by the County FA to the FA annually²².

In order to finalise the grading and promotion for referees The FA held conferences throughout England during the summer of 1951 to gather the views of County FAs and the different leagues. The RA proposed more categories than those originally suggested by the FA, and included an additional 2x grade, intended to identify referees over the age of 50 who were not submitted as part of the annual list to the FA due to their age. However, these suggestions from the RA were rejected and the initial proposals, first made by the FA in 1951, were adopted and still in place in the 1958-1959 season²³.

Information published in *‘The Football Referee’* traced the pathway that referees had to tread before becoming a Class 1 referee. This information highlights the responsibility given to the County FA’s for recruiting, coaching and grading referees, although the FA

‘...has regulations for their guidance but Associations are left wide discretion and their practices vary²⁴. It was also pointed out that there was a ‘...good deal of dissatisfaction among referees because of the widely differing proportions of referees graded in the three classes by the various County Associations’²⁵. There was evidently some considerable unrest related to the perception of an uneven and unfair system of assessment and promotion at varying levels of refereeing in England. The issue appears to lie with the application of these processes by the County FAs. In point of fact, although the County FAs were given guidance related to the training and assessment they should administer, there were still large discrepancies between the different counties in terms of what was actually delivered.

Moreover, professional referees were being discussed with increasing regularity within refereeing as an associated by-product of the focus on the assessment and promotion of referees. Copies of ‘*The Football Referee*’ demonstrate a growing acceptance that professional referees were a subject that required dialogue. Indeed, mention of professional referees can be found in May 1964²⁶, through an article discussing the merits of introducing these elite officials. ‘Professional’ referees are mentioned further in April 1971 as part of a submission through the Leicester Branch²⁷, and additionally through an article by Reg Payne (Referee Secretary of the F.A.) in February 1973²⁸ with both articles arguing that professional referees were not something wanted by the refereeing fraternity at that time.

By February 1982 there were questions being asked of the structure and promotion pathway in place and what could be done to improve the process. Palmer, writing in ‘*The Football Referee*’, proposed a two-stage training and examination procedure in order to eradicate those that know the laws but could not apply them and to try and improve the challenges to the referees’ authority as a by-product of the increased pressure and exposure produced by television²⁹. There were also further reports close to the professionalization of

these referees, debating further whether professional referees were a good idea in March 1999³⁰.

Closer to the professionalization of the elite referees in England the structure of the system in April 2001 was being discussed and John Baker, the Head of Refereeing at the FA, explained that County FA's were still responsible for the support and development of match officials, but there was some restructuring of the development classification system to produce a grading system similar to that utilised today with levels from 10 to 1 with international referees being the highest category within the system³¹.

Given the similarities between the revised structure outlined in 2001, the present study considers the current structure of elite refereeing in England and more specifically the intricacies and differences that are evident in England when discussed in relation to other comparable European leagues in terms of profile such as Serie A in Italy and the Primera División in Spain.

Method

Participants

The current investigation is part of a larger study examining elite Association Football referees and refereeing systems in European competition. The individuals for the research were selected through the use of purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method involving the selection and involvement of a particular societal group or sample because of their unique position related to the research³². The research also utilized Snowball sampling (or chain referral sampling) – a form of purposive sampling often used to find and recruit “hidden populations” or difficult to reach samples.

The sixteen participants were all from the England. All participants were working in the field of professional football and elite level (Premier League) refereeing as current elite

level referees, ex-elite level referees, referee assessors, referee coaches, managers and administrators from bodies that manage and train referees and are associated to refereeing. All participants agreed to take part in this research and the research was undertaken according to the ethical guidelines of the University of Portsmouth. Respondents were assured of anonymity when they were contacted and therefore pseudonyms are utilised to protect the identity of the respondents.

Interview Guide

Pilot interviews were initially conducted for the larger research study with Referee Development Officers at County Football Associations in England. These interviews informed the construction and formulation of the final interview schedule after preliminary analysis was conducted. A semi-structured approach was adopted where an identical set of questions was employed in a similar manner. This ensured that there was an element of structure to each of the interviews that was conducted; however, the ordering of the questions was dependent on the responses that were given by each participant, where issues raised were explored by the interviewer (the lead author). Discussions naturally varied during each interview, due to the semi structured nature of the interviews and the differing responses from the respondents.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the phone, this was decided by the participant. The interviews were recorded in their entirety (no more than 75 minutes in duration) and transcribed verbatim. Participants were given information regarding the research, by hard copy, e mail or verbally, prior to being interviewed.

Data Analysis

Having transcribed each of the interviews, inductive content analysis was employed as a means of analysing the themes generated through the data that was gathered during the

interview process. This approach was employed due to the large amount of data that were generated and to classify the common themes that could be identified through the analysis of the data³³. Furthermore, content analysis affords the researcher a coherent manner of being presented to colleagues for peer dissemination; this type of dissemination can lead to verification of the data analysis process and give the research added ‘trustworthiness’ through the concept of ‘critical friends’³⁴. It is useful for the researcher to acknowledge that they are an instrument in the process of data collection and analysis, and because of this the researcher needs to be self-reflexive.

To add further credibility to the findings of the research it was worthwhile to involve other researchers in the process. This can not only verify and inform the data collection and analysis that has already occurred but also assist the researcher in terms of support, and suggestions that otherwise may not have been considered. In the case of this research other academics were asked to perform roles in order to give triangular consensus in the form of ‘critical friends’³⁵. After the initial higher and lower order themes had been identified, the transcribed interview quotations were read and re-read by 2 academics trained in qualitative research. Each researcher then viewed the higher and lower order themes and independently identified and verified the phrases, quotations and themes that they had been asked to consider. These themes and quotations were independently grouped and compared to the initial themes that had been generated; these themes were then placed into general dimensions above which no general meaning could be identified.

Results and Discussion

The results derived from the data collection and analysis represents the collated interview responses from all sixteen participants. The interview responses were related to respondents’ perceptions and experience of the historical and current pathways, support systems and

structures that elite referees experience. Following transcription of the interviews the collated responses were inductively placed into higher order themes and finally within a general dimension (Organisational Structure and Governance of Competition). The findings of the general dimension are presented in figure 1 which is supported throughout the results and discussion by additional verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts.

[Figure 1 near here]

Refereeing in England in 2014 – Current Development Pathways

In order to fully comprehend the training, performance, and current standard of elite level referees there must be some focus directed toward the pathways these elite referees have followed to reach the Premier League and Football League.

The onset of referee classifications has been discussed historically in this article with the current structure used by the Football Association coming into force from the 2001/2002 season. Previously the levels were classified as Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3 referees. As of 1st June each year Referees in England are classified as follows;

- International Level:
- Level 1 National List (Football League and Premier League)
- Level 2a Panel Select (Conference Premier)
- Level 2b Panel (Conference North and south)
- Level 3 Contributory (Contributory Leagues)
- Level 4 Supply (Supply Leagues)
- Level 5 Senior County (County Leagues)
- Level 6 County (County Leagues)
- Level 7 Junior (Amateur Leagues)
- Level 8 Youth (Junior Referee below age of 16)

- Level 9 Trainee

Figure 2, Current Levels of Referee Progression (As of May 3, 2014, on the FA website).

This classification process, up until Level 3, is still conducted by the County Football Associations on behalf of the Football Association, something which has been in operation since the initial classification of referees³⁶. The different levels refer to referees' current rank in terms of their progression within the pathway and also determines the level of match they can officiate and there is also promotion and demotion between the levels.

Elite Structure of Refereeing in England

Having identified the current pathways in place for referees in England, attention turns to the analysis of the elite structure of refereeing, which offers something of a unique approach. The Select Group referees are directly affected by four different bodies namely the Football Association, The Premier League, the Football League and the organisation that was formed to provide match officials for all professional football matches played in England, the Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL). PGMOL has a board which consists of the chief executives of the Football Association, the Premier League and the Football League, with a Non-Executive Chairman also in attendance. This is a different structure to leagues in Spain and Italy as well as other leagues, where the Football Associations control the referees and there is no separate body that controls professional and National List referees.

Brian, an individual involved with the management and training of elite referees, explains how PGMOL operates in conjunction with the organisations that have a stake in its operation;

“Because referees are service providers at whatever level of the game we operate at, so you have the three main competitions to whom we provide a service having a stake in our future development. So, all three of them fund the development of refereeing but do

so through an independent company. So we are structured in such a way that, yes they have a seat on the board, but it is chaired by an independent chairman and they do not interfere with the day-to-day running of referees. They never cross that line. So you have the benefits of being in constant dialogue with the competitions, but at the same time the benefit of independence through the chairman and the general manager role which focuses purely on refereeing.”

PGMOL, in the 2013/2014 season, had a total of 77 referees, of which 16 were professional, as well as 231 assistant referees, although this is not a fixed figure and is subject to change, depending on individual performance. PGMOL are responsible for the training development and monitoring of these referees (As of May 3, 2014, on the Premier League website).

At elite level, professional referees are allocated to league matches by PGMOL. There are sixteen referees currently (2013/14 season) that are available to officiate ten Premier League games and six selected Football League games. When PGMOL makes these appointments several aspects are considered including the current form of the official, the position on the Merit Table (something which is calculated after each assessed game, taking into account marks received by the referee for their performance), the exposure to clubs with regard to frequency of appointment, the proximity to the ground or City in which they were born or live, any previous history with the clubs involved in the matches, the team that they personally support, International appointments (Referees who have a UEFA game on Thursday will only be available for a Sunday or Monday game) and experience.

‘Professional or ‘Full-Time’ Referees

The move towards the professionalization of referees, in terms of the ‘full-time’, paid, official, who considers refereeing as a career, was not something that occurred quickly. As has already been indicated, it had been a part of a dialogue over a period of almost 40 years

with the first mention of ‘professional’ referees in The Football Referee publication coming in the May 1964 issue³⁷.

Professionalization has arguably been a major influence on the improvements in the training of referees in England; England is the only country in Europe that has embraced the concept of full time referees³⁸, although it is somewhat debateable whether all referees in the Select Group who officiate predominantly in Premier League matches are indeed full time, professional referees, “...we’re not all full time. There’s 16 on the list and I guess half of us don’t have any other form of employment... Other guys maybe hold down 10 or 20 hours per week in another job” (Aaron, elite/ex-elite referee).

The perception that English referees, in the Select Group, are all full time, professional referees is somewhat removed from the truth, neither is this the system currently employed in Spain and Italy. Clarification is also needed at this point in terms of what “professional” actually means in this context. It can mean referees are full time and refereeing is their only form of employment. “Professional” can also mean the approach of an individual, how they perceive their application to a profession and the pride and general demeanour with which this profession or job role is undertaken. Referees who practice in other countries and who in some contexts may not be regarded as ‘full time’ referees may not consider themselves as any less professional than referees in England.

The formation of PGMOL and the management of the Select and National Group officials were inaugurated for the start of the 2002/2003 season. The inception of professional referees was something which took time and there were initial issues with contracts and areas that warranted further consideration, such as demotion of referees and the remuneration these officials were receiving;

“We selected the top 19/20 referees and we offered them a package which was a commitment of 145 days a year and for that in 99/00 they were getting just over £30,000

as a retainer plus match fees plus expenses and obviously those on the international list were picking up fees as well. And then that went up to around £45,000, the top ones were getting plus other bits and pieces. So....they were probably earning between £60-70,000 a year from refereeing...a lot of the referees, were still working part time because at the end of the day they had a one year contract...and they could have been shifted down to the Football League so they would just be on match fees, although from 2002/2003 onwards if a referee would go down he would be on a retainer simply to soften the blow financially.”

(Barney, Management and Training)

It is therefore evident that the introduction of ‘full time’ referees did not in all instances represent a launch of the professional referee, because although referees were now contracted on an annual basis, ‘a lot of the referees were, and still are, working part time’ in other occupations.

Select Group and National Group referees are selected through the promotional structure the Football Association in England has put in place and as a consequence of talent identification methods such as referee academies and programmes such as the National Referee Development Programme, that aims to train, retain and develop referees. The FA also has a support network for referees, including various roles/responsibilities at varying levels of a referee’s promotional pathway. Referee Development Officers work at every County FA; Referee Tutors deliver training and education to referees; Grassroots Mentors offer guidance and support to newly qualified referees; Referee Coaches have a refereeing background and work with referees to develop their skills; Development Coaches, who have substantial refereeing or assistant refereeing experience at a high level, work with Level 2a and Level 2b referees in order to raise standards at these levels and identify talented referees at an early age; Level 3 Mentors work with all first and second year Level 3 referees as a point of contact to offer guidance and support as well as identifying strengths, goals and development opportunities for the referees that they work with and, finally, Regional Referee

Coaches deal with a selected group of potentially talented referees on a regional basis (As of May 3, 2014, on the FA website).

This support network can differ from county to county and is dependent on the County FAs that oversee the work. This is something which has been evident throughout the evolution of referee training, assessment and promotion. Some recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the wider national game in England, the importance of referees' early development, identification for potential referee advancement and the professional game with bodies such as PGMOL, entrusted with overseeing football at the highest level, is necessary. These elite level referees have originated from a County FA; they have refereed at local levels and worked their way through the league structure to become Select Group or National Group referees.

The Current Support Network and Promotion of Referees

Responses from the interview process highlighted a difference of opinion regarding the system that is currently employed in England. There was an acceptance that the system is now more supportive and the provision of training and relevant experience is providing referees with appropriate grounding in order for these officials to move through the system effectively. This provision, according to Brian involved with the management and training of elite referees, is tempered with a pragmatic approach which details the level of commitment required in order to reach the Premier League;

“One of the things that we are noticing now is that people are a lot better prepared when they come through the system. Everyone has aspirations and wants to get to the top. What they now have is a degree of realism with their aspirations. So it is no good saying I want to be a Premier league referee without knowing the commitment and what is required for you to be a Premier league referee.”

The support now afforded to referees revolves around referees' progression through the system and their development during this progression. However, the concept of moving through the pathways in order to get to the Premier League has also been criticised with the view held that there is an 'obsession' around the promotion of match officials and that this 'obsession' should be tempered by the realisation that elite referees can only operate at the top level for 10 years due to the increased pressure that referees now find themselves operating under;

'The obsession about getting referees through is crazy. You can only referee at that level at Champions League games, Premier League games, Manchester United, Arsenal every other week doing all the big games....about 10 years is the maximum you can deal with that exposure, that pressure on a week in week out basis.'

(Alan, Elite/Ex-Elite Referee)

Furthermore, there are additional concerns regarding this process related to the associated opportunities that are available for referees as they progress through the system. In order for referees to get experience at Premier League level there is a requirement to officiate at that level and this necessitates the understanding of the clubs. The argument persists that clubs must understand that referees have to be 'thrown in' to the environment to ascertain whether they can handle the exposure and the pressure at the elite level of the game in England;

"The opportunity isn't there for everybody but I'm quite concerned that it is becoming increasingly difficult for new guys getting up the Football League and then getting on the select list to get the appreciation of the clubs, to get the experience; they have to be thrown in.... I think we are paying for this and this is why you are seeing some of the same referees refereeing the same teams 7 or 8 times and it is over exposure."

(Brett, Management and Training)

The pinnacle of this pathway is the possibility of a career in refereeing as a ‘full time’ or ‘professional’ referee. However, the structure in place in England currently is not beyond debate. The nature of the structure and the fact that it is somewhat different to that employed in other countries, means that there are divergent views on the implementation and administration of this approach more generally;

‘It doesn’t work and I made the point very early on when it first got set up....the problem is who’s paying the money – if you are a professional referee you are beholden to whoever that is and therefore the Premier League....the fact that it is set up as a PGMOL board is nonsense because the Premier League puts the money in....dominates, that’s how it works.’

(Alan, Elite/Ex-Elite Referee)

Moreover, there appears to be genuine misgivings about this structure, introduced upon the professionalization of referees in 2001. Much of the debate is centred around the money in the game, who pays the professional referees and where this money comes from, “....the Premier League have a massive say...I think realistically we have to accept that the Premier League is the biggest player and they put in most of the funding to PGMOL” (Aaron, category 1a). In addition to the issue of funding, another area of consternation relates to the structure of the management of elite referees in England. The structure in England is different to that found in other leagues and countries, ‘England is totally different to virtually all the other countries in terms of how they manage and are governed, there is a refereeing statute which says referees are controlled by the national federation.....but the point is the clubs, through the Premier Leagues, were paying the referees’ (Barney, Managerial and Training).

The funding suggests a significant influence on the part of the Premier League in terms of the input they would expect to have into PGMOL, given the amount of money that they invest in refereeing. Additionally, the importance of the relationship between PGMOL and the FA is paramount, given that County FAs are responsible for referees up to level 5,

and then hand these referees over to the FA and, latterly, PGMOL at level 2. Interview respondents have stated that this relationship between PGMOL and the FA has been somewhat fraught in the past, although it is improving, ‘Better now. There have been struggles in the past with the relationship between the different bodies’ (Bradley, Managerial and Training).

The difficulties highlighted appear to revolve around the formation of PGMOL. Nevertheless, these difficulties outlined have also been contextualised with the admission that the relationship between the various stakeholders involved in the formation and upkeep of PGMOL as an organisation has been improving in recent times. Given the focus and comments of the interview respondents concerning the complications attributed to the elite system in England, these difficulties are worthy of further investigation.

Difficulties with the System in England

The issues identified in England is the existence of PGMOL as a tripartite body that trains, supports and controls the Premier League and Football League referees. Opinion is divided over the relative importance of this body in the development framework in England, and also how this body manages the inter-relationships between the Premier League, Football League and FA. Responses during the interview process suggested concern that this body exists. However, interviews also indicated that there was a belief PGMOL was successful in its operation, as far as this was feasible, although the hindrance appeared to be that the system itself was considered flawed and therefore difficult to operate.

FIFA statutes state that referees should be “directly subordinate to the member”³⁹, which in this case is the FA in England. However, due to the organisation of elite refereeing in England and the structure employed with PGMOL overseeing the Select Group referees, this can present a problem when referees attend UEFA or FIFA events. Indeed, Adam, an elite/ex-elite referee reveals that ‘when you go abroad you represent your country you

represent the FA, you don't represent PGMOL and that is drummed into us; that is very, very important.' There is evidently some understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the system employed in England, and the fact that it is different to systems elsewhere in Europe. It seems that between the FA, PGMOL and the Premier League English referees are aware that the organisational system for managing elite referees in England is not the standard approach taken.

The structure of elite refereeing in England does involve the FA as part of the development pathway. However, the FA did not have the finances in place to fund fully professional referees when they were introduced in 2001; accordingly it seems that the FA have become marginalised in the organisational framework of referees at the elite level, 'the introduction of the Professional Game Match Officials board was at the demise of the association....the Football Association pleaded poverty, they wanted control of the referees....because of the UEFA/FIFA issues, but they didn't have the funding to run it' (Barney, Management and Training). As a result of the marginalisation of the Football Association in elite level refereeing in England, there was subsequently a need for money to be introduced from elsewhere to fund the move to professional referees. This demonstrated that the Football League and Premier League were needed to provide this money, with the Premier League contributing the majority of the funding required. The accusation, because of this directed funding from the Premier League, is that it and its members (the Premier League clubs) have too much influence over refereeing in England, '....regrettably clubs have too much influence over the recruitment, retention, promotion and appointment of referees....the truth is that the clubs have too much influence' (Adrian, Elite/Ex-Elite Referee).

The use of a tri-partite body to govern and train elite referees is also something inimitable to England which does not exist in other countries in Europe. The construction of this board has led to varying responses concerning the effectiveness of the current pathway.

Furthermore, it is unclear how the PGMOL as an organisation operates, with UEFA and FIFA seemingly uninterested in this organisational structure despite the FIFA statutes apparently stating that the home association should control referees. This is something of which PGMOL, the FA, Premier League and Football League are aware, given the instruction to individuals that represent England at European and international events to report that they represent the FA and not PGMOL; something to which individuals appear to adhere.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the historical structures involved in refereeing, especially at the elite level in England, in order to understand fully the current pathways and structures in place to support and manage elite referees, predominantly in the Premier League. In order to achieve this historical research was conducted to determine and chart the establishment and evolution of the support networks and promotional structures that would serve refereeing over time. Interviews were undertaken with individuals involved in elite refereeing as referees, ex-referees or through the management and training of these individuals.

Discussion and analysis of the current management of the elite ‘full time’ referees in England and how the current system, with the advent of PGMOL as an organisation put in place to manage the elite referees, currently operates has been undertaken. Responses have been mixed regarding the success and provision that the current system affords, and much of this scepticism centres on the input and influence that the Premier League clubs and the Premier League in particular hold over refereeing in England. There are also historical precedents in terms of the organisation, management and promotion of referees that are still part of the system today, such as the involvement of County FA’s early in the training and promotion process for referees.

This process has been identified as a pathway which is producing referees that are better prepared, with an understanding of what it takes to officiate in the Premier League. Nevertheless, the ‘obsession’ with this promotion process and the elevation of referees through the system has been questioned given the nature of the exposure and scrutiny that referees are deemed to be under in the Premier League and professional football more widely.

The structure of elite refereeing in England is something which differs from that provided in other countries in Europe. This structure has been required in order to provide professional referees; however, over 10 years since the introduction of ‘full time’ referees, the scepticism which these potential ‘professional’ referees were viewed prior to professionalization is still evident. The focus of this scepticism has turned to the structure that supports these referees, rather than professionalization itself; nevertheless, the debate over these ‘professional’ referees and the structures that they operate within evidently requires further scrutiny.

Notes

¹ Webb, *The Emergence*; Colwell, *Elite Level*.

² Dunning and Sheard, *Barbarians*; Goldblatt, *The Ball*; Harvey, *Football*; Mangan, *Missing Men*; Taylor, *The Association*.

³ Holt, *Sport*, 13.

⁴ Goulstone, *The Working-class*, 210; Harvey, *Football*, 84; Harvey, *An Epoch*, 56.

⁵ Vamplew, *Playing*, 849.

⁶ Mason, *Association Football*, 14; Pickford, *The Psychology*, 80; Gibson and Pickford, *Association Football*, 28-31; Green, *The History*, 15; Colwell, *The Letter*, 202.

⁷ Thomson, *The Man*, 21.

⁸ Russell, *Football*, 31.

⁹ FA Council minutes, September 11, 1893.

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- ¹⁰ FA Council minutes, May 21, 1895.
- ¹¹ FA Referees' Committee minutes, February 5, 1902; Witty, *The organization of referees*, 200.
- ¹² Durham F.A., June 1927, 64.
- ¹³ Tomlinson, *North and South*, 31-32.
- ¹⁴ Sutcliffe et al., *The Story*, 15.
- ¹⁵ Vamplew, *Pay up*, 261.
- ¹⁶ Sutcliffe et al., *The Story*, 15.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 20.
- ¹⁸ FA Referees' Committee minutes, August 26, 1929.
- ¹⁹ FA Council minutes, June 01, 1931.
- ²⁰ FA Referees' Committee minutes, February 26, 1951.
- ²¹ Points of Motion for Conference, December, 1947, 7.
- ²² FA Referees' Committee minutes, February 26, 1951.
- ²³ Webb, *The Emergence*, 11.
- ²⁴ Discipline, August 1968, 16.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 17.
- ²⁶ Bullard, *Professional Referees*, 20.
- ²⁷ Professionals, April 1971, 11.
- ²⁸ Payne, *Why we don't want*, 14.
- ²⁹ Palmer, *In Theory*, 6.
- ³⁰ Frodsham, *Professional Referees*, 3.
- ³¹ Baker, *The Football Associates*, 4.
- ³² Byrne, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 199; Schutt, *Investigating the Social World*, 173,
- ³³ Biddle et al., *Research Methods*, 795.
- ³⁴ Faulkner, and Sparkes, *Exercise as Therapy*, 57.
- ³⁵ Ibid. 57.
- ³⁶ FA Referees' Committee minutes, February 05, 1902; Durham F.A., June 1927, 64.

³⁷ Bullard, *Professional Referees*, 20.

³⁸ Nevill *et al.*, Improved Training, 226; BBC Sport, 'Football Referees Turn Professional'.

³⁹ FIFA, FIFA Statutes, 12.

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