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Umpiring
A Serious Leisure Choice

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Abstract

Umpire (or referee) recruitment and retention is an issue for many sports, yet little is known about the positive experiences that influence an individual's decision to continue umpiring. This research examined umpiring as serious leisure. Nineteen volunteer umpires in Australian Rules football were interviewed. There are four key findings from this research: individuals actively choose to umpire rather than to engage in other leisure activities; individuals derive meaning from engaging in umpiring, and understand themselves as athletes; umpires experience isolation; and, socialisation within the umpire group is important group cohesion and assists in reinforcing identity and meaning. Umpiring is a serious leisure pursuit that can be complementary to other leisure activities. This research outlines strategies for recruitment and retention.

Keywords: *umpire; serious leisure; management; recruitment; retention*

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Introduction

Sport regulating officials such as umpires or referees play an integral role in the delivery of most organised sporting competition. Umpires, whether officiating at the highest professional levels or grassroots levels of competition, ensure that the rules of the sport are adhered to—providing sanctioned competition as well as a safe environment for all participants. However, the position of umpire or referee is often considered to be a necessary evil due to the regulatory or "policing" nature of the role (Warren, 1984). As a consequence, umpires endure abuse from players, coaches, and spectators (Kurkjian, 1995; Levitt & Tockman, 1991; Rainey, 1994; Rainey & Cherilla, 1993; Rainey & Hardy, 1997). Research on umpires has focused on the negative experiences associated with the role including abuse, stress, burnout, and conflict (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Hardy, 1997; Taylor & Daniel, 1987), as well as on how various coping skills and personality types assist individuals to persevere in the activity despite the negative experiences (Cavallero, 1988; Folkesson, Nyberg, Archer, & Norlander, 2002).

Umpire recruitment and retention is increasingly an issue for the mere survival of many sporting leagues as many sports experience high umpire attrition rates which has most often been attributed to the abuse and negative experiences that umpires endure while performing their role (Australian Football League, 2010; Gencay, 2009; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Stevenson, 2001). This high level of attrition creates a human resource problem for sport managers. Without umpires, organised competition cannot exist. Sport organisations invest significant resources into the acquisition, training, and preparation of umpires, many of whom leave soon after gaining such skills (Arehart, 2002; Stevenson, 2001). Despite the reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining umpires, it is clear that many individuals do take up umpiring and continue to umpire (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Evans, 2004). Although recent research has examined passion in refereeing, and its impact on decision making, there is a limited understanding of what referees might be passionate about (Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, & Brunel, 2009). Specifically, little is known about the positive elements and experiences that influence an individual's decision to continue to participate in umpiring. For those individuals who are career umpires, the activity could be viewed as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992). In other words, some individuals "find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experiences" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). This research begins to identify how umpires view their role, and the meaning that umpires attribute to their role that influence their decision to continue to umpire.

By understanding both the barriers to entry and motives for participation in sport and leisure activities, managers are able to develop programs to improve the recruitment and retention of individuals (e.g., Backman & Wright, 1990; Biddle & Brooke, 1992; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Green, 1997; Green & Chalip, 1997; Shaw, Bonen & McCabe, 1991;Wankel & Kreisel, 1985). In the case of umpiring, the major constraint identified by both popular and empirically based literatures is the expectation of abuse (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007). Recent research by Kellett and Shilbury (2007) suggests that the positive experience of social interaction among umpires outweighs the negative connotations of abuse. Specifically they found that social interactions serve as a mechanism through which umpires learn to render abuse innocuous. Although this work provides important lessons for umpire administrators in terms of ensuring opportunities for umpires to socialise with other umpires are provided, there is a continuing need to further understand the way in which umpires derive meaning and significance from their roles. Understanding the meaning that umpires attribute to their role can inform strategies for umpire recruitment and retention.

Umpires

Despite the ubiquitous nature of umpire abuse and cultural vilification from coaches, athletes, and spectators alike (Rainey, 1994; Rainey & Cherilla, 1993; Smith, 1997; Stevenson, 2001; Voight, 1972; Warren, 1984; Wollf & Stone, 1995), abuse is not a constraint to continued participation for all umpires, nor is it linked to the intention to quit (Kellett & Shilbury 2007).

Kellett and Shilbury (2007) found that umpires expected and accepted abuse, and had learned to deal with it. They concluded that umpires either do not receive as much abuse as they expect, or are conditioned to expect abuse as a normal part of their role as it is reinforced by the media, other umpires, and administrators. Therefore, research that investigates umpires and the experience of umpiring must move beyond assuming the role is one in which participants endure negative experiences (such as abuse), and begin to understand the positive elements that individuals experience through umpiring. By viewing umpiring as a form of serious leisure, we can begin to understand the ethos embedded in the social world of umpires.

Umpires participate in organised sport competitions at the same time and in the same arena as athletes. Indeed, umpires are considered to be so important to the successful conduct of sport that researchers have sought to understand the specific physical requirements for various umpire roles to ensure that umpires can perform at peak levels (Coutts & Raeburn, 2000; Mallo, Veiga, Lopez de Subijana, & Navarro, 2008; Pyne, 2000; Turner, Walters, Leski, Saywell, & Wooldridge, 2003). Much of this research has been conducted based on the premise that umpires are athletes, and have therefore used the same testing methods that would be used when measuring athlete performance (Coutts & Raeburn, 2000; Leicht, 2008; Reilly & Gregson, 2006). The ultimate goal of the development of knowledge in this field has been to better service the athletes by providing a higher standard of umpiring—at least from a physiological perspective.

The concerted research effort directed at understanding how umpires can provide a more effective service to organised sport has been important in the development of the field from a physiological perspective. However, the uni-dimensional way in which research has focused purely on physiological capabilities might suggest that umpires have been examined as machine-like providers to organised sports (c.f., Hoberman, 2001). Interestingly, umpires have never been considered by scholars, sport managers, or administrators as if they were participants in and of the sport from the perspective of recruitment or retention.

Career Progression

Umpire organisations are often structured in the same way as sport organisations to ensure umpires develop appropriately and their umpire skills are matched to the skill level of the sport. In other words, beginner level or inexperienced umpires will begin their career umpiring at an appropriate level of competitive play (such as junior sport). Just as there is a model of sport development in organised sports where one begins at a community or amateur level, and can progress toward the professional level, there are corresponding development opportunities in umpiring for most sports. Despite the similarities between umpires and athletes, and the physiological testing and assessment methods used to analyse their performance, managers, administrators, and scholars alike have not considered umpiring as a leisure choice in its own right. This study views umpiring as a form of serious leisure and seeks to examine the meaning they attach to their role.

Umpiring as an Important Choice of Leisure Activity

Individuals who umpire choose to utilise their discretionary time and income on umpiring as opposed to other leisure activities. An examination of the way in which individuals construct their lives through their choice of leisure activities can provide an indicator of underlying meanings derived from participation (e.g., Donelly & Young, 1988; Moneta, Schneider & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggests that consumer behaviour is driven by the desire to satisfy needs. In other words, different leisure choices fulfil different needs for different people. Serious leisure (as opposed to taking a nap, or reading the newspaper) is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or a volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 1982). Stebbins (2004) identifies activities such as coaching youth sport, or serving in a grassroots sport organisations as serious leisure. Stebbins (1982) proposed that serious leisure is distinguished by six distinct qualities. First, personal effort is expended to acquire pertinent skills and knowledge. Second, the participant perseveres despite negative experiences they may encounter. Third, participation is viewed as a career. Fourth, the participant has a strong identification with the activity. Fifth, there is development of a subculture, and sixth, there are long lasting benefits including self enrichment, enhancement of self image, social interaction and physical fitness. Thus, it is possible that umpiring is an activity that one can understand from the perspective of serious leisure. To explore and develop an understanding of the meanings umpires create as leisure participants has important practical significance for umpires, managers, and marketers. Umpires must derive positive aspects of meaning from their participation in umpiring. Otherwise, individuals would not persevere with the activity, or elect to take it up.

Research Setting: Umpiring in Australian Rules Gootball

The choice to umpire, particularly in the context of Australian Rules football is not one that can be taken lightly. Not only do people choose to put themselves in a position where they can expect abuse (e.g., Dickson, 1999; Kellett & Shilbury, 2007; Smith, 1997), in choosing to be an umpire, one also expects to voluntarily invest time and resources into training for the role. In Australian Rules football, this includes investing in an educational component with written exams, and a physical component requiring physical training and task competency.

The sport of Australian Rules football is played at amateur (junior and senior), semiprofessional, and professional levels. In terms of participation, 10,167 umpire appointments are required to be filled nationally for the season in order to conduct all levels of organised competition in the sport (Australian Football League, 2010).

Each category of umpire (goal, boundary and field) has quite distinct roles and responsibilities and different levels of skills and physical activity required. While goal umpires are only required to participate in short spurts of physical exertion, boundary umpires can run as much as a marathon during a game of football. The organisation of roles and responsibilities of umpires on game day is no different to a team sport in as much as it requires cooperation and communication between umpires who take up various positions around the field of play, and perform different tasks and duties throughout the game.

Commitment to training for umpires who officiate at amateur levels of Australian Rules football is at least two nights per week (during season) at a designated umpire training venue. It is also expected that umpires train outside of the scheduled training time, as well as during the

off-season. Although training in personal time and during the off-season is not a requirement, for umpires to be able to perform adequately, such preparation is deemed necessary.

Method

Participants

This study examined participation of umpires in the sport of Australian Rules football in the state of Victoria, Australia. Umpires from each of the three categories (field, boundary and goal umpire) were represented from each nonprofessional umpire association in the current study. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants in this study. In Australian Rules football, all umpires are paid. Umpires who officiate at the professional level of competition are paid a substantial amount. However, the umpires involved in this research (none of whom officiated at the professional level) were paid a nominal amount that does would not cover travel and other expenses incurred.

Table 1

Interview Participants – Cross Sectional Sample

Organisation	Level of umpiring	Umpire category	No. of Interviews
State Level			
VFL	Semi-Professional	Goal	1
		Field	1
		Boundary	1
	Semi-professional (Academy)	Goal	1
		Field	1
		Boundary	1
			SUBTOTAL 6
Metropolitan	Amateur	Goal	2
		Field	2
		Boundary	2
			SUBTOTAL 6
Rural	Amateur	Goal	3
		Field	2
		Boundary	2
			SUBTOTAL 7
TOTAL NUMBER OF UMPIRES INTERVIEWED:			**19**

A total of 19 umpires were interviewed. Duration of umpiring experience ranged from 3 to 35 years. Umpires ranged in age from 17 to 65 years. Table 2 provides a summary of demographics of the sample.

Table 2

Demographic Data for Sample

	Category of Umpire			Level of Umpire	
	Goal	**Boundary**	**Field**	**Amateur**	**Semi-pro**
Sample size	8	7	7	13	6
Average Age (yrs)	42	32	25	37	24
Experience (Yrs)	15	12	9	13	9

Procedure

For the purposes of this research, it was important that umpires were given the opportunity to explain and describe their experiences of umpiring. Specifically, umpires were asked a set of semistructured questions aimed at probing their experiences in the role. Questions included *"What do you like about umpiring? Can you describe your development in umpiring—where did you start, and how did you get to where you are today? What do you see as your future in umpiring? How do you fit umpiring into the other things that you do in life?* By obtaining detailed descriptions in the words of those we are studying, we can attempt to capture the meanings, definitions, and descriptions of how events are interpreted (Berg, 1989). Strauss and Corbin (1994) suggest that in order to understand a particular group, theory needs to be generated directly from the experiences and frames of reference of the individuals within that group. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used. The semi-structured format was deemed most appropriate because it allowed the interview to be focused directly on the realm of umpiring. It allowed the umpire to share his or her own experiences, while allowing the researcher to seek elaborations and clarifications where necessary.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted in total. The duration of interviews varied, with the minimum interview time being 20 minutes and the maximum interview time being 80 minutes. All interview data was transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software. Data were analysed for themes and commonalities, and results are reported in the proceeding section. The authors conferred to further develop codes and categories (Creswell, 1998).

Results

Four key themes emerged from the data that explained the meaning that umpiring has for individuals as well as its role in the lives of respondents—consistent with serious leisure. First, respondents viewed umpiring as an activity that held great importance in their lives. In particular, umpiring was viewed as an activity that had central importance in their lives, or as an

activity that complimented a portfolio of active leisure pursuits. Second, umpires viewed their roles as similar to that of athletes, as part of a team sport, and as possessing a potential career path with opportunities for advancement. Further, umpires described the skills they learned from umpiring as useful life skills. Third, umpires in this study reported a sense of marginalisation—from non-umpires in football (players, coaches and fans), and by non-umpires in the general community (such as members of their peripheral social networks). Fourth, camaraderie that is experienced within the umpire community reinforced and validated the identity as an umpire. Umpires in this study reported that they would reveal their umpire identity to only a few members of their close social networks. This pattern of social isolation further reinforced their identity as an umpire. Each of these themes is discussed below. Quotes and field notes are used as examples as they best describe the opinions and experiences of umpires.

Umpiring: An Important Activity in Life

Almost 70% of umpires described umpiring as an activity that enhances their lives. It was clear that when asked why they umpire, the majority of umpires identified this particular activity as part of who they were, and how they define themselves. In essence, umpiring was viewed as either an activity that had central importance to their lives, or as an activity that complimented a portfolio of active leisure pursuits. One umpire noted, "It [umpiring] is really important to me... it is my passion. It's a big thing for me." Perhaps even more telling about the centrality of umpiring to some of those who continue in the role is the meaning and importance it has in their lives. One umpire noted, "It's only part time, but umpiring affects you greatly. It is nonstop." One umpire recounted a conversation with a fellow umpire:

> Goal umpiring is number one for me. Me and [another umpire] were walking around the oval last year [for training purposes] and I said "what is more important to you— umpiring or family?" He replied "footy umpiring". I can understand that.

The centrality of umpiring to identity was reflected in the time that was committed to training and preparation for umpiring. One umpire stated, "I do nothing else during the summer now." As this quote suggests, umpiring has become central in that during the year (as football is a winter sport), he has forsaken all other leisure activities in order to be an umpire.

Other umpires concurred with this view. One umpire said:

> My preseason (training for umpiring) can be up to 160km (running) a week. 160km – that is 4 marathons in a week [just] training. I can run a sub-30 minute 10km. I am at National level in running. … there is a handful of guys at AFL level that could be on a Commonwealth or Olympic [athletic] team.

Although this umpire highlighted that he and many of his colleagues were able to participate in other high-skill sporting activities, it was umpiring that was the preferred choice of leisure activity. These individuals were training "full time" for umpiring, rather than any other sport—which is no different to how professional athletes describe the centrality of sport in their lives. Also notice from the quote above, the umpire uses high profile sport events such as the Olympic and Commonwealth Games to describe and boast about the skill and fitness level of the umpires. This umpire went on to explain how he transitioned into umpiring:

> I was a talented runner... and it set me apart in umpiring... so right from the beginning I knew exactly where I wanted to go as an umpire. I set my goals... It's like going to the Olympics—you don't go there to do a time, you train to go there to win.

It is clear from this umpire's perspective, that the pursuit of excellence within umpiring is important for him.

For other respondents in this study, umpiring was one activity that complemented a range of leisure pursuits in which they participated. It was described as one of a series of activities that they used as a means of increasing general fitness, personal health and well being. For example, an umpire stated, "The main thing [reason for participating in umpiring] is the fitness." This umpire went on to explain how he has been able to achieve fitness through umpiring:

> When I played [the sport of football] I wasn't fit, not used to doing much at training, and I used to be a short little stubby kid. And now I umpire I've thinned out a little bit.

Another umpire noted how umpiring complemented his fitness regime:

> If you look at a normal week, it's not bad... you pop out there [on the field] to train 3 times a week and run one game. So, you've got a nice balanced fitness regime.

For some individuals, umpiring was perceived as an activity that could augment training and fitness for leisure pursuits outside of umpiring. Specifically, umpiring provides training in the "off season" of another sport or activity in which they participated. For example, one field umpire stated, "I initially started just to keep fit additional to all the other sports I was doing." Another field umpire described the way in which umpiring was specifically important for supplementing his primary sport of athletics. He explained, "It [umpiring] was just something we used to do at athletics in summer for fitness." Another umpire explained how participating in umpiring enhances performance in the sport of athletics:

> Everyone [professional boundary umpires] has a passion for running, it is not so much about the game [of football], well it is about the game itself, but most of the guys, especially at the AFL [professional] level have all got an athlete background and it compliments for the summer—if you want to be competitive in summer [in athletics].

Notice here, that the role of being an umpire is seen largely as an avenue through which umpires can continue their running in the winter months to stay fit for their athletic endeavours. Umpiring is viewed as a means of increasing fitness and preparedness for sports outside the sphere of umpiring, and thus umpiring is seen as a means to an end, with staying fit and in shape being the end. In other words, umpiring is not an isolated, standalone activity, but rather it is utilised as a training mechanism for other active leisure pursuits.

Umpires as Athletes and the Career Progression

From the results presented above, it is clear that umpiring is viewed as an important active leisure pursuit—either as a standalone activity, or one that augments other activities that individuals undertake. Consistent with the active nature that umpiring held in their lives, umpires understood themselves, and specifically described themselves, as athletes. One umpire stated, "We [umpires] are elite athletes."

Other umpires used commonly understood terms of reference in sport to describe umpiring, and its various components. For example, respondents spoke about coaches, and at the professional level, umpires travel nationally to officiate games and describe it as "being like a professional athlete." One umpire described his experience of umpiring on game day this way: "Every ground we go to, we get food and drinks, just like the players. They are professional about what they eat, and we are just like them; we are professionals, too."

Further, umpires compare their preparation for umpiring to that of preparation of elite football players for their games. One umpire describes his role during a match by using the same

terminology as a player would. In this case, he understands that he is performing or "playing." He stated, "It is obviously a buzz playing in front of crowds and playing at the highest level you can."

Further, umpires reported experiencing a sense of skill development and mastery. Similar to athletes in a sport setting, as umpires progressed to elite or professional levels of the activity, umpiring became a more central and salient identity. Umpires at the amateur levels described a desire to reach higher levels of umpiring, and some had specific goals in umpiring.

Similar to athletes, umpires aspire to officiate at the grand final. For umpires, being selected to officiate at the grand final signifies elite performance. For example, one umpire noted:

> Every season the grand final is my objective. In the 11 years that I have been umpiring, last year was the only year I haven't done a grand final. This year I have to make it count.

Meaning is derived from developing mastery of the skills involved in umpiring and a symbol of mastery is to be selected to umpire the grand final match. This is similar to the way in which the grand final represents mastery for athletes. For example, one umpire noted, "You try to continually improve your umpiring." Another umpire highlighted the importance of skill development and mastery to his continued participation. He stated:

> The prospect of even getting to the AFL [the professional league]. I think that's really good. I mean, I want to go as far as I can with umpiring. So that's important to me.

Participation in umpiring is not merely "something to do." Many umpires see a career progression in the activity and seek to improve and develop skills to achieve and maintain a high level of performance. For example, one field umpire explained, "I can still umpire at the highest level at [age] 37." It is clear that for some individuals umpiring has the ability to become a central component of their identity. In this way, umpiring has meaning and becomes a predominant activity in their life. Furthermore, umpiring is an activity where one can feel a sense of accomplishment and mastery. However, skill development and mastery is not limited to the context of umpiring. Just as sport is assumed to provide athletes with skills that are transferable to other facets of life (such as discipline, accountability, and structure), umpires describe the way that the activity of umpiring provides them with similar outcomes.

Perhaps unique to umpiring is that there are no "age groups" as appear in sport competitions. For example, an athlete competes, for the most part, in organised sport with peers of his or her own age group. In umpiring, this is not the case. A young umpire can officiate senior (adult) level games and vice-versa. This creates an interesting environment for development of young umpires beyond that of the activity itself. One umpire described the way in which he started umpiring, and the impact it had on his life:

> At the age of 14 [when I started umpiring, I was] dealing with an adult world... [other umpires] were usually 30-40 years old, and married. You get a lot of views [from them] and at grassroots level you learn discipline and structure as you are doing training like a grown man, with a team that relies on you, and you are forced to be more grown up with your attitude. I learned a lot about myself and communicating with others during that time.

Note here that this umpire is describing the way in which the activity of umpiring, particularly the way in which the activity is organised socially, is perceived to have assisted him in developing communication skills and accountability.

Similarly, umpires describe the importance of the interactions between umpires within their group as crucial to their development off the field. For example, one umpire described the experience this way:

> We all travel together as a group to the games. Sometimes this can be up to 2 hours in the car. It is important during this time to communicate with the younger blokes—I don't think they'd ever admit it to us, but I think they learn a lot about dealing with adults when they are in this environment.

Interestingly, umpires were articulate about describing what they do when they are officiating as "managing people." One umpire described the role as "managers of the game." Another umpire articulated it this way:

> What we are doing is managing men when they are emotionally on the brink. These young men are highly charged, and if you don't manage them properly, provide the structure and explanation of why you have made a decision, it could go either way... umpiring has really helped me better manage people in my workplace.

It appears that umpiring can teach important skills that are transferable beyond umpiring in the sport setting. Umpiring has been perceived by individuals in this study as an important part of their development as people, hence its perceived importance in their lives. However, umpires perceive that others (non-umpires) are not as cognisant or respectful of their skills.

Umpires: An Isolated Group

Despite the individuals in this study considering umpiring as a salient part of their identity, and an activity that reportedly takes up considerable time, effort and commitment, the respondents reported a sense of being misunderstood—both within the sport of football itself and by non-umpires in their social networks.

Umpires asserted that many footballers, coaches, and fans had a limited understanding of the rules of the game in which they are participating and instructing. For example, one umpire explained, "Sometimes you cop it from players... and they don't even know their own rules and they're playing the game." Note from this quote, that misunderstandings were perceived by the umpire to lead to abuse. Another umpire noted, "I have a family member who plays AFL footy. They understand the football part of it, but don't really understand the umpiring side. They have no idea about the way that some of the rules are enforced." Thus, umpires are responsible for interpreting the rules of the game and implementing them, yet they perceive that players and coaches do not understand the rules and the interpretation of them in the same way—thus noting that they have special skills and knowledge of the game that others lack. Another umpire suggested that education of players and coaches is required. He noted, "I think if they [coaches and players] were instructed or given guidelines, it might change the perception that they have [of umpiring] and the way that they interact with us." A solution such as educating players and coaches may reduce frustration for each of the groups involved.

Umpires in this study also reported a sense of being misunderstood by fans of the game. While umpires perceived that coaches and players did not understand the way in which they interpret and implement rules, their concern regarding fans was a lack of respect for the way in which they prepare for and execute their duties. For example, one umpire noted:

> They [fans] see it as you just rock up and just do your job and run around the ground. There is a naivety about what an umpire does. They have no idea about the professionalism and the way that we prepare for this role.

Another umpire concurred. He noted:

> [Fans] have no idea about the rules. They think we stand there and wave flags in the air. They have no idea of the commitment that we have and the kinds of training we have to do to get here.

As a result of the wide-spread misunderstandings of umpires and umpiring, and the negative perceptions of the activity, umpires in this study reported that they had only a limited network of people with whom they were comfortable "revealing" their identity as an umpire. One umpire stated "there are things you can't talk about with mates and umpiring is one of them." Another umpire explained, "[When you tell people you are an umpire] they hang a bit of crap on you. So you end up not telling most people you meet that you are an umpire. It just isn't worth it." One umpire put it this way:

> So those people who aren't in my social group and don't know me, those people just don't understand it. They don't understand why I umpire. They don't understand what we go through, what we have to do, how we train, how to be coached, what we do off season, the training pre-season. They don't understand the whole way it works, and they don't want to. It is not worth getting into a conversation to tell them that I umpire.

Similarly, another umpire explained, "I suppose deep down inside anyone you talk to, and people that don't know you and having to find out you're an umpire usually just say 'Oh' in a negative kind of way."

For some umpires, this wasn't limited to peripheral social networks. For example, one umpire noted "Even my family who are involved in umpiring, they don't really understand what we do". This pattern of social isolation served to encourage umpire's needs to socialise with other umpires who understood the role and its meaning and importance. Despite perceiving that their umpire identity was not one that could be shared with everyone, umpires did report support from those who were more central in their social networks.

Umpires: Camaraderie and Social Benefits

Umpires described other umpires as an important part of their social network. In addition to the individual benefits of umpiring as described earlier, respondents identified the strong social opportunities that umpiring offers. Sixty percent of umpires described the activity as a team activity. Umpires recognised that in order to umpire well, each umpire on the field must work together to produce a well-officiated game. One umpire described his experiences on game day—he notes, "I suppose it [umpiring] is not any different to any other team sport." Another umpire further elaborated regarding his understanding of umpiring as a team activity:

> We leave the [locker] rooms as a team. We've got a job to do as a team. We talk about communication in the rooms beforehand and whether it's your best field umpiring mate or whether it's a guy in the goals that you've never met before, the interaction is important before the game so that the team operates smoothly throughout the game.

Another umpire also articulated the importance of umpiring as a team sport, saying, "There is a bit of banter before we umpire and afterwards. When we are out there we act as a team. It is crucial to umpiring a game well."

It is clear that umpires understand umpiring as a team activity. They identify notions of teamwork, communication, and individual responsibilities. It is apparent that umpires understand this activity not only as a team activity, but more specifically as a sport team—particularly

given the skill set, effort required, and integrated set of tasks that produce the outcomes of umpiring.

It is the social connectedness of being part of this team that is important for umpires. One umpire explained, "I like the mateship." Another umpire explained, "Umpiring keeps me busy at nights... I lost my wife not long ago, and umpiring is important to keep me connected to people." Another umpire summed up the most enjoyable parts of umpiring. He noted:

> One of the bigger things I like the most about umpiring is just the people that you meet. The number one thing I love is the camaraderie... I wouldn't give up these blokes for anything.

It is clear that the social elements of umpiring—including interacting with other umpires (the in-group) and experiencing a sense of camaraderie and collegiality—are important for the ongoing involvement of umpires in the activity.

Seventeen of the 22 umpires interviewed talked about significant others as being instrumental in the support of their umpiring careers; sometimes this might have been a single support person such as a parent, wife, or partner, while for others it was a small circle of close friends, work colleagues, or family. Respondents perceived that these were the only people who understood the importance of umpiring to their life and identity. It was only these people with whom umpires were comfortable revealing their umpire identity. One umpire explained, "Most of the people I work with know I'm an umpire and involved in football. They normally take it pretty well and they all realise someone's got to do it." Note from this umpire, he felt it necessary to qualify the notion that he was an umpire with the involvement in the sport of football and that he is performing a necessary duty in the sport. Similarly, another umpire noted that his friends support him when he is umpiring, however, are also quick to criticise:

> I umpire at a couple of grounds where I have mates [that live close by]. They are always there behind the goals and they're always yelling out, 'How you going, Jules?' They give me a bit of lip on a lot of decisions, but you know, that's pretty good, a bit of support. You know [it's] a bit of fun there.

Despite the criticism, this umpire interprets his friends' behaviour largely as supportive. Another umpire was articulate in noting the support of his wife and family, and its importance to his continued umpiring:

> My wife is really understanding. It is difficult with the amount of time we put in to training and match days. But she knows how important it is to me and she comes to the games to watch with the kids. If I didn't have her support, I would have quit years ago.

It is clear from the results of this study that umpires report a felt sense of isolation—from all others except their fellow umpires (with whom they enjoy social interactions) and significant others in their close social networks.

Discussion

This research examined the ways in which long-term umpires defined and described their experience of umpiring, and the meanings that they derive from it. There are four key findings from this research all consistent with viewing umpiring as a form of serious leisure. First, individuals actively choose to umpire rather than to engage in other leisure activities. Umpiring can

become an activity that is pursued for its own importance, or is part of an overall active leisure portfolio. The results of this study show that umpiring can be a salient identity for those who partake. Second, individuals derive meaning from engaging in umpiring, and in particular, umpires understand their role as a career that requires acquisition of knowledge, skills, and perseverance. They strive for mastery and perceive that umpiring provides skills that are transferable to other contexts. Third, umpires experience isolation. Umpires perceive that their skills, and the role is misunderstood by those outside of umpiring. Fourth, socialisation within the umpire group is important for individuals to feel part of a social world. Socialising with the umpire group assists in reinforcing the identity derived from the role. As those outside umpiring don't understand the role, and the meanings that individuals derive from it, umpires tend only to talk about their identification with umpiring among themselves and with a small number of trusted significant others in their lives. There are important lessons for administrators and managers with regard to understanding umpiring as a form of serious leisure when creating strategies for umpire recruitment, and retention. There are also important implications for future research in the field of sport management. These are discussed further below.

Umpiring as a Form of Serious Leisure

Although much of the previous literature on umpires and umpiring has highlighted the negative outcomes of umpiring (Anshel & Weinberg, 1995; Rainey, 1995; Rainey & Hardy, 1997), the findings of this study highlight that umpires perceive that their role provides them with positive outcomes. It was evident that umpiring was considered a very positive, active, and healthy component of their lifestyles. Umpires perceived the activity to be a leisure pursuit in its own right in which their identity is vested in one of two ways—umpiring is one activity that augments other active leisure activities within a larger portfolio; or, umpiring is the central activity for individuals from which they derive social identification.

It was clear from the participants' responses that umpiring was incorporated into their lives as a means as a key activity through which they persevered, and obtained beneficial outcomes including mastery of skills, enhancing self-image, socialising, as well as general health and fitness. In essence, the umpires viewed the activity as a serious leisure career, from which they derived both personal and social benefit. Further, umpiring was perceived to provide skills that were transferrable to other contexts in life—such as communication and negotiation. These reported experiences render umpiring as consistent with Stebbins' (1982) serious leisure—an activity that provides self-enrichment and enhances self-image.

There is a large body of literature that has informed sport managers and scholars alike about the way in which individuals develop identity and meaning through their choice of sport or leisure activity (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Green, 1997; Green & Chalip, 1997; Wankel & Kreisel, 1985; Wheaton, 2004). This information has been utilised by sport, leisure, and recreation providers in the development of recruitment and retention strategies (Backman & Wright, 1990). Umpiring has been viewed by sport managers and administrators as a service to sport. However, this research has illustrated that it may be more useful to view umpiring as a leisure choice in its own right—and more specifically as a form of serious leisure. Umpires are attracted to the activity for many of the same reasons that research has found individuals to be attracted to other sport, recreation and leisure pursuits.

A social world is constructed around the activity of umpiring that provides individuals with social benefits that encourage ongoing participation in the activity. For example, the activity of umpiring can serve as a training environment to keep individuals fit for other sport and leisure

activities. Umpiring provides a social, yet structured training environment that these individuals would not get if they were training alone during the off-season for their chosen sport or leisure pursuits. Umpiring compels these individuals to continue training at high standards of fitness in readiness to umpire, and provides a social network that encourages ongoing participation in the activity. In this way, umpiring provides a mechanism to be in a social group, accountable for training, professional in their preparation, and keeps their levels of fitness to a high standard during the off-season of their sport. It might be argued that in this way, umpiring functions the same way for the respondents in which a team sport does for athletes.

Umpiring is central to the active leisure identity of participants, and it has significant meaning in their lives despite any negative association with the role (Kurkjian, 1995; Levitt & Tockman, 1991; Rainey, 1994; Rainey & Cherilla, 1993; Rainey & Hardy, 1997). Extending the work of Kellett and Shilbury (2007) and Kellett and Warner (2011), the results here suggest that umpires can, and do, derive positive meaning and significance from their role in similar ways to which athletes identify with their chosen leisure activity. Just as athletes find meaning in mastering skill, technique, self development, and work towards executing the "perfect game," umpires strive for similar meanings and outcomes in the context of umpiring.

Given that this research has revealed that umpires understand themselves as athletes, albeit that they are required to move in different ways to athletes in the sports in which they officiate (Bruckner & Frends, 1991), it seems clear that the sport is not the only context from which umpires can be recruited. The current research identified that some umpires had developed their interest in umpiring through first playing the sport of football then recognising a niche in umpiring that would fulfil their leisure needs. Some sports have deliberately tried to recruit umpires from their athlete pool (Stevenson, 2001) with little success. Indeed, as this research suggests, the sports themselves might be a very small pool from which to draw potential umpires. Rather, other complementary activities including other sports with complementary skills (such as athletics in this case) may offer more effective and efficient pools from which to recruit umpires.

If physical fitness and athletic ability are key in the social world of umpires, strategies for recruitment and retention of umpiring may be better served focusing on these benefits, rather than the actual role itself. Umpiring must be marketed to individuals as an activity that can enhance or complement existing leisure choices. More importantly, umpire associations would be well served by forming partnerships with other sport organisations which are implicated in the complementarities of leisure choices. An obvious partner would be the sport of athletics. It would seem pertinent to draw alliances with them, rather than to compete for participants.

As a result of the growing knowledge base of the physiology of umpiring, specific umpire training schedules and accreditation schemes, based purely on technical skill and knowledge have been developed for a number of different sports programs (e.g., Casey, 1996; Castagna, Abt, & D'Ottavio, 2007; Australian Football Foundation, & Australian Sports Commission, 1995; Pitt, 1989; White, 1994). It might be necessary to review these training schemes and schedules and cross-match these with other appropriate sports—to encourage cross-training, and also view umpiring as a training mechanism during non-peak seasons of related sport and leisure activities.

Umpires—The Social World

Not only did umpires in this study understand themselves as athletes, they also understood umpiring to be a part of a connected social world. Consistent with previous research (Kellett & Shilbury, 2007), this study found that umpires find solace within their social group. Umpires felt a sense of being misunderstood by others. Specifically, the umpire role, and the decisions

that umpires make are perceived to be misunderstood by players, coaches, and spectators (from within the sport) and the general public (who may not have had any knowledge of the sport per se). Such misunderstandings are at the core of the ubiquitous nature of abuse experienced by umpires (Kurkjian, 1995; Levitt & Tockman, 1991; Rainey, 1994; Rainey & Cherilla, 1993; Rainey & Hardy, 1997). However, the social support and connectedness that they feel within their own social world are sufficient for the umpires to continue participation in the activity. The social camaraderie and sense of community developed among umpires is an important source of learning and support.

It is often proposed that sport can teach individuals important life skills and lessons that are transferable to other contexts (e.g., Cross & Jones, 2007). Umpires are constantly faced with a hostile and negative environment on the field which can teach them how to communicate during situations that are often emotionally charged. The results of this study illustrate that a large part of learning about managing others and communication was provided through social interaction and debriefing with other umpires. Umpires reported that the lessons learned from their involvement assisted them in their role as umpires, as well as with work and general life outside of umpiring.

There are some important opportunities for sport managers if they are to consider umpiring as a form of serious leisure, and thus view the activity of umpiring as part of its own social world. Sport managers need to ensure that opportunities, both formal and informal, are provided for umpires to socialise in order to receive learning and ongoing support within the role, and to assist in the process of developing umpire identities. Previous research suggests that umpires leave the role within the first two years (Stevenson, 2001). It is possible that those umpires who leave have not sufficiently connected to the social world and thus have not been provided with appropriate support and learning.

It must be noted that the respondents in the current study had a minimum of three years umpiring experience. Despite reporting that they do not reveal their umpire identity to most non-umpires that they interact with on a daily basis, the umpires continue in their role. The importance of support of significant others in pursuing their umpiring activities is key. Although this equates to a only a small number of people within their social networks who share the meaning and understanding of umpiring, this support is crucial for ongoing participation.

Sport organisations should ensure and encourage a social structure that is inclusive of families—as social members if not participatory members. It might be important for umpire associations to consider including a greater number of opportunities to include significant others in social gatherings.

Umpires should no longer be viewed as mere service providers to sport (c.f., Hoberman, 1992) in so far as the way in which they physically contribute and service the sports in which they participate. The results of this research clearly indicate that those who umpire identify with the activity as a leisure choice in its own right. Sport managers must engage with umpires and their organisations in order to more appropriately develop the managerial and organisational strategies that would assist in influencing new and continued participation (e.g., Biddle & Brooke, 1992; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; Green, 1997; Green & Chalip, 1997; Wankel & Kreisel, 1985) such that umpiring becomes a legitimate activity that provides benefits for consumers.

Future Research

Clearly, this research suggests that umpiring can be usefully conceptualised as a form of serious leisure. By understanding umpiring in this light, one notes that there are research ques-

tions and agendas that still require exploring. If we view umpiring as a leisure choice, we must start to examine the reasons why people are choosing to spend their discretionary time and income focused on the activity of umpiring. Further, we must identify antecedent and intervening constraints to initial and continued participation in the activity (Goodale & Witt, 1989). In particular, we must identify motives for participation, and barriers that prevent individuals from adopting the activity of umpiring. As it appears that umpiring carries a negative social stigma, it may be useful to examine the constraints of stereotypically negative leisure activities. For example, Auster (2001) examined the constraints for women participating in the typically masculine activity of operating motorcycles. She found that the positive elements of participation overshadowed the negative stereotypes associated with the activity, much in the same way that umpires in this study used the activity to justify participation in a "sport," health and fitness, and social benefits. Future research should examine umpires in other sports and contexts, as not all umpires require the physical exertion that is necessary in the sport of Australian Rules Football. Thus, it may be less likely that umpire roles that are not as physically demanding would seek health and fitness benefits from the activity. Further, not all umpiring is done in a social context – in some sports, there is only one umpire or regulating official on the field of play throughout the sport competition. Future research should examine the difference between motives and constraints of regulating officials that officiate alone and those who do so in a team or group context.

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