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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRAINING PROGRAMS OF FOOTBALL REFEREES: IN THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN, TURKEY AND GERMANY

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Annotation. The training of professional football referees has evolved significantly in recent years, driven by advancements in technology and the increasing demands of modern football. Traditionally centered on knowledge of rules and on-field experience, referee education now integrates tools such as video analysis, simulation exercises, and psychological training to improve performance, accuracy, and consistency. These innovations have redefined how referees are prepared for high-pressure situations in diverse competitive environments.

Keywords: *Football Clubs, Football Referee, VAR, Training Programs, Elit referee.*

Introduction. Azerbaijan's football refereeing is in a stage of infrastructure development, with a primary focus on improving the quality of officiating in local leagues and raising training standards. The Azerbaijan Football Federation (AFFA) is the initiator of various programs aimed at modernizing referee training through the organization of seminars and training sessions, as well as collaboration with international organizations.

Germany is known for its highly structured and systematic approach to referee training, which emphasizes physical preparation, tactical understanding, and the application of the Laws of the Game through a comprehensive curriculum. The German Football Association (DFB) implements a robust system that includes continuous professional development, regular evaluations, and training for video assistant referees (VAR), ensuring that referees are well-prepared for the demands of modern football.

Turkey presents an evolving landscape for referee training, marked by significant investments and reforms aimed at improving officiating standards. The Turkish Football Federation (TFF) actively works to modernize its approach by focusing on psychological

resilience, decision-making skills, and the use of technology in training [2]. This commitment is reflected in various initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality and consistency of officiating across leagues.

The research design utilizes mixed methods, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. This methodology allows for a comprehensive evaluation of training program effectiveness by integrating numerical data — such as performance indicators, completion rates, and participant demographics — with qualitative insights obtained from interviews and surveys.

By analyzing quantitative data, the study aims to identify trends and patterns in training outcomes, while qualitative data provides deeper insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges within the respective training programs. This dual approach contributes to a nuanced understanding of how various referee training methodologies impact the development and performance of referees in Azerbaijan, Germany, and Turkey. The findings could contribute to the improvement of training practices and the elevation of officiating standards in football globally.

Literature Review. The key criteria for effective training of professional football referees have been examined in numerous research studies. Di Salvo, Pigozzi and D'Ottavio's study, Physical fitness of elite football referees, highlights the need for elevated levels of aerobic capacity, flexibility, and sprint performance to ensure that referees can sustain their performance throughout the game [3]. At the same time, Malhotra, and Williams in their study "Effects of referee training programs on decision-making accuracy" demonstrate that structured training programs, including video analysis and pitch drills, significantly improve referees' decision-making skills under pressure [4].

A study by Brown and Green entitled "The role of communication in effective refereeing: an analysis of referee-player interactions" shows that effective communication is essential to maintain control and authority during matches and the need for targeted communication training is always relevant [5].

Lee and Wilson's "Professionalism and Ethics in Football Refereeing: A Comparative Study" highlights the importance of adhering to professional and ethical standards and demonstrates how these factors affect the performance and credibility of referees [6]. Adherence to such standards ensures that referees maintain impartiality and integrity, which are vital to fair play and the overall credibility of the sport. Furthermore, research highlights that adherence to ethical practices not only strengthens referees' decision-making ability, but also builds trust between players, coaches, and spectators, fostering the respect and authority essential to effective refereeing.

These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of referee training, combining physical, technical, psychological, communicative, and professional elements (Table 1).

These skills have been developed through experience, enabling referees to anticipate the flow of the

game and position themselves effectively. Another important attribute for football referees is effective communication. Referees must communicate decisions clearly and assertively to players, coaches, and other officials. Referees use a standardized set of signals to communicate their decisions, as outlined in the FIFA Laws of the Game [7]. These signals are important to ensure that all participants understand the referee's decisions and maintain the flow of the game. Effective communication also involves managing confrontations and conflicts with players and coaches, requiring a balance of assertiveness and diplomacy.

One of the main factors for a referee to be able to perform his duties is physical fitness. Football referees must maintain an elevated level of training to match the pace of the game and cover the entire pitch. According to the study by Da Silva et al., referees must possess endurance, agility, and speed. They undergo rigorous fitness tests and training to ensure they can meet the physical demands of refereeing [3]. A study by Mallo et al highlighted that referees undergo significant physical exertion during games, which requires a well-established fitness regime to prevent fatigue and ensure optimal performance.

Data Collection. A structured survey was administered to collect quantitative data regarding various dimensions of referee training programs. This survey comprised five sections: demographics, training program structure, training effectiveness, challenges and improvements, and comparative insights.

In conjunction with the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including both current and former referees, as well as trainers. The interview questions were meticulously crafted to elicit in-depth qualitative data, focusing on several pertinent topics related to referee training and performance.

Table 1

The Main Criteria in the Training of Football Referees

| Criteria | Components |
|---------------------------|--|
| Physical Adjustment | Endurance, speed and agility, strength, agility |
| Technical Skills | Rule knowledge, decision making, positioning |
| Psychological Preparation | Stress Management, confidence, «Mental Toughness» |
| Communication Skills | Interaction with players, conflict resolution, team coordination |
| Professional Behavior | Integrity, work ethic, respect and authority |
| Tactical Awareness | Game management, adaptation |
| Analytical Skills | Performance review, relationship integration |

The author created the table.

The survey included a total of 35 participants from Azerbaijan, Germany, and Turkey, with 22 from Azerbaijan, 10 from Germany, and 3 from Turkey.

Interviews were conducted with elite football referees from Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Germany to explore their training experiences, challenges, and perspectives during training and games. A total of 12 elite football referees consisting of 5 Azerbaijani, 4 Turkish and 3 German referees were selected for the study based on their experience levels and participation in international games. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents based on the study’s objectives.

Analysis of Survey Results. The analysis is based on the survey responses of 35 participants - 22 Azerbaijani referees, 10 Turkish referees and 3 German referees. To analyze the survey responses of the 35 participants, we summarized demographic information, training program structure, training effectiveness, challenges and improvements, and comparative concepts based on the responses. Participants were categorized by their current referee level, with the distribution as follows: 7 were at the “Start” level (Azerbaijan: 5, Germany: 2), 10 at the “Average” level (Azerbaijan: 6, Germany: 3, Turkey: 1), 12 at the “Advanced” level (Azerbaijan: 7, Germany: 4, Turkey: 1), and 6 at the “Elite” level (Azerbaijan: 4, Germany: 1, Turkey: 1).

Regarding years of refereeing experience, the participants had the following distribution: 4 had less than 1 year of experience (Azerbaijan: 3, Germany: 1), 13 had 1-3 years (Azerbaijan: 8, Germany: 4, Turkey: 1), 9 had 4-7 years (Azerbaijan: 6, Germany: 2, Turkey: 1), and 9 had more than 7 years (Azerbaijan: 5, Germany: 3, Turkey: 1). This demographic breakdown provides valuable insights into the experience of referees participating in the study (Table 2).

The thematic analysis of the survey results of the training of Azerbaijani, Turkish and German football

referees reveals different training experiences and difficulties for these groups. Azerbaijani football referees show a strong base with 90 % participation in theoretical training and 82 % in practical training, but 45 % express concerns about insufficient real game management opportunities, which affects their confidence and skills. Turkish referees reflect this structured approach by involving 80 % in practical training, but they note that there is a significant gap in psychological training, with 50 % stating that this can hinder their performance under pressure.

Although German referees rate their training as the most effective, especially video analysis (67 %) and psychological training (33 %), 67 % report that access to training resources is limited, creating a barrier to their continued development. Common problems across all groups included lack of practical experience, with 45 % of Azerbaijani referees and 40 % of Turkish referees citing inadequate mentoring and support systems. In terms of training effectiveness, 40 % of both Azerbaijani and Turkish referees rate their training as «very effective», while 33 % of German referees think that it is «extremely effective». The calls for improvement highlight the need for increased practical training and psychological support, particularly among Azerbaijani and Turkish football referees, and they also emphasize the importance of strengthened mentoring programs (Table 3).

The thematic analysis reveals both strengths and weaknesses of training programs for Azerbaijani, Turkish and German football referees. While Azerbaijani and Turkish referees strive to improve practical training and mentoring, German referees benefit from a robust, structured system that emphasizes continuous development and technological integration.

Interview responses of elite football referees of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Germany. This analysis

Table 2

Training Structure

| Training Components | Azerbaijan, % | Turkey, % | Germany, % | Total, % |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|----------|
| Theoretical lessons | 90 | 90 | 100 | 91.43 |
| Practical exercise | 82 | 80 | 67 | 80.71 |
| Video analysis | 68 | 70 | 67 | 68.57 |
| Simulation exercises | 45 | 50 | 33 | 45.71 |
| Psychological training | 60 | 50 | 33 | 54.29 |
| Mentoring | 36 | 40 | 67 | 40.00 |
| Weekly trainings | 70 | 80 | 67 | 72.86 |

The author created the table.

Table 3

Outline of Thematic Analysis

| Introduction | <p style="text-align: center;">The purpose of the analysis Overview of participant demographics The importance of comparing the training of football referees in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Germany</p> |
|----------------------|--|
| Thematic Areas | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training and development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strengths and weaknesses of training methods – Comparison of training effectiveness among football referees 2. Challenges Encountered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Identifying common problems – Unique challenges across the country 3. Training Effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Perception of training quality and impact on performance 4. Proposed Improvements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – General suggestions for improvements in training and support |
| Comparative Analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Similarities and differences between the three groups – Insights into cultural and systemic influences on football refereeing |
| Results | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Summary of key findings – Implications for future training programs – Recommendations for solving identified problems |

The author created the table.

is based on the responses of 12 elite referees, 5 Azerbaijani, 4 Turkish and 3 German, and provides insights into the training programs and overall effectiveness of refereeing in each country.

All football referees confirmed the existence of a structured training program that included theoretical and practical elements. Azerbaijani and Turkish referees noted that they pay attention to physical and theoretical training, while German referees use advanced video analysis. Compared to their Azerbaijani counterparts, Turkish referees focused on theoretical and physical training and noted the integration of mental training. Azerbaijani referees emphasized the importance of discipline and responsibility, while German referees emphasized the importance of extensive mentoring and support systems.

Azerbaijani and Turkish football referees reported a mix of theoretical lessons, practical exercises and video analysis, while German referees highlighted the effective use of technology, including video tools and psychological assessments. Although referees in all three countries confirmed the role of technology in training, German referees particularly emphasized the impact of VAR and performance monitoring tools.

Azerbaijani and Turkish football referees expressed mixed opinions about the effectiveness of their training programs, stressing the importance of focusing more on digital resources. Although feedback mechanisms are mentioned by all, German referees consider

a systematic approach to integrating referee feedback into training improvement an important factor. The referees of Azerbaijan and Turkey gave little space to the discussion of this practice (Table 4-5).

A comparative thematic analysis of the interview responses of football referees from Azerbaijan, Turkey and Germany revealed significant similarities and differences in their training and development practices. All participants confirm the importance of both theoretical and practical training, all Azerbaijani and Turkish football referees participating in the interview (100 %) prefer practical exercises. However, only 67 % of Germans feel sufficiently prepared, compared to 100 % of Azerbaijani and Turkish football referees. Mental preparation emerges as an important component, especially for Turkish and German football referees, while only 40 % of Azerbaijani interviewees agree with this idea. The issue of technological integration in training varies significantly between countries. Although 100 % of Turkish and German referees stated that they are actively engaged with technology, only 40 % of Azerbaijani referees acknowledged the role of technology. This gap shows the need for Azerbaijani referees to use modern technological tools to improve training effectiveness and overall performance on the field [11-15].

Discussion. An important finding of this comparative analysis through interviews highlights significant differences in how each country prepares its referees

Table 4

Summary of Topics

| Theme | Results for Azerbaijan | Results for Turkey | Results for Germany |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Training components | Theoretical and physical training supervised by AFFA | Emphasis on mental preparation as well as physical and theoretical training | The importance of advanced video analysis and extensive resources |
| Preparation for competitions | Discipline and responsibility are noted. Mentoring is important | Preparation supported by structured training. Mentoring plays an important role | Extensive support systems and mentoring for novice referees |
| Training methods | Theoretical lessons, practical exercises, video analysis | Simulations and mental training | Focusing on technology, video tools and psychological assessments |
| Efficiency | Mixed opinions about the effectiveness of the program, requiring more resources | Effectiveness of training related to mental preparation and group training | High confidence in learning outcomes and use of systematic feedback |
| Difficulties | Injuries from artificial surfaces, limited practical training | The need for better psychological training and support systems | Resource constraints affecting continuous improvement |
| Career development | Effective training and international opportunities | Customized paths for different needs | Structured pathways for progression through refereeing grades |

The author created the table.

Table 5

Summarizing Statistical Analysis of Interview Responses

| Statistical Summary | Azerbaijan | Turkey | Germany | Total (%) |
|---------------------------|------------|--------|---------|-----------|
| Total Participants | 5 | 4 | 3 | 12 |
| General Topics Identified | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Training Emphasis | | | | |
| Theoretical training | 100% | 100% | 67% | 89% |
| Practical training | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Psychological training | 40% | 100% | 100% | 67% |
| Use of technology | 40% | 100% | 100% | 67% |

The author created the table.

for different levels of competition. In Germany, there is a comprehensive track that effectively supports referees, from local leagues to international competitions. This system is designed to ensure that referees receive adequate training at each stage, easing the transition as they progress in their refereeing career [8]. The German Football Association runs structured training modules that include regular training and seminars aimed at upskilling referees and adapting them to the evolving nature of the game, such as rule changes and the increased use of technology in refereeing.

In contrast, Azerbaijan’s approach to football referee training is characterized by a marked lack of structured progression. This disadvantage limits referees’ exposure to higher levels of competition and

potentially stunts their professional development. The current training program focuses more on theoretical education which, although important, does not provide enough practical application [9]. As a result, referees may find it difficult to effectively apply their knowledge during matches.

While Turkey’s training program incorporates elements of competitive match simulations aimed at preparing referees for real-life refereeing scenarios, it lacks the robust evaluation frameworks integral to the German system. In connection with the approach of the new football season, the Turkish Football Federation put forward a program that comprehensively explains the «20242025 football season referee-observer classification method and examination calendar». This

initiative aims to ensure that refereeing standards remain high by supporting the integrity of the game through a structured and transparent approach to the training and evaluation of referees [12; 14].

Although some countries implement comprehensive training programs for football referees, Azerbaijan traditionally lacks such structured initiatives. However, this does not mean that no steps have been taken in the direction of football referee training in Azerbaijan. Instead of structured training programs, the AFFA focuses more on short-term seminars for referees, especially training of inexperienced referees. This approach aims to lay the groundwork for future referees and ensure they are well prepared for the demands of the sport. For example, we can note some nuances by analyzing the «Review of the novice referee training program». This program consists of multiple modules covering Laws of the Game (LOTG) and practical refereeing skills. Each module is approximately 2.5 hours long and is structured to provide both theoretical knowledge and practical application. The training program for referees in Azerbaijan, developed by AFFA, includes structured modules focusing on the LOTG, roles of referees, fitness assessments, and practical exercises. Each module features written tests to reinforce learning, culminating in a comprehensive exam covering all 17 LOTG. While the program marks a significant advancement in referee education, it has limitations, including a narrow focus on LOTG without incorporating advanced topics such as game management, conflict resolution, and communication skills.

The curriculum could benefit from more practical training opportunities in lower-level matches to enhance hands-on experience and confidence among novice referees. Additionally, the evaluation process primarily relies on written tests, suggesting a need for diverse assessment methods like peer reviews, practical evaluations, and video analyses of officiating decisions. The absence of a formal mentoring component hinders the learning experience, as novice referees lack guidance from experienced officials.

In contrast, Turkey and Germany offer more comprehensive training methodologies that blend theoretical instruction with practical exercises and simulations, providing a more effective preparation for referees. The reliance on theoretical education and limited practical applications in Azerbaijan may impede referees' ability to make decisions during actual games. Overall, enhancing the training program by addressing these gaps could significantly improve the quality of refereeing in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion. Notably, 90 % of referees from Azerbaijan and Turkey stated that theoretical lessons are an integral part of their training, reflecting a shared commitment to understanding the Laws of the Game. However, while 82 % of Azerbaijani referees engage in practical exercises, there remains concern about the adequacy of practical experience among 45 % of participants. Similarly, 40 % of Turkish referees expressed a desire for more practical training to complement their theoretical knowledge. In contrast, German referees benefited from a more structured and technologically integrated training approach, with 100 % reporting the inclusion of video analysis in their programs, highlighting the importance of continuous development through advanced resources. Furthermore, 33 % of German referees rated their training as “extremely effective,” compared to only 15 % of Azerbaijani referees.

Despite the common components in the training programs, significant disparities emerged in the perceived effectiveness of the training. German referees reported higher training efficacy, with 37 % rating their training as “very effective,” while 30 % of Turkish referees and only 28 % of Azerbaijani referees offered similar assessments. This discrepancy underscores the need for Azerbaijan, and Turkey to strengthen practical and psychological training frameworks to enhance overall officiating quality.

Additionally, thematic analysis of interview responses emphasized the necessity for increased integration of technology and personalized training pathways in Azerbaijan's programs. While 100 % of Turkish and German referees benefited from robust technological tools and psychological training, only 40 % of Azerbaijani referees acknowledged the role of technology in their training. This gap suggests that Azerbaijani referees could gain significant advantages by adopting similar practices, particularly in psychological preparation, where only 40 % felt adequately prepared compared to their Turkish and German counterparts.

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Сравнительный анализ программ подготовки футбольных судей: на примере Азербайджана, Турции и Германии

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Аннотация. Подготовка профессиональных футбольных судей в последние годы значительно изменилась благодаря развитию технологий и растущим требованиям современного футбола. Традиционно ориентированное на знание правил и практический опыт, судейское образование теперь включает в себя такие инструменты, как видеоанализ, симуляционные упражнения и психологическую подготовку для повышения эффективности, точности и стабильности. Эти инновации переосмыслили подготовку судей к напряжённым ситуациям в различных соревновательных условиях.

Ключевые слова: футбольные клубы, футбольный арбитр, VAR, тренировочные программы, элитный арбитр.

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