

THE MANIFESTATION OF WHISTLEBLOWING IN SPORTS ARBITRATION IN WESTERN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. Introduction: In many social areas, as well as in sports, corruption is one of the most complex challenges threatening integrity. Referees, as key players in sports games, often face moral dilemmas, external pressures, and situations involving ethical decisions. In this context, whistleblowing practices have become an important factor in identifying and combating illegitimate practices. **Objective:** The purpose of this study is to identify the level of awareness, perception, and behavior of referees towards the phenomenon of match fixing. **Material and Methods:** The study involved 100 football and handball referees, members of the County Referees' Associations in Timiș and Caraș-Severin counties. The data was collected using an adapted version of the FIFPro 'Don't fix it!' questionnaire (2014), adjusted to be applicable to referees and to correspond to the objectives of the study. **Results:** In the sports games covered by our study, the main reason for match fixing is financial gain. Over two-thirds of the questioned referees consider that easy money is a deciding factor in their choices. Another factor is internal pressure. This refers to pressure exerted by colleagues, officials, or people within the club. **Conclusions:** In sport, combating corruption involves adopting permanent prevention and control measures, regardless of the level at which it occurs. The education of referees plays a fundamental role in strengthening the integrity of matches, giving them the opportunity to better understand what match-fixing means and the consequences it entails.

Keywords: Whistleblowing; referees; football; handball; corruption.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, sport is an important phenomenon that promotes numerous values and offers people the opportunity to experience powerful and unique emotions. At the same time, it represents a global industry with complex

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economic, political, and private implications, which is why maintaining its integrity is a major and complex challenge (Van Der Hoeven et al., 2020). Current trends, such as the intensification of commercialization, the digitization of sports activities, and the corporatization of organizational structures, have led to an increase in corruption in sports (Giulianotti, 2005; Jackson, Grainger & Batty, 2004). The negative effects of corruption can be significant and can affect both sport itself and society as a whole (Kihl, Citation2018; Kihl et al., 2008; Kihl & Richardson, 2009).

In sport, according to Gorse and Chadwick (2011), corruption refers to any illegal, immoral, or unethical activity intended to deliberately influence the outcome of a sporting competition to obtain a material benefit for one or more of the parties involved. This phenomenon undermines the core values of fair play and reduces public trust in sports institutions, being facilitated by gaps in the legislative framework and insufficient enforcement of laws (Abazi, 2019; Olesen, 2019), match-fixing is a common form of corruption in sports, which affects the competitive balance and fundamental values of sport, while also generating significant economic and social consequences (Kassem, 2024; Loyens & Vandekerckhove, 2018). Identified since the 1980s in several sports (Spitz, 2016), and together with other forms of illegal activities, it poses a major threat to sports competitiveness, compromising its educational, cultural, and social values (Carpenter, 2019).

In this context, whistleblowing becomes an essential tool in combating corruption, as it is an effective means of identifying, investigating, and punishing dishonest acts. By exposing illegal acts, those involved take significant risks to protect the public interest, often in the absence of adequate legal and psychosocial protection mechanisms (Abazi, 2019; Loyens & Vandekerckhove, 2018). Whistleblowing is defined as “the disclosure by members of an organization (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employees to persons or organizations that may be in a position to take action” (Miceli & Near, 1992, p. 15). At the same time, it can be viewed from two contrasting perspectives: as the ultimate act of justice, which contributes to the removal of evil, or as a serious violation, a supreme betrayal (Dungan et al., 2015).

Under pressure from external or internal influences, referees can become key players in match-fixing, being directly involved in controversial decisions that can influence results (Olesen, 2019). In sports competitions, they are responsible for ensuring that teams and players fully and consistently comply with the rules specific to the sport, and when these are violated, they have a duty to intervene and take the necessary measures in accordance with the regulations (Reilly & Gregson, 2006; Rullang et al., 2017). Therefore, the main duties of referees are to make decisions regarding technical, offensive, or defensive fouls (Bar-Eli et al., 2011; Plessner et al., 2009), decisions that can significantly influence the outcome of the game and the final result (Larkin et al., 2014; MacMahon et al., 2015).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

One hundred referees participated in this study, 50% (N=50) of them were members of the Handball Association of Timiș County and 50% (N=50) were members of the County Football Association of Caraș-Severin County. All participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study and the procedure, and their participation was voluntary, following their informed consent. The approval of the Ethics Committee must be mentioned along with the statement that approved consent was obtained from all subjects.

Procedure

To conduct this research, a questionnaire consisting of 26 items was used, adapted from the instrument proposed by FIFPro 'Don't fix it! (Harvey & Levi, 2014), designed to be applied to soccer players. The version of the questionnaire used in this study was modified so that it could be applied to referees and, at the same time, allow for the investigation of referees' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward match-fixing and their willingness to engage in whistleblowing. Thus, the first six items sought to obtain demographic and professional information, while items 7-15 focused on aspects related to referees' direct experiences and perceptions of match-fixing. Items 16-17 considered their perceptions of the people who initiate or facilitate match-fixing and identified the reasons that may lead to involvement in such practices. Items 18-20 sought to establish the factors that prevent referees from becoming involved in match-fixing and the measures considered effective in preventing this phenomenon, while items 21-23 investigated respondents' willingness to report attempts at match-fixing and their preferences regarding reporting channels. The last items, 24-26, aimed to identify the level of knowledge of existing national rules on sports betting, as well as attitudes towards compliance with these rules.

RESULTS

Table 1. Profile Indicators of Handball and Football Referees

Indicator	Handball	Football
Average age (years)	27.7	28.0
Dominant age category	18-25 years (32%)	18-22 and >30 years (35%)
Proportion of young referees (<30 years)	58%	52%
Distribution of referees over 30 years	18%	35%
Gender distribution	Predominantly male (≈95%)	Predominantly male (≈98%)

The average age is 27.7 years in handball and 28 years in football. Both samples consist mainly of young individuals, confirming that most referees are at the beginning of their professional careers.

In handball, the dominant age category is 18–25 years (32%), while in football there is a more balanced distribution between referees aged 18–22 years and those over 30 years (35%). This suggests that although refereeing remains a young field in both sports, football tends to attract and retain older referees more easily, indicating greater professional stability.

Approximately 58% of handball referees and 52% of football referees are under the age of 30, highlighting that both groups are still in a phase of professional development. However, the proportion of referees over 30 years old is almost twice as high in football (35%) as in handball (18%), reflecting a higher level of maturity among football referees.

In both cases, the gender distribution is strongly unbalanced, with the field being dominated by men — approximately 95% in handball and 98% in football. Although minor, this difference still shows a slightly greater openness in handball toward the participation of women in refereeing, compared to football, where female representation remains almost nonexistent.

Overall, a common profile emerges for referees in both disciplines: young, predominantly male, and at the beginning of their careers, but with a more substantial presence of mature and experienced referees in football, contributing to the consolidation of higher competitive structures in this sport.

Table 2. Direct Experiences Reported by Handball and Football Referees

Category	Handball	Football	Average of Respondents
Participation in fixed matches (%)	4%	7%	5.5%
Direct approaches for match-fixing (%)	2%	12%	7.0%
Suspicious of match-fixing (%)	8%	15%	11.5%

The results indicate that direct experiences related to match-fixing are relatively rare in both sports; however, there are clear differences between handball and football.

In handball, only 4% of referees reported having participated in a game that was later confirmed to have been fixed, while in football this percentage rises to 7%. Although the absolute values are low, they suggest that football is slightly more exposed to such situations, probably due to the larger scale of competitions and the greater financial interests involved.

When it comes to direct approaches received by referees in the past 12 months, the differences become much more evident. In football, 12% of referees were contacted by individuals who asked them to influence the outcome of a match, whereas in handball this was reported by only 2% of respondents. This ten-percentage-point variation indicates that external pressures and attempts at influence are far more frequent in football, where economic stakes, media visibility, and competition-related interests are considerably higher.

Regarding suspicions of possible match-fixing, these remain higher in football: 15% of referees stated that they had reasons to believe that some matches had been manipulated, compared to 8% in handball. These data confirm that the general perception of corruption risk is more acute in football, reflecting both the greater pressure placed on referees and the more complex competitive environment of football tournaments.

Overall, although the total proportion of reported cases remains low, a clear pattern emerges: football referees are significantly more exposed to pressures, suspicions, and influence attempts, whereas in handball such situations appear sporadically and are perceived as exceptions rather than a recurring phenomenon.

Table 3. Main Instigators of Match-Fixing

Category	Handball	Football	Average of Respondents
Club officials (%)	72%	55%	63.5%
Referees or other officials (%)	22%	20%	21%
Athletes (%)	6%	0%	3%
Individuals outside the sport (%)	0%	25%	12.5%

The results show that, in the referees' perception, club officials are the main instigators of match-fixing. This opinion is shared by 72% of handball referees and 55% of football referees, indicating a common tendency to associate the phenomenon with the managerial level of clubs rather than with the direct actors on the field.

In football, a quarter of respondents (25%) attributed responsibility to individuals outside the sport, such as intermediaries, former referees, or representatives of financially interested groups. In contrast, in handball, none of the respondents mentioned this category, suggesting that referees perceive the phenomenon as more contained within the sports system and less influenced by external factors.

Another relevant observation concerns the perception of referees or other game officials. Similar proportions — 22% in handball and 20% in football — consider them potential participants in match-fixing, reflecting a certain level of internal distrust within the refereeing body.

In addition, only handball referees identified players (6%) as possible initiators, indicating that in handball, direct interactions between players and referees may sometimes generate suspicions of influence over match outcomes.

Overall, the data confirm that, regardless of the sport, club officials are perceived as the main actors responsible for initiating match-fixing, though football is viewed as more vulnerable to external influences, while handball appears as a more internalized system, where pressures mainly arise from within the sports environment itself.

Table 4. Main Reasons for Match-Fixing

Category	Handball	Football	Average of Respondents
Easy money (%)	68%	75%	71.5%
Internal pressures (%)	50%	60%	55%
Financial difficulties (%)	40%	52%	46%

The results indicate that, in the perception of referees from both sports, financial motivations represent the main cause of match-fixing. Thus, 75% of football referees and 68% of handball referees believe that easily earned money is the decisive factor leading to involvement in such practices.

Referees' opinions suggest that this phenomenon stems from the desire to obtain quick gains, neglecting fairness and the core values of sport.

The second most mentioned cause is internal pressure — cited by 60% of football referees and 50% of handball referees. This refers to the influence exerted by colleagues, club officials, or other figures within the sports environment, which can create situations of moral or professional constraint.

Financial difficulties are mentioned more frequently in football (52%) than in handball (40%), indicating that referees' economic instability may represent an additional factor of vulnerability, especially in sports where rewards are uneven across competitive levels.

Overall, the data suggest that although the perceived causes are similar in both sports, football is more affected by the economic dimension of the phenomenon, while handball is more influenced by social and moral pressures.

This differentiation highlights the need for sport-specific preventive policies — focusing on reducing economic motivations in football and strengthening ethical values and community cohesion in handball.

Table 5. Perceived Barriers Among Handball and Football Referees

Category	Handball	Football	Average of Respondents
I don't need money (%)	64%	58%	61%
Honesty and personal integrity (%)	66%	70%	68%
Disappointment of the team and fans (%)	48%	40%	44%
Risk to future career (%)	32%	62%	47%
Fear of arrest (%)	4%	40%	22%

Referees in both disciplines identify personal integrity and a low need for financial gain as the main factors that discourage them from engaging in match-fixing. Similar proportions — 70% in football and 66% in handball — confirm that moral values and professional conscience remain essential self-regulation criteria in referees' decision-making processes.

A significant number of respondents also stated that they “do not need money” (64% in handball, 58% in football), suggesting that financial motives are not the main temptation for most participants. This response indicates the presence of an intrinsic motivation for ethical behavior, supported by personal stability and professional satisfaction.

Regarding the fear of external consequences, there are notable differences between sports. In football, 40% of referees mention fear of arrest, compared to only 4% in handball, and 62% of football referees consider the danger to their future career, versus 32% in handball. These data show that football referees face greater legal pressures and reputational risks, linked to the sport's higher visibility.

In contrast, handball referees place greater emphasis on the social dimension of responsibility, more frequently mentioning the disappointment of their team and fans (48%), which suggests a stronger sense of community involvement and greater concern for personal reputation within their immediate sporting environment.

Table 6. Preventive Measures Indicated by Handball and Football Referees

Category	Handball	Football	Average of Respondents
Education (%)	62%	55%	58.5%
Higher salaries (%)	48%	60%	54%
Better conditions and support (%)	40%	40%	40%

Education and ethical training are considered the most effective tools for preventing match-fixing, being mentioned by 62% of handball referees and 55% of football referees.

Regarding financial compensation, the differences become evident: 60% of football referees believe that higher salaries could discourage involvement in match-fixing, compared to 48% in handball.

This difference suggests that football referees feel the economic pressure and the temptations associated with financial rewards more strongly, confirming a closer connection between material motivation and the risk of unethical behavior.

Both handball and football referees equally (40%) indicated the importance of working conditions and organizational support.

Table 7. Referees' Willingness to Report a Match-Fixing Attempt or Suspicions of Game Manipulation

Responses	Football (n)	Handball (n)
Yes	50% (25)	50% (25)
No	50% (25)	50% (25)

The data show a perfectly balanced distribution between referees who would be willing to report a match-fixing attempt and those who would not, both in football and in handball. This equal percentage (50% "Yes" – 50% "No") highlights a contradictory attitude toward whistleblowing behaviors in the sports environment.

On one hand, half of the respondents express openness to reporting irregularities, indicating an awareness of the importance of ethics and professional integrity. On the other hand, the equal proportion of those who would avoid reporting suggests the persistence of a climate of reluctance and distrust in the effectiveness or confidentiality of existing reporting mechanisms.

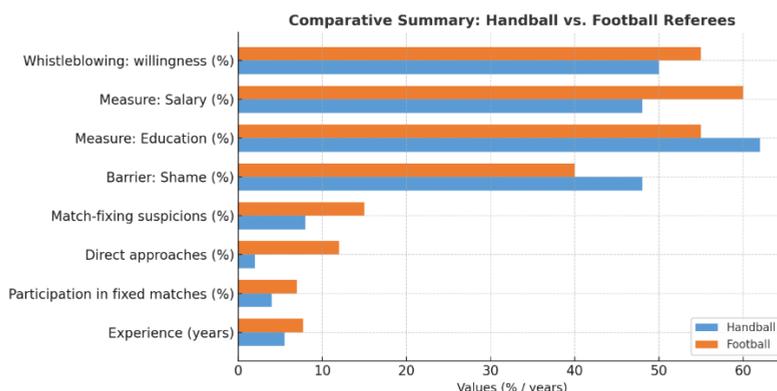


Fig. 1. Comparative Summary: Handball and Football Referees

The chart highlights the main differences between handball and football referees across the analyzed categories. In terms of professional experience, football referees show a higher average of 7.7 years, compared to 5.5 years in handball, confirming that football has a more stable and experienced group of referees. Regarding exposure to match-fixing, football referees report higher values at all levels: 7% have participated in fixed games (compared to 4% in handball), 12% have been directly approached to influence a match (compared to 2%), and 15% have had suspicions about possible manipulations (compared to 8%). These data indicate stronger external pressure on football referees, associated with higher financial stakes and the greater media visibility of this sport.

In terms of ethical barriers, both groups emphasize personal integrity; however, handball referees stand out through a stronger influence of social and community pressure — 48% mention shame in front of colleagues or supporters, compared to 40% in football. This difference suggests that in handball, maintaining ethical behavior is more strongly supported by group responsibility than by fear of sanctions.

When it comes to preventive measures, the priorities differ: handball referees consider education and ethical training (62%) as the main tools of prevention, while football referees focus on higher salaries (60%), correlating financial stability with resistance to temptations and external pressures.

Regarding whistleblowing (the willingness to report), the differences are minimal: 50% of football referees and 50% of handball referees would be willing to report match-fixing attempts. This similarity indicates a moderate openness toward reporting irregularities, but also a persistent reluctance, probably caused by fear of consequences or by a lack of trust in protection systems.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained provide a broad picture of how handball and football referees from western Romania perceive the phenomenon of match-fixing and how they relate to their own professional integrity, including through the lens of whistleblowing – the process of reporting match-fixing attempts and other irregularities that affect the fairness of competition. Although differences can be observed between the two sports regarding the level of trust in the competent institutions and the preferred reporting channels, the analysis also highlights common aspects that reveal the general way in which integrity is understood and applied in Romanian refereeing. The data show that referees

from both sports are evenly divided between those who would be willing to report a match-fixing attempt and those who would avoid doing so (50% “Yes” – 50% “No”).

The data show that referees from both sports are evenly divided between those who would be willing to report a match-fixing attempt and those who would avoid doing so (50% “Yes” – 50% “No”). This equality reflects a dual attitude: on one hand, an awareness of the importance of ethics and professional responsibility, and on the other, a lack of trust in official reporting mechanisms. The results confirm the conclusions of Constantin (2019) and Grigore et al. (2018), who indicate that although Romania has a law protecting whistleblowers, its application in the sports field remains limited. This sustains a “culture of silence” that discourages the reporting of irregularities.

The level of trust in the competent institutions differs between the two sports. Football referees place greater trust in international bodies (FIFA/UEFA) and the national federation, while handball referees rely more on the Romanian Handball Federation (FRH) and, to a lesser extent, on independent individuals outside the system. This difference suggests that football referees believe only large governing structures can handle cases of corruption, whereas handball referees tend to prefer local, trust-based solutions.

Regarding reporting methods, both groups favor direct and secure channels. In football, the majority (73%) consider the telephone hotline the most effective option, as it is associated with protection and confidentiality. In handball, the answers are more varied: 52% prefer the telephone line, but there is also a greater openness to online and mobile app reporting. This difference can be explained by the younger generation of handball referees and by modern digitalization trends, also noted by Barkoukis et al. (2019) in studies on whistleblowing education.

However, the lack of confidentiality and institutional support remain the main barriers, especially in football. These results confirm what Henik (2015) describes as a conflict between moral values and fear of consequences, which makes referees hesitate to act. Similarly, Goldsmith (2015) points out that the decision to report is influenced by a cost–benefit analysis, in which fear of repercussions outweighs the desire to defend ethical values. In comparison, handball referees seem more anchored in a form of community integrity, guided by interpersonal relationships and group norms, whereas football referees act more according to rules and institutional protection.

Overall, the results show that whistleblowing in Romanian sport is at an intermediate stage: referees recognize the importance of integrity, but the lack of real protection mechanisms and the fear of consequences limit action. To strengthen an authentic culture of ethics, clear educational and institutional

measures are needed — continuous training of referees in integrity, the development of secure reporting channels, and the support of those who choose to report irregularities. These directions, supported by Philippou & Hines (2021) and Nicholls et al. (2021), can contribute to creating a more transparent and accountable sports environment.

Study limitations

The results obtained in this study are limited in terms of generalizability, due to the relatively small sample size (N=100) and the geographically restricted origin of the respondents (Timiș and Caraș-Severin counties – Western Romania). Moreover, the use of the questionnaire as the main data collection instrument limited access to more detailed information that could have allowed a deeper analysis and a better understanding of the whistleblowing phenomenon in the studied context.

CONCLUSIONS

The results show that soccer and handball referees perceive match-fixing differently but share the same concerns about fairness and integrity. Soccer is more exposed to external pressures and financial interests, while handball has a more community-based character, where moral decisions are influenced by relationships between colleagues and responsibility towards the team.

Referees believe that the main reasons that can lead to match-fixing are the desire for financial gain and pressure from within the sporting environment. At the same time, most reject these practices out of moral conviction and respect for the profession. The differences between sports show that soccer referees are more afraid of legal sanctions or losing their careers, while handball referees are more concerned about their image in front of their colleagues and the public.

When it comes to whistleblowing, half of referees would be willing to report an attempt to fix a match, but the other half would avoid doing so. This reality shows a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms and in the protection offered to those who report irregularities. Referees prefer to communicate through secure channels, such as telephone lines or dedicated apps, but they fear a lack of confidentiality and a lack of support from sports institutions.

In order to support ethical behavior, concrete measures need to be implemented to develop educational programs dedicated to the moral training of referees and to raise awareness of the consequences of corruption. At the same time, it is essential to create secure reporting mechanisms that guarantee

anonymity and protection for those who report irregularities, as well as to provide constant institutional support through collaboration between federations and authorities to promote transparency and trust. At the same time, public and professional recognition of referees who maintain high ethical standards would help to strengthen a sporting climate based on respect and responsibility.

In conclusion, maintaining integrity in arbitration depends not only on sanctions, but on a balance between education, organizational support, and the moral courage of those involved.

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