

Official retention is crucial to the success and growth of grassroots sport across the country. Officials can be referees, umpires, judges or anyone else responsible for moderating the action of the game. These officials provide necessary guidance and support to ensure fair play and maximise the enjoyment for everyone involved. The demanding nature of the role and the mental strain it puts on officials can often negate the benefits the role holds for them.

Player participation rates are on the rise across many sports and understanding how to retain officials should be of an equally high priority.

So how do we minimise the mental strain and demands placed on our officials?

Officials of grassroots sports leave their positions for a variety of reasons researched by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). These reasons remain consistent around the world. These reasons include:

- Obligations to their full-time career or job take priority over officiating.
- Poor support mechanisms in place by clubs and sporting associations (i.e. lack of ongoing training, support, recognition).
- Too much time away from family, friends and social activities.
- Low pay or insufficient reimbursement for personal expenses.
- Fear of liability and other legal issues.
- Lack of opportunities to advance as an official.
- Mental and physical stress (i.e. injury or too high a workload) that may lead to burnout.
- Poor sportsmanship exhibited by players (i.e. verbal abuse, etc.).
- Pressure to perform at a high level of proficiency.

Improving our understanding of these issues will lead to improved strategies to accommodate and minimise them. A large contingency of officials are volunteers and from ABS research, volunteers in sport have been decreased at a rate of 21.4% between 1993 and 2004, and a further 6.6% between 2004 and 2010. Everyone involved in grassroots and community level supports needs to be increasingly vigilant with official retention strategies.

Obviously not all of the above listed reasons for leaving can easily be targeted for improvement and change, a prominent one in grassroots sport is the mental stress that officials are put under. During the game, tensions run hot and officials will often receive barrages of abuse or feedback from players and supporters. This ongoing psychological strain can lead to burnout and should be minimised where possible. Ensuring a playing environment that doesn't permit this sort of behaviour in your club, can make for a much more nurturing environment for officials to grow and learn.

A factor which further increases the stress or pressure in a role, is being under trained for it. An increased focus on education for all officials around the game will also improve their decision making and understanding of the rules. During training officials will learn a sound technical knowledge of the game, including rules and customs, and they will also develop psychological and personal skills required to officiate the game. Adequate training reduces the chance of mistakes by officials during the game, improves their decision making ability and reduces the negative pressure that can be received from supporters and players.

In future we'll be looking in more detail about how you can set up a framework in your club or league for officials, as well as the importance of communication and mentoring. We strongly value the role officials play in our grassroots sport across the country and believe that the turnover rates of officials can be decreased with the implementation of an encouraging and nurturing environment.