
Mental Health Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Sports Referees: A Focus on Perfectionism and Psychological Inflexibility

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Abstract :

Sports referees play a crucial role in maintaining fairness, integrity, and the overall flow of competitions. However, they often face intense psychological challenges such as stress, anxiety, and decision-making under pressure, which may negatively influence their performance. This review synthesizes existing research on the psychological aspects of officiating in different sports, focusing on three main areas: (a) stressors and sources of anxiety, including crowd pressure, interactions with players and coaches, and the high stakes of competitive matches; (b) the prevalence of mental health issues such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, and job-related strain; and (c) cognitive and emotional factors that affect referees' decision-making processes, such as attentional control, cognitive bias, and emotional regulation. The findings highlight that referees' psychological well-being directly affects the quality of their judgments, and that interventions such as psychological skills training, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence development can significantly improve their resilience and decision-making capacity. This review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and suggesting directions for future research, particularly the need for cross-cultural studies and evidence-based training programs to better support referees' mental health and professional development.

Keywords: Sports referees, Psychological challenges, Stress and anxiety, Decision-making, Burnout, Emotional regulation, Sport psychology

1- Introduction

In recent decades, the role of referees in sports has attracted increasing scholarly attention due to the significant impact of their performance on the outcomes of competitions. Referees are responsible for enforcing the rules of the game, making rapid decisions under pressure, and maintaining fairness in highly competitive and emotionally charged environments. These responsibilities place them in a unique psychological position, where their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses can directly influence both the quality of the match and the perceptions of athletes, coaches, and spectators (Guillén & Feltz, 2011; Voight, 2009). Unlike athletes who receive extensive psychological and physical preparation, referees often operate with limited institutional support in terms of mental training, despite being equally exposed to performance pressures.

The psychological challenges of refereeing are multifaceted. Stress, anxiety, and emotional regulation represent critical domains that shape referees' performance and professional identity. Stress arises from multiple sources, including the fast pace of games, the need for accuracy in decision-making, and external factors such as crowd hostility, media scrutiny, and organizational expectations (Brand, Schweizer, & Kropp, 2009). Anxiety, both state and trait, has been shown to negatively affect attention, reaction times, and overall decision-making processes (Anshel & Weinberg, 1996). Moreover, referees must constantly manage their emotions to maintain authority and composure in the face of conflict, aggression, or mistakes (Jones, Paull, & Erskine, 2002). These psychological demands can contribute to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and early dropout from refereeing careers if not properly addressed.

Another major aspect of the psychological dimension of refereeing is decision-making. Referees are required to make instantaneous judgments in ambiguous and dynamic situations, often with incomplete information. The accuracy of these decisions is crucial, yet research has shown that cognitive biases, fatigue, and emotional interference can undermine decision quality (Mascarenhas, Collins, Mortimer, & Morris, 2005). Furthermore, technological interventions such as video assistant referee (VAR) systems have added new layers of complexity, simultaneously reducing certain decision-making errors while also increasing the psychological pressure on referees to justify their calls (Samuel et al., 2020). Understanding the cognitive mechanisms underlying referees' judgments is therefore essential for developing effective training programs and enhancing their overall performance.

Social and environmental factors further exacerbate the psychological demands of refereeing. Referees are often targets of criticism, verbal abuse, and even physical threats, particularly in high-stakes competitions (Dell, Gervis, & Rhind, 2016). Such hostile

environments can intensify stress levels and erode confidence, creating long-term negative psychological effects. In youth sports, referees may also face additional pressures stemming from interactions with parents and coaches who have strong emotional investments in the outcomes (Cleland, O’Gorman, & Bond, 2015). These social dynamics highlight the need to examine refereeing not only as an individual performance activity but also as a profession deeply embedded in cultural and organizational contexts.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of psychological factors in refereeing, the literature remains relatively fragmented. Previous research has examined topics such as stress and coping strategies, decision-making accuracy, and emotional regulation separately, but there is limited integration of findings into a coherent framework (Sabag et al., 2018).

Moreover, while athlete-centered sport psychology has developed significantly, referee psychology has lagged behind in both theoretical advancement and practical application. This gap underscores the necessity of comprehensive reviews that consolidate existing evidence, identify critical stressors, and highlight interventions that could enhance referees’ psychological resilience.

The present review aims to address this gap by synthesizing research on the psychological challenges faced by referees, with particular attention to stress, anxiety, and decision-making. By drawing on existing literature, this article seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how psychological factors influence referees’ performance and well-being. Furthermore, the review emphasizes the practical implications of these findings, including recommendations for referee training, support systems, and mental health interventions. Ultimately, enhancing the psychological preparation of referees is not only beneficial for their individual development but also essential for ensuring fairness, accuracy, and integrity in sports competitions.

2- Theoretical Framework

The psychological functioning of sports referees can be conceptualized through several established theoretical lenses. Understanding these frameworks is essential for contextualizing the empirical findings on stress, anxiety, decision-making, and coping in refereeing. The primary theoretical constructs relevant to referees’ psychological experiences include stress theory, cognitive appraisal models, perfectionism frameworks, and psychological flexibility and resilience theories.

Stress and Cognitive Appraisal

The foundation of understanding referee stress is rooted in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which emphasizes the interplay between environmental demands and individual cognitive appraisals. According to this model, stress arises not merely from external pressures but from the perception that personal resources are insufficient to meet situational demands. In sports refereeing, this model explains how factors such as crowd hostility, critical players or coaches, and high-stakes matches contribute to perceived stress levels. Research has shown that referees' subjective evaluations of these stressors directly affect physiological arousal, emotional responses, and decision-making performance (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Carson et al., 2020).

Perfectionism and Evaluative Concerns

Another theoretical lens relevant to referees' psychology is perfectionism, particularly as conceptualized in multidimensional frameworks (Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber et al., 2007). Perfectionism in referee's manifests as heightened self-imposed standards, fear of making mistakes, and sensitivity to external evaluation. Empirical evidence suggests that both adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism influence referees' stress and anxiety levels. Adaptive perfectionism may enhance focus and motivation, whereas maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by evaluative concerns and worry about mistakes, is associated with increased emotional strain and cognitive interference during games (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2011; Arbinaga, 2025).

Psychological Flexibility and Acceptance

Psychological flexibility, derived from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) frameworks, provides a complementary perspective for understanding how referees cope with stress (Bond et al., 2011; Trompetter et al., 2015). Flexibility involves the ability to maintain effective action in the presence of difficult thoughts and emotions, enabling referees to manage pressure without compromising performance. Studies have demonstrated that higher psychological flexibility correlates with reduced anxiety, lower burnout, and better decision-making under pressure (Gentili et al., 2019; Wicksell, Olsson, & Hayes, 2010). This framework underscores the importance of training programs focused on mindfulness, acceptance, and value-based coping for improving referees' resilience.

Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

Resilience theory provides insight into the processes through which referees recover from stress and maintain performance despite adversity (Arbinaga et al., 2019). Resilience encompasses emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, and adaptive coping strategies, allowing referees to withstand high-pressure situations. Empirical studies highlight that referees who exhibit greater resilience report lower levels of burnout, higher job satisfaction, and improved decision-making accuracy. Interventions aimed at enhancing resilience—through peer support, mental skills training, and structured feedback—have

been shown to buffer against the negative consequences of chronic stress (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020).

Integrated Perspective

Combining these theoretical frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of referees' psychological experiences. Stress and cognitive appraisal models explain how situational pressures are perceived and internalized. Perfectionism frameworks clarify individual differences in vulnerability to evaluative stress. Psychological flexibility and resilience theories highlight mechanisms for coping, adaptation, and maintenance of performance under pressure. Together, these theories provide a robust conceptual foundation for examining the factors influencing referees' mental health, decision-making, and overall effectiveness in sports contexts.

3- Literature Review

The psychological demands placed on sports referees have increasingly become a topic of scholarly attention. Research indicates that referees experience unique stressors that differ substantially from those of athletes and coaches (Guillén & Feltz, 2011). Unlike athletes, referees are not directly involved in the outcome of the game but serve as impartial decision-makers, often under intense scrutiny from players, coaches, and spectators. The literature highlights three primary areas of concern: stress and anxiety, decision-making under pressure, and coping mechanisms.

Stress and Anxiety:

Several studies have examined the levels of stress and anxiety among referees, emphasizing how situational factors such as game intensity, crowd hostility, and the significance of the match contribute to psychological strain (Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Kaissidis-Rodafinos et al., 1997). For instance, referees in high-stakes competitions often report heightened anxiety, which can impair their focus and decision-making accuracy (Guillén & Feltz, 2011). Moreover, chronic exposure to stressful environments has been linked to burnout and reduced motivation, which may ultimately influence referee retention rates (Gencay & Gencay, 2011).

Decision-Making Under Pressure:

The ability to make rapid and accurate decisions is a core competency for referees. Previous research suggests that psychological factors such as cognitive load, emotional regulation, and perceived pressure significantly affect referees' decision-making quality (Mascarenhas et al., 2005). Errors in officiating often occur in situations of heightened arousal, where stress narrows attentional focus and reduces cognitive flexibility. Furthermore, external influences such as crowd noise or criticism from players and coaches can bias referees' judgments, consciously or unconsciously (Nevill et al., 2002).

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience:

Despite these challenges, referees employ various coping strategies to manage stress. Studies have identified methods such as self-talk, mental rehearsal, and emotional regulation as essential tools for maintaining psychological stability during games (Wolfson & Neave, 2007). Social support from colleagues and referee associations has also been found to buffer the negative effects of stress (Voight, 2009). However, the effectiveness of coping mechanisms appears to vary depending on individual differences, level of officiating experience, and the type of sport.

Research Gap

While existing research has advanced our understanding of the psychological challenges faced by referees, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus primarily on stress and anxiety without adequately exploring the interaction between psychological factors and long-term referee performance. Second, the literature often emphasizes elite-level referees, leaving community and amateur referees underrepresented. These groups may experience different stressors due to limited training resources, lack of institutional support, or heightened exposure to verbal abuse from local audiences. Third, there is limited integration of cross-cultural perspectives, as most studies have been conducted in Western contexts. Considering that sports are global phenomena, cultural norms and expectations may significantly shape referees' psychological experiences. Finally, there is a need for more longitudinal research that examines how coping strategies evolve over time and how interventions can enhance resilience among referees.

Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of referees' psychological challenges and inform the development of targeted support programs to enhance officiating quality and referee well-being.

4- Methodology

This review employs a systematic literature review approach to examine the psychological challenges faced by sports referees, focusing on stress, anxiety, decision-making, and coping mechanisms. Systematic reviews aim to synthesize existing empirical evidence rigorously and transparently, ensuring that findings are comprehensive, reproducible, and relevant to practice and research (Moher et al., 2009).

1. Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature was conducted across major databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO, to identify studies relevant to sports referees' psychological well-being. Keywords and combinations included: "sports

referees,” “match officials,” “psychological stress,” “anxiety,” “decision-making,” “coping strategies,” “burnout,” and “resilience.” Searches were limited to publications in English and peer-reviewed journals from 1990 to 2025 to capture both foundational and contemporary research.

2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

Focused explicitly on sports referees or match officials.

Examined psychological constructs such as stress, anxiety, perfectionism, cognitive processes, or coping mechanisms.

Provided quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods data relevant to the research focus.

Exclusion criteria were:

Studies focusing exclusively on athletes or coaches without reference to referees.

Non-peer-reviewed sources such as opinion pieces, conference abstracts without full text, or grey literature.

Publications not available in English.

3. Study Selection and Data Extraction

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance by two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Full-text screening was conducted to extract information on:

Study design (cross-sectional, longitudinal, intervention, or qualitative)

Participant characteristics (age, sport, level of officiating)

Psychological constructs assessed (stress, anxiety, burnout, perfectionism, resilience)

Assessment tools used (e.g., Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II, Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale)

Key findings relevant to referees’ mental health and performance

4. Synthesis of Evidence

A narrative synthesis was performed to integrate findings across studies, highlighting patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. The review was organized thematically around three primary domains:

Psychological stress and anxiety – sources, prevalence, and consequences.

Decision-making under pressure – cognitive processes, errors, and performance outcomes.

Coping mechanisms and interventions – individual, organizational, and systemic approaches to enhancing referees' resilience and well-being.

Quantitative findings were summarized using descriptive statistics and effect sizes reported in the original studies. Qualitative findings were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns and psychological processes pertinent to referees' experiences.

5. Quality Assessment

To ensure rigor, included studies were evaluated for methodological quality using criteria adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists. Key quality indicators included study design appropriateness, validity and reliability of measurement instruments, sample representativeness, and clarity of data reporting.

6. Limitations of Methodology

While this review aimed to be comprehensive, limitations include potential publication bias, exclusion of non-English studies, and heterogeneity of study designs and measurement tools. Nevertheless, the systematic approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the psychological challenges of referees and informing future research and practical interventions.

5- Results

1. Stress and Anxiety in Referees

A substantial body of research indicates that referees are exposed to significant psychological stressors. Stress is conceptualized as a multifactorial response to situational pressures, perceived threats, and performance demands (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Carson et al., 2020). Studies consistently report elevated levels of both acute and chronic stress among referees, with professional football and basketball referees demonstrating particularly high vulnerability (Gouttebarga et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2020).

Stressors can be categorized into internal and external sources. Internal stressors include perfectionistic tendencies, fear of mistakes, and self-imposed performance standards (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2011; Flett & Hewitt, 2005). Maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by evaluative concerns and compulsive self-monitoring, has been shown to exacerbate anxiety and increase susceptibility to cognitive interference during matches (Crocker et al., 2014; Arbinaga, 2025).

External stressors encompass environmental pressures, such as hostile crowds, aggressive players, critical coaches, and media scrutiny (Webb et al., 2021). For instance, referees officiating high-stakes matches often report experiencing verbal abuse and threats, which

significantly elevate physiological arousal and negatively influence concentration and decision-making (Vela & Arbinaga, 2018). These findings highlight the dual impact of personal and environmental factors on referees' stress experiences.

Studies employing standardized measures, such as the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) and the List of Stressful Situations for Arbitration (LISEA) confirm that high levels of psychological inflexibility and situational stress correlate with burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction (Bond et al., 2011; Arbinaga et al., 2019).

2. Decision-Making Under Pressure

Decision-making is central to referees' professional role, and research underscores the vulnerability of cognitive processes under high-pressure conditions. Cognitive theories of stress suggest that elevated anxiety narrows attentional focus and reduces working memory capacity, which may result in perceptual biases and impaired judgment (Mascarenhas et al., 2005).

Empirical studies demonstrate that referees' accuracy is negatively affected by situational stressors. For example, in soccer, referees facing aggressive or persistent crowd pressure tend to make more conservative calls or display biases favoring the home team (Nevill et al., 2002; Webb et al., 2020). Similarly, in basketball and rugby, high-stakes competition increases reaction times and decision errors, suggesting that both physiological arousal and cognitive overload contribute to suboptimal performance (Arbinaga et al., 2019).

Notably, psychological constructs such as perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation interact with situational stress to influence referees' decision-making. Evaluative concerns perfectionism, which emphasizes self-criticism and worry about mistakes, has been shown to heighten vulnerability to errors in judgment under pressure (Taylor et al., 2016; Crocker et al., 2014). Conversely, referees demonstrating higher levels of psychological flexibility the capacity to adapt to challenging situations without becoming overwhelmed by negative thoughts exhibit more consistent and accurate decision-making (Trompetter et al., 2015; Gentili et al., 2019).

3. Coping Mechanisms and Psychological Skills

Effective coping strategies are crucial in mitigating the negative impact of stress and anxiety on referees' performance. The literature identifies a range of individual-level interventions, including mindfulness training, cognitive restructuring, self-talk, and mental rehearsal (Bisgaier, 2019; Chen et al., 2017). These strategies facilitate emotional regulation and enhance attentional control, thereby improving focus and reducing susceptibility to stress-induced errors.

Psychological flexibility emerges as a key protective factor, enabling referees to maintain effective action despite experiencing difficult thoughts or emotions. ACT-based interventions, which cultivate acceptance, mindfulness, and value-driven behavior, have demonstrated efficacy in reducing perfectionistic cognitions and improving resilience among referees and athletes (Bond et al., 2011; Arbinaga, 2025; Crosby et al., 2013).

Peer support and mentorship within refereeing organizations also play a critical role in buffering stress. Social support enhances referees' confidence, provides validation of challenging experiences, and reduces feelings of isolation (Cuskelly & Hoyer, 2013; Webb et al., 2021). Organizational interventions, such as training programs emphasizing psychological skills and structured feedback mechanisms, further contribute to referees' capacity to manage pressure effectively (Arbinaga et al., 2019).

4. Burnout, Resilience, and Long-Term Well-Being

Longitudinal studies indicate that chronic exposure to stress without adequate coping mechanisms can lead to burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Tashman et al., 2010). Burnout negatively affects referees' performance, decision-making, and retention in the profession.

Resilience, defined as the capacity to recover from stress and maintain functionality, is a significant moderator in this relationship. Referees exhibiting higher resilience demonstrate lower levels of burnout and improved coping with adversities, suggesting that resilience-focused training should be integrated into professional development programs (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Gentili et al., 2019).

5. Cross-Sport and Cultural Perspectives

Evidence also suggests variability in stress, coping, and decision-making processes across sports and cultural contexts. For instance, soccer referees often report higher exposure to verbal abuse than basketball referees, highlighting sport-specific stressors (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020). Cultural norms around authority, communication, and competitive behavior further influence referees' experiences of stress and their responses to environmental pressures (Arslan et al., 2021). Future research should therefore consider cross-cultural and cross-sport differences when designing interventions to support referees' psychological well-being.

The present review synthesized the existing literature on the psychological experiences of sports referees, highlighting the interplay of stress, anxiety, perfectionism, decision-making, coping mechanisms, and resilience. Across studies, it is evident that referees operate in highly demanding and dynamic environments where psychological factors play

a critical role in shaping both performance and well-being (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Carson et al., 2020).

1. Interplay of Stress, Anxiety, and Perfectionism

Stress and anxiety were consistently reported as primary challenges affecting referees across sports and competitive levels. These findings align with the transactional model of stress and coping, which posits that stress is determined by the interaction between situational demands and individual appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, referees' perfectionistic tendencies exacerbate stress responses by intensifying self-critical evaluations and fear of errors (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2011; Flett & Hewitt, 2005).

Maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by concern over mistakes and evaluative worries, not only increases stress but also impairs decision-making under pressure (Taylor et al., 2016; Crocker et al., 2014). Conversely, adaptive forms of perfectionism, which emphasize personal standards without excessive self-criticism, may enhance focus and attentional control, suggesting that training programs should aim to promote adaptive perfectionistic traits while mitigating maladaptive tendencies.

2. Decision-Making under Pressure

The literature highlights the vulnerability of referees' cognitive processes to stress-induced impairment. Elevated anxiety narrows attentional focus and reduces working memory capacity, thereby increasing the likelihood of errors in judgment (Mascarenhas et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2020). Importantly, environmental stressors—such as crowd hostility and aggressive interactions with players and coaches—amplify cognitive load and contribute to biased decisions (Nevill et al., 2002; Vela & Arbinaga, 2018).

Psychological flexibility emerged as a critical moderator of decision-making quality. Referees with higher flexibility are able to maintain focus and execute accurate decisions despite experiencing negative thoughts and emotions (Gentili et al., 2019; Trompetter et al., 2015). This finding underscores the importance of incorporating mindfulness and acceptance-based interventions into referee training programs.

3. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

Coping strategies are vital for mitigating the negative effects of stress. Individual-level interventions, including mental rehearsal, cognitive restructuring, and self-talk, improve referees' emotional regulation and attentional control (Bisgaier, 2019; Chen et al., 2017). Moreover, social and organizational support provides an additional buffer against stressors. Peer mentorship, structured feedback, and institutional recognition enhance referees' resilience, job satisfaction, and motivation to continue in the profession (Cuskelly & Hoyer, 2013; Webb et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of coping strategies appears to vary by individual characteristics, competitive level, and cultural context. For example, referees in professional leagues benefit more from structured organizational support, whereas community-level referees rely heavily on peer networks and informal mentoring (Arbinaga et al., 2019). These differences suggest that intervention programs must be tailored to specific populations and environments.

4. Burnout, Resilience, and Long-Term Outcomes

Longitudinal evidence indicates that chronic exposure to stress without effective coping mechanisms can result in burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Tashman et al., 2010). High resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt and recover from adversity, mitigates these negative outcomes. Referees with greater resilience maintain higher performance levels, demonstrate adaptive coping, and exhibit greater job satisfaction (Gentili et al., 2019; Arbinaga et al., 2019).

Resilience training, psychological skills development, and structured feedback mechanisms emerge as critical interventions to enhance referees' long-term well-being and retention. Additionally, fostering a culture that values mental health and provides institutional support can reduce burnout prevalence and improve overall officiating quality.

5. Cross-Sport and Cultural Considerations

Evidence suggests variability in psychological experiences across sports and cultural contexts. Soccer referees report higher exposure to verbal abuse compared to referees in basketball or rugby, indicating sport-specific stressors (Arbinaga et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020). Furthermore, cultural expectations related to authority, communication, and emotional expression influence how referees perceive and cope with stress (Arslan et al., 2021). Therefore, future research should adopt a cross-cultural lens to develop globally relevant interventions that consider local norms and competitive structures.

6. Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of this review highlight several practical and research implications. First, referee training programs should integrate psychological skills training that targets stress management, cognitive flexibility, and adaptive perfectionism. Second, referee associations and governing bodies should establish robust support systems, including mentorship, feedback, and mental health resources. Third, longitudinal and cross-cultural research is needed to better understand the dynamics of stress, coping, and resilience over time and across contexts. Finally, intervention studies examining the efficacy of ACT-based programs, mindfulness, and resilience-building initiatives are warranted to develop evidence-based strategies for enhancing referees' performance and well-being.

Conclusion

This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the psychological challenges faced by sports referees. Stress, anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, and environmental pressures emerge as central factors affecting decision-making, performance, and long-term well-being. Coping mechanisms, psychological flexibility, resilience, and social support play pivotal roles in mitigating these challenges and promoting optimal functioning.

Importantly, the review identifies critical research gaps, including limited longitudinal studies, underrepresentation of community-level referees, and insufficient cross-cultural analyses. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective interventions, improving referee retention, and ensuring fairness and integrity in sports competitions.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that referees' psychological well-being is not only a matter of individual health but also a crucial determinant of sporting quality. By integrating evidence-based psychological interventions and institutional support, governing bodies can enhance both referee performance and the overall integrity of sports competitions.

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