



healthcare

Special Issue Reprint

Improving Athletes' Performance and Avoiding Health Issues

Edited by
João Paulo Brito and Rafael Oliveira

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Improving Athletes' Performance and Avoiding Health Issues

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Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Novi Sad • Cluj • Manchester

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This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Healthcare* (ISSN 2227-9032) (available at: www.mdpi.com/journal/healthcare/special_issues/athletes_performance).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

| |
|--|
| Lastname, A.A.; Lastname, B.B. Article Title. <i>Journal Name</i> Year , <i>Volume Number</i> , Page Range. |
|--|

ISBN 978-3-0365-8971-8 (Hbk)

ISBN 978-3-0365-8970-1 (PDF)

doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-0365-8970-1

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| About the Editors | ix |
| Preface | xi |
| Rafael Oliveira and João Paulo Brito Load Monitoring and Its Relationship with Healthcare in Sports Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023 , <i>11</i> , 2330, doi:10.3390/healthcare11162330 | 1 |
| Rafael Oliveira, João Paulo Brito, Adrián Moreno-Villanueva, Matilde Nalha, Markel Rico-González and Filipe Manuel Clemente Reference Values for External and Internal Training Intensity Monitoring in Young Male Soccer Players: A Systematic Review Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2021 , <i>9</i> , 1567, doi:10.3390/healthcare9111567 | 6 |
| Hadi Nobari, João Paulo Brito, Jorge Pérez-Gómez and Rafael Oliveira Variability of External Intensity Comparisons between Official and Friendly Soccer Matches in Professional Male Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2021 , <i>9</i> , 1708, doi:10.3390/healthcare9121708 | 22 |
| Mauro Miguel, Rafael Oliveira, João Paulo Brito, Nuno Loureiro, Javier García-Rubio and Sergio Jose Ibáñez External Match Load in Amateur Soccer: The Influence of Match Location and Championship Phase Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 594, doi:10.3390/healthcare10040594 | 32 |
| Roghayyeh Gholizadeh, Hadi Nobari, Lotfali Bolboli, Marefat Siahkoughian and João Paulo Brito Comparison of Measurements of External Load between Professional Soccer Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 1116, doi:10.3390/healthcare10061116 | 46 |
| Hadi Nobari, Akhilesh Kumar Ramachandran, João Paulo Brito and Rafael Oliveira Quantification of Pre-Season and In-Season Training Intensity across an Entire Competitive Season of Asian Professional Soccer Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 1367, doi:10.3390/healthcare10081367 | 61 |
| Ana Filipa Silva, Francisco Tomás González-Fernández, Rodrigo Aquino, Zeki Akyildiz, Luiz Palucci Vieira and Mehmet Yıldız et al. Analyzing the within and between Players Variability of Heart Rate and Locomotor Responses in Small-Sided Soccer Games Performed Repeatedly over a Week Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 1412, doi:10.3390/healthcare10081412 | 76 |
| Renato Fernandes, Halil İbrahim Ceylan, Filipe Manuel Clemente, João Paulo Brito, Alexandre Duarte Martins and Hadi Nobari et al. In-Season Microcycle Quantification of Professional Women Soccer Players—External, Internal and Wellness Measures Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 695, doi:10.3390/healthcare10040695 | 91 |
| Juan M. García-Ceberino, María G. Gamero, Sergio J. Ibáñez and Sebastián Feu Are Subjective Intensities Indicators of Player Load and Heart Rate in Physical Education? Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 428, doi:10.3390/healthcare10030428 | 102 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Alfredo Irurtia, Víctor M. Torres-Mestre, Álex Cebrián-Ponce, Marta Carrasco-Marginet, Albert Altarriba-Bartés and Marc Vives-Usón et al. Physical Fitness and Performance in Talented & Untalented Young Chinese Soccer Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 98, doi:10.3390/healthcare10010098 | 116 |
| Dragan Mijatovic, Dragan Krivokapic, Sime Versic, Goran Dimitric and Natasa Zenic Change of Direction Speed and Reactive Agility in Prediction of Injury in Football; Prospective Analysis over One Half-Season Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 440, doi:10.3390/healthcare10030440 | 129 |
| Hadi Mohammadi Nia Samakosh, João Paulo Brito, Seyed Sadredin Shojaedin, Malihe Hadadnezhad and Rafael Oliveira What Does Provide Better Effects on Balance, Strength, and Lower Extremity Muscle Function in Professional Male Soccer Players with Chronic Ankle Instability? Hopping or a Balance Plus Strength Intervention? A Randomized Control Study Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 1822, doi:10.3390/healthcare10101822 | 141 |
| Silvana Loana de Oliveira-Sousa, Martha Cecilia León-Garzón, Mariano Gacto-Sánchez, Alfonso Javier Ibáñez-Vera, Luis Espejo-Antúnez and Felipe León-Morillas Does Inspiratory Muscle Training Affect Static Balance in Soccer Players? A Pilot Randomized Controlled Clinical Trial Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 262, doi:10.3390/healthcare11020262 | 159 |
| Chien-Nan Liao, Chun-Hao Fan, Wei-Hsiu Hsu, Chia-Fang Chang, Pei-An Yu and Liang-Tseng Kuo et al. Twelve-Week Lower Trapezius-Centred Muscular Training Regimen in University Archers Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 171, doi:10.3390/healthcare10010171 | 172 |
| Chien-Nan Liao, Chun-Hao Fan, Wei-Hsiu Hsu, Chia-Fang Chang, Pei-An Yu and Liang-Tseng Kuo et al. Correction: Liao et al. Twelve-Week Lower Trapezius-Centred Muscular Training Regimen in University Archers. <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 171 Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 378, doi:10.3390/healthcare10020378 | 182 |
| Hakan Yapici, Yusuf Soyulu, Mehmet Gulu, Mehmet Kutlu, Sinan Ayan and Nuray Bayar Muluk et al. Agility Skills, Speed, Balance and CMJ Performance in Soccer: A Comparison of Players with and without a Hearing Impairment Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 247, doi:10.3390/healthcare11020247 | 183 |
| Mário C. Espada, Marco Jardim, Rafael Assunção, Alexandre Estaca, Cátia C. Ferreira and Dalton M. Pessôa Filho et al. Lower Limb Unilateral and Bilateral Strength Asymmetry in High-Level Male Senior and Professional Football Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 1579, doi:10.3390/healthcare11111579 | 196 |
| André Rebelo, João R. Pereira, Diogo V. Martinho, João P. Duarte, Manuel J. Coelho-e-Silva and João Valente-dos-Santos How to Improve the Reactive Strength Index among Male Athletes? A Systematic Review with Meta-Analysis Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 593, doi:10.3390/healthcare10040593 | 208 |
| Akhmad Fajri Widodo, Cheng-Wen Tien, Chien-Wei Chen and Shih-Chiung Lai Isotonic and Isometric Exercise Interventions Improve the Hamstring Muscles' Strength and Flexibility: A Narrative Review Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 811, doi:10.3390/healthcare10050811 | 225 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Xing Zhang, Siyuan Feng and Hansen Li The Effect of Velocity Loss on Strength Development and Related Training Efficiency: A Dose–Response Meta–Analysis Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 337, doi:10.3390/healthcare11030337 | 235 |
| Yake Chen, Yonghwan Kim and Moonyoung Choi Effects of Aquatic Training and Bicycling Training on Leg Function and Range of Motion in Amateur Athletes with Meniscal Allograft Transplantation during Intermediate-Stage Rehabilitation Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 1090, doi:10.3390/healthcare10061090 | 246 |
| Aurelio Olmedilla Zafra, Bruno Martins, F. Javier Ponseti-Verdaguer, Roberto Ruiz-Barquín and Alejandro García-Mas It Is Not Just Stress: A Bayesian Approach to the Shape of the Negative Psychological Features Associated with Sport Injuries Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 236, doi:10.3390/healthcare10020236 | 258 |
| Laura C. Sánchez-Sánchez, Clemente Franco, Alberto Amutio, Jaqueline García-Silva and Juan González-Hernández Influence of Mindfulness on Levels of Impulsiveness, Moods and Pre-Competition Anxiety in Athletes of Different Sports Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 898, doi:10.3390/healthcare11060898 | 273 |
| Jamel Hajji, Aiche Sabah, Musheer A. Aljaberi, Chung-Ying Lin and Lin-Yi Huang The Effect of Ramadan Fasting on the Coping Strategies Used by Male Footballers Affiliated with the Tunisian First Professional League Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 1053, doi:10.3390/healthcare11071053 | 285 |
| Ryszard Makarowski, Radu Predoiu, Andrzej Piotrowski, Karol Görner, Alexandra Predoiu and Rafael Oliveira et al. Coping Strategies and Perceiving Stress among Athletes during Different Waves of the COVID-19 Pandemic—Data from Poland, Romania, and Slovakia Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 1770, doi:10.3390/healthcare10091770 | 297 |
| Samir Rawat, Abhijit P. Deshpande, Radu Predoiu, Andrzej Piotrowski, Romualdas Malinauskas and Alexandra Predoiu et al. The Personality and Resilience of Competitive Athletes as BMW Drivers—Data from India, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 811, doi:10.3390/healthcare11060811 | 314 |
| Gabriella Pinto, Rosamaria Militello, Angela Amoresano, Pietro Amedeo Modesti, Alessandra Modesti and Simone Luti Relationships between Sex and Adaptation to Physical Exercise in Young Athletes: A Pilot Study Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 358, doi:10.3390/healthcare10020358 | 329 |
| Simone Luti, Rosamaria Militello, Gabriella Pinto, Anna Illiano, Angela Amoresano and Giovanni Chiappetta et al. Chronic Training Induces Metabolic and Proteomic Response in Male and Female Basketball Players: Salivary Modifications during In-Season Training Programs Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023, 11, 241, doi:10.3390/healthcare11020241 | 347 |
| Marius Baranauskas, Ingrida Kupčiūnaitė and Rimantas Stukas The Association between Rapid Weight Loss and Body Composition in Elite Combat Sports Athletes Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022, 10, 665, doi:10.3390/healthcare10040665 | 365 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Paulo J. Puccinelli, Claudio A. B. de Lira, Rodrigo L. Vancini, Pantelis T. Nikolaidis, Beat Knechtle and Thomas Rosemann et al. The Performance, Physiology and Morphology of Female and Male Olympic-Distance Triathletes Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 797, doi:10.3390/healthcare10050797 | 377 |
| José Geraldo Barbosa, Claudio Andre Barbosa de Lira, Rodrigo Luiz Vancini, Vinicius Ribeiro dos Anjos, Lavínia Vivan and Aldo Seffrin et al. Physiological Features of Olympic-Distance Amateur Triathletes, as Well as Their Associations with Performance in Women and Men: A Cross-Sectional Study Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023 , <i>11</i> , 622, doi:10.3390/healthcare11040622 | 386 |
| Hyoung Jean Beak, Wonil Park, Ji Hye Yang and Jooyoung Kim Effect of Low-Intensity Aerobic Training Combined with Blood Flow Restriction on Body Composition, Physical Fitness, and Vascular Responses in Recreational Runners Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 1789, doi:10.3390/healthcare10091789 | 398 |
| Celal Bulgay, Işık Bayraktar, Hasan Huseyin Kazan, Damla Selin Yıldırım, Erdal Zorba and Onur Akman et al. Evaluation of the Association of VDR rs2228570 Polymorphism with Elite Track and Field Athletes' Competitive Performance Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2023 , <i>11</i> , 681, doi:10.3390/healthcare11050681 | 407 |
| Vicente Javier Clemente-Suárez, Santos Villafaina, Tomás García-Calvo and Juan Pedro Fuentes-García Impact of HIIT Sessions with and without Cognitive Load on Cortical Arousal, Accuracy and Perceived Exertion in Amateur Tennis Players Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 767, doi:10.3390/healthcare10050767 | 418 |
| Joaquim Paulo Antunes, Rafael Oliveira, Victor Machado Reis, Félix Romero, João Moutão and João Paulo Brito Comparison between Olympic Weightlifting Lifts and Derivatives for External Load and Fatigue Monitoring Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 2499, doi:10.3390/healthcare10122499 | 426 |
| Konstantinos Papadimitriou The Influence of Aerobic Type Exercise on Active Crohn's Disease Patients: The Incidence of an Elite Athlete Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 713, doi:10.3390/healthcare10040713 | 443 |
| Carlos Castellar-Otín, Miguel Lecina and Francisco Pradas Bone Turnover Alterations after Completing a Multistage Ultra-Trail: A Case Study Reprinted from: <i>Healthcare</i> 2022 , <i>10</i> , 798, doi:10.3390/healthcare10050798 | 448 |

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In 2022 and 2023, he was awarded with the 1st place for his contribution to research and development by the Polytechnic Institute of Santarem. He was also awarded with an honorable mention as a researcher with the best citation rate in scientific publication in 2022 and the 1st place as a researcher with the best citation rate in scientific publication in 2023 by the Life Quality Research Centre.

Preface

In several elite sports, training and match loads are assessed. However, only clubs with the most resources and money can apply more valid and reliable tools. For instance, at the regional level, clubs and their coaches do not have sufficient resources to allow them to precisely monitor the training/match loads. As an example, elite football generates the most media and commercial attention, but it is at the regional level that the greatest numbers of clubs, players, and coaches are found. Meanwhile, studies that investigate load monitoring among teams at the regional level are sparse.

The planning and quantification of intensities are important for optimizing athletes' physical fitness to guarantee wellbeing and a better performance in male and female athletes.

Considering other sports, such as futsal, basketball, volleyball, rugby, hockey, and handball, resources could be equally distributed to apply proper load management. Conducting studies at the regional level enables the development of knowledge about athlete populations, while promoting research on the evolution of sports at all competitive levels will also contribute to avoiding any kind of healthcare issues, such as injury or illness.

Therefore, the aim of this Special Issue, which now constitutes a reprint, was to compile and present information on load and competition monitoring, especially in less resourceful sports, and the effects of gender, as well as to demonstrate the use of various tools for monitoring load to avoid healthcare issues among athletes.

Any coach or practitioner of any sport who is interested in improving their understanding of the relationship between intensity control and injury prevention or overtraining would be interested in reading this reprint.

João Paulo Brito and Rafael Oliveira

Editors

Load Monitoring and Its Relationship with Healthcare in Sports

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Load monitoring consists of training/match demand quantification as well as wellness and readiness to maximize the likelihood of optimal athletic performance [1]. The literature divides load into two dimensions: internal and external. Internal load is associated with psychophysiological demands that can be objectively and subjectively measured (e.g., heart rate and rating of perceived exertion, respectively) [2,3]. External load is associated with mechanical/locomotor demands, usually collected by global positioning systems, global navigation satellite systems, local positioning systems, and inertial measurement units that belong to micro-electro-mechanical systems (which provide a combination of 3D accelerometers, 3D gyroscopes, and 3D magnetometers). Despite different technologies, they provide external load measures, such as distances covered at various running speeds, accelerations, decelerations, player load, and others [2–5].

Indeed, there are other types of wearable technology that were considered to be among the top worldwide fitness trends in 2016 and 2017 [6]. Such technology (i.e., smartwatches and mobiles) allows for the quantification of different physical variables such as step counts, metabolic work, or power [7].

Another relevant dimension to monitor is the wellness/well-being of athletes, which is regularly collected by questionnaires that include different categories such as fatigue, quality of sleep, muscle soreness, mood, and stress [8,9]. For instance, a systematic review showed several relationships between wellness and training load measures that ranged from no association to a very large association [10].

The monitoring of different dimensions is useful in sports to optimize training adaptation, which can consequently improve performance and reduce injury risk [11]. Still, inappropriate load management can be a significant risk factor for acute illness and overtraining syndrome [12]. Therefore, all quantification can contribute towards better healthcare for recreational or elite sport athletes. However, there are few research papers that combine load monitoring and its relationship with healthcare in sports.

The present Special Issue contributed to the field with 35 articles. Of those, 16 articles involved only soccer athletes. For instance, one study was a systematic review that summarized studies about external and internal training load monitoring to provide range values for the main measures in young male soccer players [13]. Another study compared the external load between official and friendly matches and between the first and second halves of professional soccer players [14], while another analyzed differences among playing positions: whether playing home/away matches and if playing in the first or second part of the championship influence the external load of amateur soccer [15]. Moreover, external load was compared between starters and non-starters [16] and among the playing positions [17] of professional soccer players based on different parts of a full season. A sub-analysis of a specific type of training exercise (i.e., small-sided games) was performed to analyze the between-session and within-player variability of heart rates and external load of young male soccer players [18]. While the previous literature included male athletes, the analysis

Citation: Oliveira, R.; Brito, J.P. Load Monitoring and Its Relationship with Healthcare in Sports. *Healthcare* **2023**, *11*, 2330. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11162330>

Received: 3 August 2023

Accepted: 10 August 2023

Published: 18 August 2023



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of female professional soccer players was also conducted by quantifying external and internal load as well as the wellness profile of a typical microcycle [19]. Another study tested objective and subjective external and internal loads in primary education students [20].

Other investigations included the analysis of physical fitness and competitive performance in different age categories (8.0–9.9, 10.0–11.9, and 12.0–13.9 years) [21] and in professional soccer [22]. In this regard, different intervention protocols were applied to professional soccer players [23,24] and archers [25] to improve several fitness characteristics. In the same way, fitness and technical skill were compared among young soccer players [26]. Additionally, the relationship between different inter-limb jumping asymmetries and performance measures in male senior and professional soccer players was analyzed [27]. Furthermore, the effectiveness of different training programs on the reactive strength index was compared in a systematic review with a meta-analysis [28], isotonic and isometric exercise interventions were reviewed to analyze the strength and flexibility of the hamstring muscles [29], and a dose-response meta-analysis was conducted to assess the velocity loss effects on strength development and related training efficiency [30]. In fact, other authors analyzed different sports training protocols. For instance, aquatic and bicycling training was applied to improve leg function and range of motion in the intermediate stage of rehabilitation in amateur athletes that underwent meniscal allograft transplantation [31].

Other negative psychological variables, such as stress, injury, anxiety, and depression in adult soccer players, were also analyzed [32]. In this regard, one study applied a mindfulness program to address levels of impulsivity, mood, and pre-competition anxiety in samples of athletics, tennis, swimming, basketball, handball, volleyball, and soccer athletes [33]. Coping strategies were another topic analyzed in professional soccer during Ramadan fasting [34], as well as in other sports than soccer, such as handball, martial arts, rugby, basketball, athletics, aerobic and artistic gymnastics, volleyball, tennis, and swimming during the COVID-19 pandemic [35]. Lastly, the personality and resilience of competitive drivers were another topic of research [36].

In basketball, one study compared the redox, hormonal, metabolic, and lipid profiles between adult male and female athletes and sedentary controls [37], while others characterized the salivary proteome and metabolome of highly trained female and male young basketball players [38].

Body composition and rapid weight loss were another topic of analysis for combat athletes [39]. Moreover, not only body composition but also physiology and morphology were compared between male and female Olympic-distance triathletes [40,41]. Another study analyzed the effects of low-intensity aerobic training combined with blood flow restriction on body composition, physical fitness, and vascular responses in recreational runners [42]. An analysis of the vitamin D receptor (VDR), the rs2228570 polymorphism, and its effect on elite athletes' performance was also compared between track and field athletes with non-athletes (controls with a physical activity record) [43].

In tennis, high-intensity interval training effects in athletes with and without cognitive load were analyzed on accuracy, critical flicker fusion threshold, and rating of perceived exertion [44].

In Olympic weightlifting, a comparison of the fatigue prompted by the "Clean and Jerk", and "the Snatch" and their derivative exercises among male and female participants was performed [45].

A case study about the influence of swimming training on an athlete with active Chron's disease, where scarce research exists, was conducted [46]. Finally, another case study analyzed four athletes who participated in a 768 km ultra-trail race for 11 days to address bone turnover alterations [47].

This Special Issue provides relevant information to update the state of the art in this field. It addresses several sports, including young, professional, recreational, male, and female athletes. Moreover, it addresses some gaps in the literature (e.g., Chron's disease, Olympic weightlifting, or velocity speed loss). Notwithstanding, this Special Issue, along

with its included studies, contributes information to improve load monitoring (of training and competition) and healthcare through direct or indirect research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: R.O. and J.P.B.; writing—original draft: R.O. and J.P.B.; writing—review and editing: R.O. and J.P.B.; project administration: R.O. and J.P.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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