

Analysis of Threats and Attacks against Referees during Football Matches in Congo-Brazzaville

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaspe.2025.v08i01.002>

| Received: 12.10.2024 | Accepted: 16.11.2024 | Published: 16.01.2025

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Abstract

In Africa, studies devoted to violence against football referees are rare. This study aims to characterize threats and aggression against referees during football matches in Congo. The qualitative study, which took place in Brazzaville from February to April 2024, included 9 referees with international or federal certification. The semi-directed interviews conducted with these referees addressed the following points: the types of threats and aggression; their causes; refereeing decisions; sources of violence; the management of said threats and aggression. The results highlighted the predominance of verbal aggression, the perpetrators were more spectators and players. Refereeing decisions directly opposed to the opinions of players/coaches/spectators were the major sources of threats and aggression. The impact of socio-cultural and political capital on these behaviors was also noted. Self-control was the main strategy for managing these distressing situations. In short, the study highlighted the complexity of the phenomenon of aggression towards referees.

Keywords: Aggression, Referee, Interview, Football, Threat.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sports aggression is defined as behavior, verbal or physical, that violates the rules of the activity in question and is emitted with the intention of causing harm, physical or psychological, to another person (Tenenbaum *et al.*, 1996). Most of the time, the main motive for using such behaviors is simple: to perform (Carpentair and Yates, 1997). But this relationship between aggression and performance essentially concerns instrumental aggression whose main goal is to obtain an advantage, whatever it may be. However, sport participates in the learning of socially desirable attitudes and values (Council of Europe, 1995); according to Parisot, " *the social skills acquired in the practice of sport are intended to be automatically transferable to social life, thus making sport a fundamental agent of socialization* " (Durand and Weil, 1997: 41).

It is in this context that several authors have examined the effect of playing football on aggressive behavior among players (Bromberger, 1995; Burns, 2010; Lahrache *And al.*, 2022; Mohibullah *et al.*, 2022; Nosanchuk, 1981; Pfister, 2010). While handball and basketball have a reputation for helping individuals gain better control over anger and impulsive intentions (Seegmuller, 1984), the same is not true of football.

Referring to social learning theory (Bandura, 1980), some authors consider football to be a place for learning aggressive behavior and one of the main causes of current violence in cities (Tandy and Laflin, 1993). For example, playing football teaches children to act within the limits of the rules. Very often, they are also taught to develop behavioral strategies that transgress these rules (Durand and Weil, 1997).

Delva-Taui'i'ili (1995) shows that footballers have less developed prosocial characteristics compared to factor A of the 16 PF form A test of Cauell: sociability, cooperation, pleasant character, kindness, adaptability, trust in others, hauler, attention. These data highlight, if there is a beneficial effect following the practice of handball and basketball, that the training method adopted by the coaches, the stakes of the competitions and the time of practice of the activity play a determining role. In addition, Nosanchuk (1981) notes an increase in aggressiveness and a deterioration in self-esteem with the practice of high-level football.

In this whole process, the referee, as the third pillar of football matches after the coaches and the players, is the guarantor of sporting fairness, but he is also the one who respects the physical and mental

integrity of the players. He appears as a central character in the regulation of aggressive behavior (Cabagno and Rasclé, 2014; Nicolas, 2010). However, despite the fact that justice and impartiality are expected from him (Dosseville and Garnarczyk, 2007), the referee is not insensitive to the characteristics of the players he is confronted with.

In Congo-Brazzaville, only one study has been devoted to aggressive behavior observed during football matches, which only included players (Litoto *et al.*, 2018). The lack of work associated with the violence suffered by referees during football sports competitions justifies the present study, the aim of which is to characterize the threats and aggressions directed against football referees in Congo and to identify their attitudes towards them. The specific objectives relating to it were: to identify the types of threats and aggressions suffered by football referees; to describe their sources; to determine the refereeing decisions opposed to the opinions of players/coaches/spectators; to describe the attitudes of referees towards these aggressive behaviors. Among the socio-anthropological approaches likely to explain violence against the referee, Lorenz's theory of aggression (1969) was retained. According to the author, the aggressive manifestations of an individual are a product of culture. These are due to external factors such as coaches, players and spectators. It is an adaptive instinct, a tendency, an energy *"which is expressed originally by activity and then manifests itself in the most different forms, both individual and collective, as they result from learning and social transmission, from simple self-affirmation to barbarism"* (Hacker, 1972: 126). Life would be shaped by aggression. When the evolution of man allowed him to dominate his environment, to master increasingly sophisticated tools and techniques, instinct became harmful, aggressiveness destructive.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The aggression experienced by referees during sports competitions in team sports, particularly football, is a relatively recent subject in the sociology of sport, since it was first discussed less than fifty years ago. Isberg (1981) examined referees' attitudes towards aggression in ice hockey. They watched video sequences of films on the 1981 World Ice Hockey Championship. They evaluated the aggressiveness of incidents that occurred during each match on a 5-point scale. The results show that referees tolerate high levels of violence better in a game situation than coaches and players. Among these, older referees were found. During the 1990s, Anshel and Weinberg set out to examine, based on a self-assessment survey of 135 qualified American and Canadian referees, the styles of approach and avoidance of aggressive attitudes during basketball matches. Approach styles were summarized as: reporting/warning a technical foul, criticizing the coach, verbally expressing anger; avoidance styles were: ignoring the coach, quickly continuing the game,

ignoring the player. Differences between adaptation styles were found depending on the type of stress. In football, Folkesson *et al.*, (2002) analyzed the causes of threats and aggression during matches among 107 referees. Among the sources of these behaviors mentioned, three deserve to be mentioned: players, coaches and spectators. Threats and aggressions had an impact on the concentration, performance and motivation of referees. In addition, younger referees were more exposed to threats and aggressions. Referees with a pessimistic orientation were less inclined to fight against the difficulties associated with these aggressive behaviors, unlike referees with an optimistic orientation. In Sweden, Andersson (1983) devoted a study to the motivations of 36 referees to continue to referee football matches despite an apparently thankless task. After processing the questionnaires given to these referees, the intention to resign from their position as referee was highlighted by almost 2/3 of the referees. Among the reasons given, there was mainly the fatigue induced by all the overwhelming criticism, accepted reluctantly as a referee. The demands imposed on them for the performance of their tasks seemed unreasonable. Finally, Friman *et al.*, (2022) conducted a study on threats and aggression directed at football referees. This is an empirical study that included seven referees from the league and association levels. It was based on a phenomenological psychological approach, in order to understand the types of threats and aggression perceived by referees and how they experience them. The results show that the aggressions were all verbal and they came from players/coaches/spectators. The backhand and the decisions taken by the referee, directly opposed to the opinions of the latter were the most important sources of threats and aggressions.

Our contribution in this theme is around the phenomenon of aggression towards football referees in the African environment. We try to show that cultural diversity and ethnic conflicts, the stakes of sports competitions can lead players/coaches/spectators to adopt aggressive behavior towards referees.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Participants

This is a qualitative study based on interviews, carried out in Brazzaville from February to April 2024 during the 2024 sports season. It included referees from the Congolese Football Federation, officiating football matches in the Brazzaville League and those in the national championship. Initially, 63 referees, listed, approved and managed by the Federation were identified in Brazzaville. They were 58 men (92.1%) and 5 women (7.9%). The inclusion criteria were: being of Congolese nationality; being at least a federal referee in accordance with the certification standards of the central referees committee of FIFA (International Federation of Association Football); having refereed at least 2 football matches during the past sports season at league, national or African level; agreeing to participate in the study.

Thus, 17 referees, all male, were selected. However, when during an interview the statements collected were similar to those recorded previously, the interviewed

referee was not retained. Ultimately, 9 football referees, all male, constituted the study sample. Table 1 shows some individual characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Individual characteristics of participants

	Age (years)	Certification Level	Years in arbitration	Level of intervention
Jim	27	Federal	7	National elite
Greg	24	Federal	5	National elite
Tony	31	Federal	8	National elite
Craig	23	Federal	5	National elite
Teddy	25	Federal	7	National elite
Ryan	27	Federal	6	National elite
John	32	FIFA	14	National elite + International
Willy	29	Federal	8	National elite
Mike	26	Federal	6	National elite

Please note: the first names given to the referees are pseudonyms.

During the study period, the Brazzaville Football League brought together 14 football teams (8 men's and 6 women's).

3.2. Survey Tool

The survey work was based on a semi-directed individual interview. Its use required the development of an interview grid. This grid had three aims: to provide the framework for discussions with the respondents; to propose a distribution of time allocated to each of the groupings of themes; to identify the object of study with the groupings of themes. Thus, we developed a grid with open questions. These took into account the following points: (2) the sources of threats and aggression directed against referees; (2) refereeing decisions opposed to the opinions of players, coaches and spectators; (1) the types of threats and aggression; (4) reactions to these behaviors; (5) the management by referees of threats and stressful situations.

Conducting a study of threats and aggression against football referees requires the adoption of terminology and the precise definition of the terms used. For example, in football a legitimate tackle for possession of the ball may be interpreted as aggressive, but not necessarily as aggression for which the additional requirement of an illegitimate physical act must be met. This distinction can facilitate the underlying implications of "aggressive" and "aggression". Thus, verbal aggression has been defined as any verbal statements that are expressed against the referee and that are experienced as unpleasant (e.g., swearing, insults, and slander). Physical aggression has been defined as any action by which football players, coaches, or spectators intentionally attack the referee physically (e.g., pushing/shoving, kicking, or punching). The concept of threat refers to the verbal threat of imminent physical aggression.

The interview, lasting 30 to 45 minutes, was conducted using a dictaphone with a sound recording and

full transcription of each interview. The interviews took place at the home of each referee surveyed, on a day set by the referee.

3.3. Procedures

The implementation of this survey and its protocol were approved by the Football League and the Departmental Directorate of Sports and Physical Education of Brazzaville. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki and its revisions, as well as the guidelines on ethics and professional conduct of the National Commission for Ethics in Human and Social Sciences of the General Delegation of Scientific and Technical Research, near the Ministry in charge of scientific research in Congo. The participants were fully informed of the objectives of the study. Informed consent was obtained from each of them.

3.4. Content Analysis of Interviews

It relied on the methodology adopted by Folkesson *et al.* (2002). A targeted cross-coding of the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was therefore carried out, deductively applying the steps and milestones developed in Friman 's study *et al.*, (2004). For this, descriptive codes were used to record the timing and manifestation of the stages of each interview. Subsequently, the systematic combination method as proposed by Dubois and Gadde (2002, p.552) and whose theoretical framework is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1988), made it possible to analyze the situation of referees exposed to aggression during football matches.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Types and Perpetrators of Threats and Attacks

The respondents' comments highlighted the predominance of verbal aggression over threats towards referees (Table 2). No physical aggression was reported.

Table 2: Types of threats and verbal attacks directed against referees in Congo

Kind	Shape
Threats	Show a punch at the referee Walk towards the referee yelling.
Verbal aggression	Shouting at the referee Whistle at the referee Insulting the referee Insulting the referee Insulting the referee using ethnic language

Seven respondents reported the following comments made by spectators:

"We'll have your skin, you bastard"

"We know where you live, we will burn your house"

"Sold, we bought you, you poor fool"

In addition, three participants mentioned mockery, mostly related to the referee's physique.

"Look at his eyes like a frog. That's why you can't see the fouls."

"You move like a pregnant woman..."

"Look at that sickly boy who can't run".

Verbal attacks came more from spectators, while threats came from players and in some cases from coaches.

4.2. Arbitration Decisions, Sources of Threats and Aggression

The first source concerned match defeats, attributed by spectators to the referee's decisions and deemed not to comply with the rules. Here are some excerpts from referee remarks.

"It is common to hear that we are responsible for the loss. We are often accused of being bad referees." (Interview 2).

"A loss due to the referee happens every day." (Interview 7).

Players' failures are expressed in different ways. However, it is common for players to express their dissatisfaction with the referee as shown in the following statements.

"The guy who whistled was part of the team that lost on goal difference. I knew it was a complicated situation since the team claimed a free kick for touching the ball. From where I was, I had to approve the goal and they lost the championship." (Interview 5).

"...sometimes the crowd is aggressive. If the crowd supports a team that is not playing well, they can attack the referee." (Interview 8).

"When a good team meets a less good team and ends up winning the match, the players on the good team can get quite annoyed." (Interview 6).

"I think it's those who are unhappy with their own team who find the referees' mistakes rather than their own." (Interview 9).

Another referee considered offside as a source of many major problems that lead to aggressive behavior against the referee.

"The rules regarding offside situations change often. This gives rise to big discussions." (Interview 9).

In the same sense, another source of threat and aggression against referees, mentioned by those surveyed, is the decision related to giving the advantage of the field to a team when previously a foul is supposed to be committed by the opposing team, especially if it is committed within 20 m of the goal. In this regard, the lack of knowledge of the players, coaches and spectators about the rules is a source of many conflicts.

"...and it depends a lot on the lack of knowledge of the rules among players and the public." (Interview 6).

"It is rare that the rules change, but their interpretation changes from time to time. ...it is difficult for players and the public to get used to all these new interpretations." (Interview 8).

Moreover,

"There is a particular mentality among the supporters of certain teams. For example, the Diabes Noirs team, which has been playing in the first division of the national football championship since its creation, is supposed to have won the Congo Cup in recent years. So, beware of the referee who gives the home advantage to the opposing team within 20 m of the goal! This gives rise to whistling, shouting or obscene gestures." (Interview 8).

Referees sometimes have to make decisions that go against the opinions of players, coaches and spectators. In these cases, 7 referees were accused of making wrong decisions.

"It's hard to accept that I don't agree." (Interview 2).

"Often during a match, the crowd thinks you should have waved but you didn't." (Interview 4).

"Yes, it's always the case, it's everyone from the young players to the coaches who think you missed a free kick or that you're an idiot for abandoning the game." (Interview 5).

"...if they don't like the decision." (Interview 6).

"I missed an obvious offside. However, I didn't think I did anything wrong, but the coach did" (Interview 7).

"They probably think they could have done better themselves." (Interview 8).

"I didn't take out the flag and then he started yelling at me: 'it's offside', I knew it wasn't..." (Interview 9).

Five respondents admitted that they sometimes made mistakes. A lack of attention due to too many games in a week was cited as a source of aggression and threats.

"The main problem is that decisions can vary enormously from one match to another, which is naturally difficult to accept." (Interview 1).

"Some referees are very strict while others are not. This makes things difficult." (Interview 3).

"If something starts to go wrong in a match, you are responsible for the rest of the match." (Interview 4).

"The difference between players and a referee is that you can replace one player with another, but that's not possible with referees. Everyone can have a bad day." (Interview 7).

"...if you judge four or five games in a short period of time, in the fifth game it can be difficult to concentrate." (Interview 8).

4.3. Attitudes of Referees

The respondents mentioned several strategies for managing situations of aggression and threats encountered by referees during football matches. First, writing a report to the League or the Federation was mentioned, as well as raising awareness among family members about the incidents that occurred. Here are some excerpts from interviews.

"You call home and tell them not to answer any phone calls because it could be a threatening supporter." (Interview 5).

"I contacted the Football League office. I considered the threats from supporters of a team in second-to-last place in the league table to be a harmless incident, but my family became concerned and wanted me to take further action. I filed the complaint with the League." (Interview 7).

"Eight years ago, I received a murder threat from a member of a football team. Since then, I have not judged that team." (Interview 9).

However, six respondents acknowledged the importance of being calm in dealing with these stressful situations. *"Take a few days off."* (Interview 2).

"Try to stay as calm as possible and let the players and coaches know that you are the one in charge." (Interview 4).

"It's a good thing to tell them that you can't see everything on the ground when you're alone." (Interview 5).

"I used to say, 'It's not that easy' when I explained the situation to the players. Then they say, 'We know.' They understand because they see the situation from the same perspective as me." (Interview 6).

"If I have to make a report, I usually wait a day or two to think about the situation." (Interview 8).

"Seek advice and talk about the situation." (Interview 9).

Finally, three respondents noted the impact of keeping one's cool on managing aggressive behavior that occurred during matches.

"Don't worry about the sports crowd... They paid for the screaming." (Interview 1).

"The best thing to do is to ignore the player... We have the cards in hand if we want to resort to something." (Interview 4).

"Talk to the players and tell them you're wrong. That usually solves the problem." (Interview 7).

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to characterize the threats and aggressions suffered by Congolese referees during football matches and to identify their attitudes towards them. The comments collected highlight the following main observations: (i) most of the aggressions were verbal and no respondent expressed physical aggression; (ii) the sources of threats and aggressions were mainly spectators and players; (iii) the reactions of the referees called for the writing of reports addressed to the Football League or the Federation, but also self-control was an asset to deal with them.

As for verbal aggression, it takes different forms, between insults and remarks with a strong ethnic undertone. The latter, very present at the stadium, are prevalent in the Diables Noirs - Etoile du Congo matches. Thus, the matches between the two teams often give rise to [1], belittling and discriminatory verbal

¹ These are the first two teams created before independence in the popular neighborhoods; the first is headquartered in Baongo (inhabited mainly by the Kongo ethnic group), located in the southern zone of

Brazzaville. Its fan club is the most popular and organized in the Congo. As for the Etoile du Congo team, its headquarters is located in Ouenze, a commune in the northern zone of Brazzaville, and its supporters are

aggression from the public towards the referees. This type of remark is not specific to the Congolese context, Iranian researchers have reported the same animosities between spectators and referees during football matches (Torkfar *et al.*, 2011). Threats and mockery join verbal violence, forms which are at the origin of psychological harm towards referees.

As for the causes of threats and aggression, in our study refereeing decisions directly opposed to the opinions of players/coaches/spectators are important sources. These observations are consistent with those of several authors (Andersson, 1983; Folkesson *et al.*, 2002; Friman *et al.*, 2004). In Congo, especially in the national championship or the Congo Cup, it is undeniable that victory has an important value. Consequently, an unfavorable decision for the team whose audience is in the majority at the stadium is linked to strong emotional reactions such as irritation and aggressiveness of the spectators. At this level, the lack of knowledge of the rules of the game by the public constitutes an explanatory factor for aggressive behavior towards the referee. For example, in the case of referees' decisions on home field advantage during the game, an increase in incidents has been noted following supposedly incorrect judgments by the public, especially if the advantage is granted in favor of the home team compared to the away team in favor of the home team compared to the away team (Lovell *et al.*, 2014; Mason and Lovell, 2000; Page and Page, 2007). In the majority of games, visiting teams committed more infractions. Playing away from home tends to encourage teams to commit more infractions and generally impair their performance. These inferred differences may be due, in part, to factors including the aggressiveness or frustration displayed by the visiting team, or the use of more defensive tactics by the home team (Nevill & Holder, 1999). Therefore, any referee who gives such a team home-field advantage in a high-stakes competition is exposed to threats and aggression from fans. However, the most controversial, incorrect, or missed refereeing decisions are those awarded in favour of the home team. These observations support the assertion of many players and coaches that referees award more points for controversial decisions in favour of home teams (Waters & Lovell, 2002). Although the number of "biased" decisions made during a match may be relatively small, the importance of this observation is confirmed by Nevill and Holder's (1999) statement, "it only takes two or three crucial decisions in favor of the away team or the home team to give the home team an advantage" (p.236).

Furthermore, our survey showed that self-control was an asset in dealing with threats and aggression directed at referees. Indeed, it helps to compensate for the loss of self-confidence that has an effect on performance. The referee must expect to be

mostly from the Ngala ethnic group. For more than 30 years, the leaders of the Congo have come from the Ngala people.

responsible for managing stressful situations. In addition, the comments collected revealed the importance for referees to remain calm and not to deal personally with threats. Several respondents stressed the importance of explaining decisions to players and support staff. Successful communication seems to reduce aggressive behavior between players and coaches.

Torkfar 's study *et al.*, (2011) showed the significant effect of public involvement on the judgement of referees during the competition and that of the proximity of the stands. These observations are consistent with those of Debanne and Fontayne (2017), Pettersson (2007). However, our results contrast with those of Rasclé *et al.*, (2005). These studies found that proximity to the stands, fights between spectators and stadium security were the most important factors affecting referees' judgment, but proximity to the stands was the most important. Torkfar *et al.*, (2011) also noted a correlation between spectator physical aggression and proximity to the stands ($r=0.37$), but an indirect correlation between spectator verbal violence and proximity to the stands. It therefore seems necessary to raise public awareness at the football pitch. It is also appropriate to reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors among spectators by disseminating appropriate behavioral images so that spectators facing errors of judgment on the field by the referee are calm. The last practical solution is to use educational programs to organize psychological workshops for referees confronted with violence at the time of violence, which could lead to a reduction in violence among spectators and in turn lead to a healthy atmosphere in the stadium. This would lead to a reduction in stress and anxiety among referees when judging.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study once again show that threats and aggression against referees during matches are a real problem in the sports environment. This is an exploratory study in sub-Saharan Africa on this topic based on interviews with internationally and federally certified referees. Congolese referees are subject to verbal aggression, mainly from spectators and players. There is no doubt that this type of aggression from the public can be very frustrating and give rise to a feeling of injustice. These aggressions are attributable to the lack of knowledge about the rules of the game and the commitment of referees during the game. Among the strategies adopted by them to deal with these aggressive behaviors, self-control was mainly mentioned. However, research is needed to better clarify the relationship between referees' commitment to the game and statements that they should not take threats and aggression personally.

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