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The Referee Is Not an Employee but Must Endure Full Subordination: The Precarious Work of Soccer Referees in Brazilian Football

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Abstract

Although referees play a crucial role in soccer, they are neither recognized nor valued as a professional category. This article aims to explore the precarious working conditions faced by Brazilian soccer referees through the accounts of former referees from Minas Gerais, Brazil, who were affiliated with the Minas Gerais Soccer Federation (FMF). To achieve this, we drew on theoretical discussions of job insecurity, defined by Druck (2011) as a condition experienced by workers, encompassing technological changes, restructuring, legislation, and instability in labor relations. Methodologically, we employed a combination of historical and qualitative approaches to conduct a memory-based investigation. A total of 21 semi-structured narrative interviews were

conducted and triangulated with historical documents accessed during fieldwork, alongside notes recorded in a research-specific notebook. The findings, analyzed through thematic narrative analysis, reveal seven key categories of precariousness: lack of preparation, class fragmentation, hegemony of governing entities, lack of infrastructure, double shifts, retaliation, and vulnerability to violence. This article contributes to discussions on the inconsistencies inherent in non-employment labor arrangements, using the experiences of former referees from Minas Gerais in Brazilian soccer as a lens to examine broader patterns of work and social dynamics. Ultimately, it aims to shed light on the often invisible labor of individuals with limited power in social hierarchies.

Keywords: job insecurity; soccer referee; narrative analysis.

The initial whistle

The referee is the ultimate authority in a soccer match, responsible for enforcing the technical and disciplinary rules that govern the game, whether in a professional or amateur context, particularly when competition is involved. However, despite their critical role, especially in professional soccer, referees are neither recognized nor valued as a professional category – even though the role demands an elevated level of preparation (Righeto & Reis, 2017).

As reflected in the legislative evolution of the profession, referees have not experienced the same professionalization as soccer itself. Brazilian organizing bodies even require referees to provide proof of employment in another profession. This requirement aims to demonstrate that referees are not financially reliant on match fees, despite the reality that many depend on this activity for their livelihood. Their earnings are tied exclusively to the matches they referee, creating a service relationship between independent contractors and soccer clubs or federations (Boschilia, Vlastuin & Marchi, 2008; Horn & Reis, 2016).

This article seeks to revisit the history and memory of organizational agents involved in the practice of soccer. The central research question guiding this work is: What are the perceptions of former referees from Minas Gerais regarding the precariousness of their profession? Throughout this article, we aim to understand the precarious working conditions faced by Brazilian soccer referees, drawing on the accounts of former referees from Minas Gerais, Brazil, who were affiliated with the Minas Gerais Soccer Federation (FMF). To this end, we focus on the precarious dynamics governing the profession, highlighting the importance of the issue and the ways it emerged during the interviews.

Although the theme of precarious work has gained prominence in recent years in the social sciences and humanities as a central element in critical studies on labor relations (Betti, 2018), research portraying precarious working conditions and their effects on workers' daily lives remains emergent in the field of administration, both nationally (Cassundé, Barbosa & Mendonça, 2016; Cerqueira & Leal, 2018) and internationally (Costa et al., 2019). This context justifies and guides the development of this study. Several years ago, Alves (2007) underscored the need for a more rigorous examination of the term, noting that its usage often lacks a more nuanced and reflective treatment of the topic.

Furthermore, Teixeira, Lemos, and Fuzyama (2021) observed that within the scope of studies on job insecurity, careers requiring lower levels of formal education or involving less complexity have been largely overlooked. This study aims to address these research gaps by focusing on the

work of soccer referees. Until recently, this occupational category has received attention only within the domains of physical education and psychology, typically examining physical and psychological attributes (Cruz, Machado, Tertuliano, & Oliveira, 2018), institutional support networks, and parallel career development (Mendes, Travassos, & Oliveira, 2020), or motivations and experiences associated with the role (Lima, Camões, Clemente, Castro, & Silva, 2022).

From its earliest regulatory framework, sports refereeing has been regarded as a mere provision of services, lacking formal employment relationships or associated labor rights. The legislative basis for refereeing can be traced to Article 88 of Law No. 9,615 (1998), which remains in effect and established general guidelines for sports activities. While the law permits the formation of professional associations, its sole paragraph explicitly prohibits referees and their assistants from forming employment relationships with the governing sports organizations they serve. As self-employed workers, referees' remuneration is limited to match-related fees, exempting these organizations from any labor, insurance, or social security obligations.

The attempt to formalize the profession of soccer referee materialized with the enactment of Law No. 12,867 (2013), which symbolically declared the recognition and regulation of the profession by law. However, no additional rights were conferred on these workers, apart from the reaffirmation of the possibility for referees to organize themselves into professional associations and unions. Without the repeal of Article 88 of the 1998 law, referees remain unable to register for a professional work card.

As this law was largely symbolic – and therefore ineffective – it faced no resistance to its repeal under the General Sports Law (Law No. 14,597, 2023). Articles 78 and 81 of this new law reiterated the earlier provisions concerning refereeing and maintaining referees' status as service providers. According to the regulation, a professional soccer referee is defined as an individual whose primary paid activity is enforcing discipline and compliance with sports rules during a match or sporting event. Their activity continues to be regulated by sports organizations without any employment-based subordination. While referees retain the right to self-organize in unions and professional entities, no regulatory developments have occurred to enable the recognition of dignified and legally protected professional practice.

As a result, referees remain excluded from essential labor benefits such as the Workers' Severance Indemnity Fund (FGTS), National Social Security Institute (INSS) contributions, paid vacation, and a 13th salary (Santos & Oliveira, 2018). This exclusion persists despite the presence of all conditions that legally constitute an employment relationship, including personal accountability, subordination, regularity, and compensation.

In a landscape devoid of labor guarantees, referees are subjected to various forms of precarization. Drawing on Druck (2011), we frame the social precarization of work as an economic, social, and political process marked by flexibilization, instability, insecurity, fragmentation of worker collectives, and intense competition among individuals. Castel (1998) similarly observed that precarization often entails the reduction or absence of labor rights, coupled with an increase in temporary and part-time contracts – conditions that align closely with the realities faced by soccer referees.

Cruz et al. (2018) identified two major limitations in a career as a referee. First, it restricts the pursuit of parallel educational and professional pathways. Second, the requirement for referees

to maintain parallel careers limits their ability to specialize and dedicate themselves exclusively to the sport. The authors propose the need for programs that support the development of dual careers, particularly for referees who typically retire around the age of 45 and often lack the financial independence needed to sustain themselves solely through their profession.

In this article, we contend that economic independence represents only one dimension of the precariousness experienced by referees. The absence of legislation and formal contracts in the sports sector exacerbates their vulnerability, leading to even more critical challenges. To explore this issue, we conducted a qualitative study involving 21 semi-structured thematic narrative interviews with former FMF soccer referees. The data was triangulated with historical documents and notes recorded in the field notebook. Analysis was carried out in line with the principles of narrative analysis.

This article is structured into five sections, including this introduction. The second section examines the theoretical framework of job insecurity, followed by a detailed look at the research methodology in the third section. The fourth section kicks off the “match” with the analysis and discussion of the data collected. Finally, the article concludes with reflections offered in a final whistle – one that is never truly final.

Precarization of work

While the concept of precariousness has a broad scope, it is understood here through the lens of Druck's (2011) contributions, which define it as a condition faced by workers shaped by technological changes, restructuring, legislation, and insecurity in labor relations. These factors are predominantly driven by the advancing effects of globalization in the neoliberal era and the flexibilization of labor.

It is important to distinguish between the notions of precarization and precariousness, as they are related but distinct. While precarization refers to the structural condition of human labor within the capitalist system of production, precariousness pertains to the numerous ways in which precarization manifests throughout the history of capital (Alves, 2007). In other words, understanding the dynamics of precarization in labor and employment relations requires an analysis of the underlying content – namely, precariousness itself. Although the fragility of labor relations became particularly widespread during the Industrial Revolution – marked by changes in production methods, long working hours, and the erosion of workers' quality of life (Tosta, 2008) – its most recent phase emerged with the intensification of globalization's effects and the relentless pursuit of economic growth in the wake of the oil crisis of the 1970s (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013).

Druck (2011) identifies key indicators of the social precarization of work in Brazil. These include the intensification and outsourcing of labor, the vulnerability of workers' organizations, the erosion of individual and collective identities, and the persistent threat of job loss. Additional challenges encompass insecurity and deteriorating health conditions in the workplace due to precarious environments. Druck also highlights ongoing efforts by the state to deregulate labor, whereby labor laws are systematically undermined in favor of liberal ideals advocating for the flexibilization of labor and employment relations.

For Antunes (2008), outsourcing, subcontracting, temporary work, and task-based work represent some of the key forms of precarious employment. These practices fragment labor collectives, impose poor working conditions, and lead to the deterioration of health and job security, all while rendering workers invisible. Similarly, Boltanski and Chiapello (2009) argue that precariousness arises from increased flexibility in the management and hiring of workers, which has led to a rise in temporary contracts and outsourced roles, thereby reducing career stability and predictability. In this vein, Vosko (2010) characterizes precarious work by its instability, low wages, and limited access to social benefits and statutory rights.

Oliveira (2004) adds that the flexibilization and precarization of labor and employment relations can also be attributed to the deprofessionalization and proletarianization of certain careers. This involves assigning tasks beyond the worker’s training, diminishing their control over the work process, and employing mechanisms to disqualify professionals. Antunes (2008) further cautions against practices that obscure the reality of job insecurity, noting the frequent use of terms like “flexibilization” to mask its impacts on function, salary, job duration, and work organization.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) also provides a nuanced understanding of precarious work, encompassing both labor market instability – driven by limited job opportunities – and health and safety insecurity, as well as a lack of access to vocational training. To counteract these issues, the ILO introduces the concept of “decent work,” which involves fostering productive and high-quality employment, strengthening social dialogue, expanding social protections, and ensuring respect for labor rights. This includes equitable access to employment opportunities, fair remuneration, safe working conditions, and the elimination of discrimination in all its forms (Ghai, 2003).

Cerqueira and Leal (2018) outline the primary dimensions of contemporary job insecurity by categorizing them into formal elements, which pertain to the legal status and contextual characteristics of work, and narrative elements, which focus on aspects more closely tied to work as a human activity (Table 1).

Table 1
Dimensions of contemporary precarious work

Formal Elements	Narrative Elements
Fragile employment contracts	Lack of professional development opportunities
Reduced income	Increased prevalence of dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, affecting both physical and mental health
Elimination of social protections tied to employment	Intensification of work
Diminished capacity for collective bargaining	Barriers to direct participation in the work process
	Heightened discriminatory practices in labor relations

Source: adapted from Cerqueira and Leal (2018).

It is important to emphasize that submission to precarious working conditions is not voluntary. Due to the increasing flexibilization and precarization of labor and employment relations, workers are compelled to accept unstable work as it often represents their only means of survival.

In this context, the freedom of the worker is incomplete, shaped instead into a form of disguised servitude (Alves, 2007).

The impact of precarious work extends beyond the workplace, influencing both individual and social spheres, including the families of affected workers (Wilson & Ebert, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that precarious work significantly affects workers' physical and psychological health (Benach & Muntaner, 2007; Canivet et al., 2017), increases the likelihood of burnout syndrome (Paltrinieri, 2017), heightens and exacerbates workplace accident risks (Lancman, 2011), and contributes to the development of chronic illnesses (Kim, Khang, Muntaner, Chun, & Cho, 2008).

Applying these insights to our scope, we understand job insecurity and precariousness as encompassing the degradation of working and employment conditions. These are closely tied to the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by formal, informal, and temporary workers. Such conditions arise from contemporary economic, political, and social processes that erode security, stability, and quality of life in the workplace across various professional categories. They also have profound repercussions on the physical and psychological health and safety of workers, both at individual and collective levels.

Behind the scenes in the (research) field

To explore the precariousness of Brazilian soccer referees' work, based on the accounts of former referees from Minas Gerais who were affiliated with the FMF, we conducted qualitative research (Gil, 2010). This approach allowed us to delve deeply into the realities of the studied phenomenon. To this end, we conducted 21 semi-structured thematic narrative interviews, following the guidelines of Meihy and Holanda (2013). These interviews enabled us to access the participants' memories of soccer refereeing through exploratory questions, allowing the narrated events to be linked with greater autonomy.

We also triangulated the interview data with field notes, which documented every step of the research process, and historical documents, which provided additional context for objects requiring historical and cultural contextualization. This approach incorporated the temporal dimension into the social understanding of refereeing (Sá-Silva, Almeida, & Guindani, 2009). The use of historical documents complemented the research, serving more as illustrative support than as a means of validating information. The decision to include historical documents in this manner was grounded in the perspectives of Bosi (2003) and Sá-Silva et al. (2009). Indeed, the materials accessed included photographs, newspaper clippings from interviewees' personal collections, publications by the Minas Gerais Referees Union (SAMG), and organizational documents such as articles of association and electoral regulations from the union.

The initial interviewees were identified through SAMG, whose board provided contact details for former soccer referees. We then expanded the research sample using the "snowball" method, whereby interviewees suggested additional participants (Goodman, 1961). The only selection criteria for participants were that they must have been affiliated with the FMF and had concluded their refereeing careers. The number of interviews adhered to the usefulness and use principle proposed by Meihy and Holanda (2013), which suggests halting data collection when responses begin to show repetition. Consequently, the criterion of saturation was applied to conclude the data collection protocol.

The interviews were conducted in person across six cities in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte (MG). The sole exception was an interview conducted via Skype® with a participant residing in the countryside of Minas Gerais. Regarding the interviewees' careers in soccer refereeing, three began their careers in the 1960s, four in the 1970s, eight in the 1980s, five in the 1990s, and one in the 2000s. As for their departure from refereeing, only one left in the 1980s to take a position on the FMF's referees' commission, where he served until 2003. Additionally, five interviewees left refereeing in the 1980s, while the remaining 15 concluded their careers in the 2000s.

To ensure confidentiality, we randomly assigned pseudonyms to the nineteen men and two women interviewed. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, resulting in a total of 27 hours of material, which was subsequently transcribed verbatim by the lead author. To enhance methodological rigor, we enlisted an external expert to cross-check the content of the full transcripts with the audio recordings of five randomly selected interviews (McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2003). The external reviewer verified the first and last four minutes, as well as minutes 35 and 44 – when applicable – of all files. After correcting minor grammatical and typographical errors, the transcripts were approved for analysis using the narrative analysis technique.

Following the establishment of the research corpus, we proceeded to the data analysis and interpretation phase, drawing on Barreto's (2018) contributions. Our focus was on extracting meaningful content from the narratives, going beyond the surface of what was explicitly stated. In line with Barreto, we aimed to capture the depth of experiences conveyed in the narratives, avoiding purely descriptive analysis. As Bastos and Biar (2015) emphasize, narrative analysis does not involve judging the values expressed in the narratives. Instead, it offers a framework for uncovering diverse interpretations, avoiding the imposition of a homogeneous perspective, and fostering careful listening by the researchers. This method also facilitates an exploration of how narrators construct meaning from their experiences, identifying both unifying themes and unique elements. By doing so, it allows for an authentic representation of the narrators' individual lives and the contexts in which they operate.

Kickoff!

However, professionalization is lacking

One of the key themes that emerged in interviews with former referees from Minas Gerais was the absence of professionalization in the field. The interviewees themselves acknowledged the challenges posed by the lack of professionalization and regulation in refereeing and how these factors contribute to the precariousness of labor and employment relations. This issue is evident in the following excerpts:

It's not even a professional career to start with. I refereed for 18 years, and then it was over – just like that. And no contribution to social security was made in my name, either. I always paid my INSS contribution separately. **Everything in soccer is professional:** the steward has a signed contract, the physiologist, the goalkeeper coach, the manager, the players. **But the soccer referee has nothing [...].** Referees aren't covered by anything. **If you get injured, the Federation doesn't care – they'll**

just stop booking you. If you perform badly in a game, they “put you on ice,” so you’re sidelined and not called up for matches. (Thulio, 2019)

Refereeing is a gig you do without any guarantees. If you’re working, fine. If you’re not, it’s the same thing. **If the Federation decides to let you go tomorrow, you can’t even argue. You have got to go, game over.** (Reinaldo, 2019)

[Soccer] refereeing is an amateur activity. It wasn’t professionalized in my day, and even now that it’s considered professional, it’s not regulated. **Who wants to be responsible for hiring referees? Nobody. The CBF [Brazilian Football Confederation], which should be the main party interested in regulating the field, isn’t pursuing it. Refereeing is expensive, and anything that generates costs is something the Confederation and the federations avoid [...]. What profit do they see in soccer referees? On the contrary, it’s just another expense.**” (Fernanda, 2019)

Thulio and Reinaldo highlighted the lack of protections offered by organizing bodies such as the FMF and the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF). As they pointed out, “being a soccer referee” is not treated as a recognized profession and does not come with the labor rights associated with formal employment. Reinaldo characterizes refereeing as a *“bico”*— which is the Portuguese term for a gig without any guarantees. Thulio’s narrative expands on this by contrasting the lack of professionalization in refereeing with other roles in soccer, which are fully professionalized and involve significant salaries and transactions, as noted by Boschilia et al. (2008). The lack of institutional “cover” leaves referees exposed to the arbitrary decisions of federations and confederations, which can exclude them without explanation, often due to internal or external pressures.

This absence of safeguards highlights the precariousness of the profession, further marginalizing referees within the broader soccer ecosystem. In this context, the precariousness of refereeing is characterized by flexible management practices and hiring arrangements that bypass labor laws designed to protect formal workers (Castel, 1998). These conditions undermine the stability and predictability of the profession (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2009), as referees can be placed in the “fridge” – excluded from assignments—for indefinite periods. This fragility in employment contracts represents a formal element of contemporary precarious labor relations (Cerqueira & Leal, 2018). Consequently, refereeing is often perceived as a “gig” or “amateur activity,” as it provides “no guarantees,” “no cover,” and “no right to speech” for professionals. This lack of regulation is compounded by political and interpersonal interference within federations and confederations, perpetuating the precarious status quo.

Interviewee Belmiro noted that “there is already professionalism” in the sense that “referees have to prepare themselves,” indicating that the physical, technical, and psychological standards required of referees are comparable to those of athletes. While organizing bodies demand such elevated levels of preparation, they fail to offer corresponding steps toward professionalization. As Cavaignac (2011) observed, the precariousness of work and employment relationships, in this case, stems from the organizing bodies’ expectations for “flexible” and malleable behavior from referees.

These professionals are offered no guarantees while simultaneously facing significant pressure to meet the rigorous criteria of professional activity, often under the threat of dismissal.

The absence of formal employment contracts in refereeing was a recurring theme in the interviewees' narratives. A lack of interest from organizing bodies, particularly the CBF, the highest authority in Brazilian soccer, emerged as a central issue. As one interviewee put it, *"The CBF, which should be the main party interested in regulating the field, isn't pursuing it."* Financial and political considerations were identified as the primary factors behind this disinterest. From a financial perspective, referees are seen as "costly" to the entities, which prioritize "profit" and avoid "losing money" by sidestepping the increased expenses associated with labor guarantees. This reflects practices aimed at concealing the realities of job insecurity (Antunes, 2008).

Our analysis reveals that the fragility of contractual relationships and the lack of regulation in refereeing are underpinned by financial and political discourse on the part of the organizing institutions. While these entities establish and enforce strict criteria for the profession, they fail to regulate the activity or provide referees with the labor protections they are entitled to.

And the competition isn't just between players – it's between referees too

Another theme that emerged from the interviewees' narratives was the fragmentation of the referee community and the resulting erosion of collective bargaining power. We build on this idea through the excerpts below:

It's a very disunited class; it always has been. Everyone's competing for assignments, badmouthing each other, **and trying to bring others down** – "pulling the rug out from under one another" to secure opportunities. (Thulio, 2019)

The referee's greatest enemy is his own colleague because you're not an employee, you work to get paid. You're refereeing the game, the guy is rooting against you so that he'll be booked next time so that he can earn the money you earned in that game. So, **one referee is always trying to bring the other down.** [...] You could say it still happens today, to be honest. **The referee is rooting for his side, he doesn't care about the other side.** (Reinaldo, 2019)

Referees to me are a bunch, to this day they're not a category. Everyone is looking out for themselves, no one cares about anyone else [...] Referees have no unity. This has been going on forever and it remains. I helped the union a lot here for a while, I didn't want to be president, so I ended up being a member of ANAF [National Association of Football Referees]. It's very difficult. **You organize an assembly for the guys, to fight for their rights, but they're the first to run away, nobody gives a damn, and they don't want anything. They just want to be booked.** (Guilherme, 2019)

The lack of unity among referees as a class was unanimous in the narratives of our interviewees. None of the 21 ex-referees reported the existence of an articulation in the fight for the rights of the activity. Thus, match assignments are seen as a barrier to fostering a sense of collectivity. Because of them and the money involved, the referees end up “badmouthing” and, to “bring the other down,” they use strategies such as “getting the wrong information” and “gossiping,” thereby undermining the group spirit. In this sense, the narratives point out that the opportunity to act in a game, for one referee, means losing space to another, making it clear that this is an individualistic and hostile environment among colleagues. Guilherme says that referees are “a bunch,” developing his narrative from his experience when he held positions of power in representative bodies, encountering environments that were unwilling to fight.

The interviews reveal that the social precariousness of soccer referees’ work in Minas Gerais is an economic, social, and political process (Druck, 2011). This precariousness is characterized not only by flexibility, instability, and insecurity in labor and employment relationships but also by the fragmentation of worker groups and intense competition among them. The narratives vividly highlight the vulnerability of workers’ organizations, emphasizing their disunity and lack of coordination in advocating for rights. They also point to the erosion of both individual and collective identities, as well as the challenges in organizing unions, engaging in collective action, and ensuring worker representation. In an environment where “The referee’s greatest enemy is his own colleague,” referees face the daunting task of resisting precarious working conditions amidst heightened competitiveness and limited job prospects in an increasingly vulnerable and uncertain labor market (Cavaignac, 2011). Additionally, it is important to consider the potential role of organizing bodies in fostering disarticulation as a strategy to weaken the collective strength of workers’ demands.

And the CBF and the entities are keeping a sharp eye on the play!

This section examines the role of regulatory bodies as outlined in legislation and the direct subordination to which referees are subjected. While the law explicitly states that employment and subordination relationships cannot be established, the interviews reveal a material reality that deviates significantly from this normative framework.

The interviewees’ experiences indicate that referees face persistent criticism and ostracism for mistakes inherent to their role, preventing the profession from achieving true professionalization. The relationship of complete submission that referees have with organizing bodies stems from the fact that, as Renata (2019) stated, “*everyone wants to boss the referee around a bit.*” In other words, these organizations demand complete compliance with their directives while avoiding any formal ties that could lead to lawsuits in labor courts or financial liabilities, such as costs associated with dismissing a worker without just cause.

These dynamics leave referees vulnerable to injustices perpetrated by the managers of organizing bodies. The issue remains under national scrutiny. In August 2023, the National Association of Football Referees (ANAF) filed a criminal complaint with the Labor Prosecutor’s Office against the CBF for what it described as “silent punishment” of referees from Goiás. This followed an incident where the Goiás Football Federation supported Goiás Futebol Clube’s criticism of the CBF’s national refereeing staff. In retaliation, the CBF refrained from assigning any referees from the

state of Goiás to its competitions, even after over 100 matches had taken place. This information was reported by Gonçalves and Zarko (2023) on the Globo Esporte portal.

We've fought hard and we haven't succeeded, and I don't think anyone will succeed in professionalizing the soccer referee. CBF isn't interested in referees being professional. You have to be at their mercy and comply with everything they demand; you don't have the right to demand much. At the moment, if the referee demands anything more than what they offer, they remove him from the team. And they don't even have to give a reason. They just remove them. The power over refereeing is a dictatorial one. (Lucas, 2019)

The referee is not an employee but works under full subordination to the Federation and the CBF. They schedule a physical test and don't care about your availability [...]. So it's a relationship of subordination that exists, as well as a culture of silence. You can't say anything. (Belmiro, 2019)

Former referees Lucas and Belmiro highlight the barriers to professionalization by emphasizing the submissive and authoritarian dynamic between referees and the organizing bodies. Although referees are not formally “employees,” they work “under full subordination” with these institutions, yet without the legal protections afforded to employees, as outlined in the General Sports Law (Law No. 14,597, 2023). Lucas portrays this dynamic as one of manipulation, where arbitration commissions expect referees to be *“at their mercy, to comply with everything they demand,”* in a system that disregards the actual needs and concerns of referees. Any form of resistance or questioning can lead to immediate exclusion from the panel, reinforcing a “relationship of subordination” without the corresponding rights of a worker. This aligns with Vosko’s (2010) observations on precarious labor conditions, where workers are subordinated without adequate labor guarantees. Both Lucas and Belmiro describe this relationship as a “dictatorship” maintained through “a culture of silence. You can't say anything.” This lack of dialogue undermines any effort to expand referees’ rights, as progress depends entirely on decisions imposed by those who hold the greatest power in the relationship. Indeed, without reciprocity or open channels for negotiation, meaningful advancements in referees’ professionalization remain unattainable.

What's happening is a contradiction, because the referee is neither an employee nor hired in the slightest. If they want referees to be autonomous, then let them be autonomous. Form a referees’ collegiate. Set some requirements and allow referees to self-organize and manage the sale of their labor. But they don't want to, **they want to keep political power over refereeing. They keep the referees within the federations to exercise political and financial power over the referees.** (Belmiro, 2019)

Belmiro’s statement strongly underscores the contradiction perpetuated by sports

organizations: they desire referees to remain independent, avoiding any formal ties – and consequently, any associated costs – but simultaneously resist measures that would grant referees genuine autonomy. The interviewee points to a potential model where a referees' association or representative body could appoint officials for matches, as is done in England.¹ However, this approach has not been implemented in Brazil due to the desire of organizing bodies to retain control over refereeing.

A good player is an expensive player! As for the referee, the cheaper the better

The narratives that characterize the contemporary precariousness of work and employment relations in soccer refereeing in Minas Gerais reveal a lack of professional development opportunities for referees (Cerqueira & Leal, 2018), as highlighted in the excerpts below:

There isn't the investment in refereeing within the confederations and federations that there should be. Every sector knows that soccer exists because there is refereeing. The day it ends, soccer ends. They know this, but there's a lack of investment, they're sure of it, but they don't invest enough. (Dario, 2019)

I refereed 70, or 80 games a year. I had a fight with [the national president of the referees' commission], which was normal because he was with CBF, and I was with the association. He wanted to run the association, and I said: "You don't call the shots here, I do." Then I started refereeing 30 games a year. [...] I fought with a lot of people – club managers, everything you can think of. But I was defending the interests of the referees. [...] And there was always money left over, I'm convinced of that, and that money never went to the referees. There was no investment in refereeing. And today very little is invested. If you say that a lot is invested, it's because, in the very recent past, nothing was invested at all. (Guilherme, 2019)

The first excerpt highlights the insufficient investment by federations and the Brazilian Confederation in refereeing. Dario suggests that providing mentors for "promising" referees who could guide them in their activities would be a basic step forward, but this does not occur due to a lack of financial support. He expands on the idea of Brazilian society's "culture" to explain the lack of investment, which, in his view, is only secured through pressure and lobbying by organizations representing workers.

Moreover, the absence of coordination among referee representation entities is identified as another barrier to advancing initiatives that could support the development of refereeing. According to this participant, collective action – such as refusing to officiate under the conditions imposed by organizing bodies – could advance professionalization. However, this approach shifts the responsibility for referees' development away from the organizing entities and places it solely on the referees themselves.

Guilherme's account provides insight into the circumstances that led to his presidency at ANAF. He explains that this move was initiated by the president of the CBF's referees' commission,

who threatened to terminate ANAF's operations if he did not take the position. Guilherme's narrative exposes the extent of the CBF's interference in referees' activities and organizations. He also emphasizes the historical lack of investment in improving refereeing, arguing that claims of significant recent investment only hold weight when compared to a past where *"nothing was invested at all."* This underscores how CBF's involvement not only limits financial support but also hinders referees' ability to organize and advance as a professional group.

Some referees are playing a one-two with other trades

Beyond the lack of professional development opportunities, former referees report additional narrative elements that illustrate the precarious nature of labor and employment relations in soccer refereeing in Minas Gerais. These include labor intensification and unhealthy working conditions, both physically and mentally (Cerqueira & Leal, 2018).

Referees don't get time off. I often refereed on Saturday and Sunday. Monday, I had the day off, but in the evening, I had to go to the Federation to talk about the weekend's fixtures. On Tuesday, I'd go to the barracks [of the army in Belo Horizonte] to do physical training and mark the attendance list. On Wednesday, you'd have the day off, or maybe there'd be a game in the evening for you to referee. On Thursday, you'd go back to [physical] training in the morning, and on Friday, you'd have to go there to pick up the roster for the weekend. **And that was after working eight hours a day.** I worked in a cement factory at the time, on the shop floor. **And I was frowned upon by my boss.** (Jairo, 2019)

We didn't know about their problem, whether they worked 24 hours a day or not [...] It influences the referee's performance, no doubt about it. **You make demands from the referee, but you don't give them the [right] conditions.** They don't want the referee to be an employee of the Federation. **They want a good job from you, but they don't care about the situation. Nobody cares about your problem; they want a satisfactory level of refereeing. So there were demands from clubs, the press, and the Federation, but the referee wasn't given the right conditions.** (Leandro, 2019)

Every referee must have a job. They can't live off refereeing for the Federation. But that's not what happens. **Many referees depend on this money to make ends meet. Referees are totally exploited** because they have no image rights, get no percentage of sponsorship, they get nothing. (Thulio, 2019)

The narratives above illustrate the challenges referees faced during Jairo's time when it was impossible to dedicate oneself fully to refereeing. Jairo described how his primary livelihood came from working in a cement factory, where reconciling his full-time job with refereeing obligations created constant conflicts. He recounted that referees "don't get time off" due to the continuous demands of their role, which spanned every day of the week. These demands often led to tensions with his employer, who "frowned upon" his dual responsibilities. Jairo had to navigate these

difficulties by compensating for lost hours during nights or weekends. According to Leandro, a former member of the FMF refereeing commission, tolerance toward working referees was “*up to a certain point,*” as their individual “*problems*” were not well understood. However, these issues were, in a way, also problems for the refereeing commission, as they impacted the referees’ performance on the field, even if they were not officially acknowledged. He stated that he attempted to make progress toward professionalizing referees so they could become exclusive employees of the federation, but these efforts did not succeed because “*nobody wants to take over.*”

The narrative concludes with the recollection that while referees faced high demands for performance, the leaders of organizing institutions failed to provide equivalent support. This dynamic creates inhumane working conditions for referees, who must maintain a stable source of income while meeting stringent physical, technical, psychological, and theoretical preparation requirements, all while delivering a superior performance from the commission’s perspective.

Thulio underscores the significance of the income earned from refereeing in sustaining his livelihood, noting that it enables him to “*buy groceries, and buy produce.*” His narrative highlights the exploitation referees face, particularly in the absence of image rights or sponsorship money for the uniforms they wear.

The issue raised by Thulio remains a topic of current debate. In March 2023, the CBF succeeded in suspending several court decisions favoring the referees’ association at the Superior Labor Court. The lawsuit, filed by ANAF, required the governing body of Brazilian soccer to pay the association a percentage of sponsorship revenues displayed on referees’ and assistants’ uniforms during the Brazilian Championship since 2019. The CBF argued that it had negotiated individually with each referee, thereby avoiding transparency in the terms and fragmenting collective efforts by promoting the individualization of labor relations. However, in August of the same year, the 6th Civil Court of Barra da Tijuca (RJ) ruled in favor of ANAF, ordering the CBF to regularize the situation and reimburse referees for unpaid amounts since the contracts came into effect.

Thulio’s account illustrates that soccer referees’ submission to precarious working conditions is not voluntary but a result of a lack of regulation, labor flexibility, precarization of work and employment relations, and the fragmentation of collective entities. This fragmentation forces referees to accept these conditions, as they often have no alternative means of survival. As Thulio himself stated, “*Many referees depend on this money to make ends meet.*”

A referee who chokes gets sent to the showers

Some interviewees also reported obstacles to direct participation in their work and highlighted discriminatory practices in workplace relations. These elements are consistent with the contemporary precariousness of labor as outlined by Cerqueira and Leal (2018). The following narratives illustrate these challenges:

The referee’s assessment is very subjective in my opinion. So there’s no point coming up with this nonsense that they do evaluations, that they make spreadsheets, that they are relying on spreadsheet data. It has a value; it’s an

observation tool. But that in itself doesn't solve the problem and doesn't show things as they are. **This instrument cannot be said to be the basis on which they evaluate and promote referees. That's a lie.** It's a lie because **it's not what defines whether you're going to promote A or B; it's just an observation tool.** (Belmiro, 2019)

The soccer referee in Minas Gerais has a direct relationship with the Federation's leaders, **who don't evaluate a referee's competence, meritocracy, technical, psychological, or disciplinary capacity.** [...] **The referee is related to the federation; he has to serve its interests. He's a bit of a manager's boy.** If he goes against the interests of the clubs, he is inevitably the weakest part of the relationship. In the context of soccer as a whole, in the context of Brazil, the referee is the weakest link. (Nívio, 2019)

Belmiro and Nívio's narratives converge on key points: the lack of objective assessment and monitoring based on clear, defined criteria by the Federation for the promotion of referees. Their accounts emphasize that career progression relies on personal relationships rather than meeting technical, physical, theoretical, psychological, and merit-based standards for officiating. Social factors – such as relationships with federation leaders – play a decisive role in determining promotions to higher levels of refereeing. Referees are thus subject to power dynamics, requiring them to align with the ambitions of managers to avoid jeopardizing their careers.

These accounts expose not only discriminatory practices in promotion but also a loss of control over the work process by referees, alongside mechanisms that disqualify these professionals. According to Oliveira (2004), such dynamics are hallmarks of labor flexibilization and precariousness. As Nívio noted, referees face significant challenges in participating directly in their work processes, largely due to their diminished autonomy. The Minas Gerais referee, as he put it, is *"a manager's boy"* who *"cannot go against the interests of the clubs."* Moreover, both interviewees highlighted that referees' performance evaluations are *"very subjective,"* failing to assess *"a referee's competence, meritocracy, technical, psychological, or disciplinary capacity."* This subjectivity undermines professional development and further entrenches the precariousness of the profession.

And if you have a problem with this, watch out for the "12th man"

The final theme that emerged from the interviewees' narratives is the precarious working conditions involving intimidation, authoritarianism, and violence. These challenges are vividly illustrated in the following accounts:

I've had some terrible experiences. I called a play, and the guy challenged me, boy, and went nose to nose with me. [At the end of the argument] **I gave him the red card; he slapped me on the ear, and I can still hear the buzzing to this day.** In another game, **I called a penalty kick** against the home team. **The goalkeeper came at me and punched me right in the stomach. I was knocked down and couldn't**

breathe. And then I got up: “I’m going to carry on.” [It was] an act of courage. After the second half, **a full-back tackled the guy. He already had a yellow, so I gave him another yellow and sent him off.** “I’m sorry, ref,” he said and offered me his hand. **I reached out, and he slapped me in the ear with his other hand. I was attacked twice in the same game. But I carried on.** (Thulio, 2019)

There were some places where we went to blow the whistle, and some fans would stand near the sideline and **show guns. This was common and still is common. This relationship with the drug world is common.** And I tell you that **this only happens because the federations are silent. They have interests – other interests – of the people who are in the federations, other political interests.** (Belmiro, 2019)

The interviewees described how drug trafficking influences soccer, both in their time as active referees and today. They highlighted the financing of *várzea* (grassroots) teams, the involvement of drug traffickers among players, and the pressure exerted to ensure favorable results for home teams. Intimidation, including the display of firearms, was a common tactic. This led to the sentiment that *“you’ve got to be a hero to referee a grassroots match,”* as referees must navigate numerous adversities to satisfactorily officiate matches.

Belmiro attributed this intimidation and violence to the federations’ negligence, asserting that their silence enables such crimes. According to him, these federations pursue political interests tied to elected government positions, allowing violent and intimidating practices to continue unchecked. This connivance with violence often serves electoral goals, as federations later seek support from community leaders for their political ambitions. Thus, federations subvert the rules of the game for political gains, highlighting the deep-seated issue of political interference.

Finally, Thulio’s narrative recounts instances where he was physically assaulted in two different championships. In one game, he endured two separate attacks yet continued officiating, describing his decision as an *“act of courage.”* His account underscores the verbal and physical violence referees face, often perpetrated by both professional and amateur athletes. This illustrates the growing prevalence of workplace violence, including bullying, authoritarian behavior, humiliation, threats, and risks to health and safety. These issues reflect the broader precariousness of work and the systemic dissemination of such conditions within the organizational structure of soccer refereeing (Turte-Cavadinha, Turte-Cavadinha, Luz, & Fischer, 2014).

The whistle that is never final: referees lose 7-0

This article aimed to understand the precariousness of Brazilian soccer referees’ work based on the accounts of former referees from Minas Gerais who were linked to the FMF. The findings reveal that the precariousness of refereeing work and employment relations can be understood through different formal elements, which refer to the legal and contextual aspects of work, as well as narrative elements that directly relate to the human experience of the profession and its environment.

Long before the so-called “uberization of work,” precarious labor practices were already prevalent in modern capitalism, particularly in roles requiring minimal specialization (Teixeira et al., 2021). The precariousness of sports labor, often obscured by the power structures of large corporations operating in the sector, was evident in the interviewees’ narratives, contradicting the principles of decent work (Castro, Canopf, Nunes, & Costa, 2021). The precariousness of soccer referees’ work is categorized into seven dimensions, summarized in Table 2:

Table 2

Categories of Precariousness Identified

Category	Description
Lack of preparation	Absence of investment in improving the trade.
Class fragmentation	Fragmented environment, with intense competition among workers.
Hegemony of governing entities	Dominance of rules dictated by major sports bodies.
Lack of infrastructure	Insufficient support and infrastructure for the profession.
Double shifts	Necessity to maintain a parallel profession.
Retaliation	Repercussions for non-compliance or dissent.
Vulnerability to violence	Submission to the risk of violence from players and fans.

Source: prepared by the authors.

The discussions of these categories highlight the contradictions of both Law No. 9.615 (1998) and the General Sports Law (Law No. 14.597, 2023). These laws define soccer referees as workers who cannot establish employment relationships, despite their working conditions meeting legal criteria such as personality, subordination, continuity, and remuneration. However, it is equally important to consider why referees continue to pursue this career despite the obvious signs of precarization within the profession. Interviewees mentioned the allure of being part of the spectacle and the sense of authority referees wield during the 90 minutes of a match. Another possible factor is the potential for substantial financial earnings at the highest levels of refereeing. As of 2023, according to the article “Find out how much referees, assistants, and VAR earn in the A and B series of the Brazilian Championship,” published by Globo Esporte (June 9, 2023), a referee affiliated with the International Football Federation (FIFA) earns R\$6,500.00 per match in a Série A Brazilian Championship game (the first division). These questions about referees’ motivations present valuable avenues for future research on the topic.

We emphasize that when former referees choose to discuss the precarious aspects of their profession, they aim to shed light on the power dynamics between the federations and the CBF, which persist and perpetuate themselves within the framework of Brazilian soccer. Furthermore, while we did not interview active referees, some remain deeply engaged with the soccer ecosystem, serving as television and radio commentators, as well as members or advisors to unions and the FMF itself. This enables us to conclude that although the interviews focus on past experiences, they also address ongoing events within these institutions, which continue to uphold a status quo of referee subjugation in Brazilian soccer.

In conclusion, this article offers insights into three main points that intersect with our categories of analysis: (1) the existence of a process of submission to the authoritarianism of soccer organizing entities, which is critical for referees to sustain their roles and remain within the sport; (2) the inherent uncertainty of the profession, characterized by the precarization of work coupled with job insecurity, as referees can be dismissed from their roles by organizing entities without justification, compounded by the lack of professional protections available to referees in Brazil; and finally, (3) an analysis of how political interference – rooted in the power dynamics of federations, confederations, and soccer clubs – impacts refereeing, alongside interpersonal interference, where so-called criteria frequently overshadow the technical, physical, theoretical, and psychological standards established by soccer organizations for career progression.

Through the discussion presented in this article, we contribute to the field of research on the precarization of work activities that, while not legally defined as employment relationships, manifest all the characteristics of such relationships. By examining the memories of soccer referees and fostering what is referred to as the “other” from a historical perspective, we also shed light on the smaller, marginalized, silenced, and forgotten stories and memories – narratives that closely parallel individuals relegated to the background in management studies. Understanding the inconsistencies in these professional relationships from the perspective of those with less power can deepen our insight into situations that jeopardize the physical and mental health of workers classified as self-employed. This, in turn, can lead to broader discussions on the structural conditions of work for such groups. For future research, we suggest developing narratives and histories focused on the work experiences of individuals who are not central figures in power dynamics, delving into various dimensions of precariousness across diverse professions.

Finally, our study was limited to exploring the precarization of refereeing activities in Minas Gerais within Brazilian soccer. Therefore, we propose that future research investigate refereeing work in other state federations, referees from different states associated with the national entity, and referees in other sports. Additionally, we recommend expanding research aimed at examining the precarization of refereeing through a gender lens, given the disparities in opportunities and earnings noted by Santos and Oliveira (2018), which also surfaced briefly in our interviews.

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Notes

1. In England, the management of professional soccer officiating is handled by PGMOL (Professional Game Match Officials Limited), an organization responsible for appointing referees to matches organized by the Football Association. A total of 117 referees and assistant referees undergo training, and after completing technical, psychological, and physical evaluations, 18 referees are selected for full-time officiating roles. Each selected referee earns approximately £50,000 annually for their services (EFL Handbook, n.d.).

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The authors use inclusive language that acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.

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