

1 The influence of playing surface on the loading response to soccer-specific activity

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3 4 **Abstract**

5 **Context:** The influence of playing surface on injury risk in soccer is contentious, and
6 contemporary technologies permit an in-vivo assessment of mechanical loading on the

7 player. **Objective:** To quantify the influence of playing surface on the PlayerLoad elicited
8 during soccer-specific activity. **Design:** Repeated measures, field-based. **Setting:**

9 Regulation soccer pitches. **Participants:** 15 amateur soccer players (22.1 ± 2.4 yrs), injury
10 free with ≥ 6 yrs competitive experience. **Interventions:** Each player completed

11 randomised order trials of a soccer-specific field test on natural turf, astroturf and third
12 generation artificial turf. GPS units were located at C7 and the mid-tibia of each leg to

13 measure triaxial acceleration (100Hz). **Main Outcome Measures:** Total accumulated
14 PlayerLoad in each movement plane was calculated for each trial. Ratings of perceived

15 exertion (RPE) and visual analogue scales (VAS) assessing lower-limb muscle soreness
16 were measured as markers of fatigue. **Results:** ANOVA revealed no significant main

17 effect for playing surface on total PlayerLoad ($P = 0.55$), distance covered ($P = 0.75$), or
18 post-exercise measures of RPE ($P = 0.98$) and VAS ($P = 0.61$). There was a significant

19 main effect for GPS location ($P < 0.001$), with lower total loading elicited at C7 than mid-
20 tibia ($P < 0.001$), but with no difference between limbs ($P = 0.70$). There was no unit

21 placement \times surface interaction ($P = 0.98$). There was also a significant main effect for
22 GPS location on the relative planar contributions to loading ($P < 0.001$). Relative planar

23 contributions to loading in the AP:ML:V planes was 25:27:48 at C7 and 34:32:34 at mid-
24 tibia. **Conclusions:** PlayerLoad metrics suggest that playing surface does not influence

25 mechanical loading during soccer-specific activity (not including tackling). Clinical

26 reasoning should consider that PlayerLoad magnitude and axial contributions were
27 sensitive to unit placement, highlighting opportunities in the objective monitoring of load
28 during rehabilitation.

29 **Key Words: PlayerLoad, soccer, injury, playing surface**

30

31 **Introduction**

32 Soccer is characterised by an irregular, intermittent, and multi-directional activity profile,
33 increasing the complexity of its mechanical demands. The mechanical demands of soccer
34 and subsequent injury risk might be further influenced by the nature of the playing surface,¹
35 an extrinsic risk factor for soccer injury that has received relatively little consideration.
36 Soccer is traditionally performed on natural turf,² but artificial surfaces are increasingly
37 being used for both training and match-play due to greater consistency of the playing
38 surface, greater availability in respect to climatic challenges, and reduced maintenance costs.
39 However, each variation of playing surface will have specific characteristics and
40 mechanical properties,³ with implications for mechanical loading and subsequent risk of
41 injury.⁴

42 Reviews of the literature have typically reported no difference in overall incidence rates
43 between natural and artificial playing surfaces.^{5,6} However, the incidence of ankle injuries
44 has been associated with an increased risk on artificial surfaces.⁷⁻¹² Increased ankle
45 inversion and external rotation during cutting movements have been reported on artificial
46 surfaces,¹ with the task chosen to reflect the common mechanism of injury in soccer. The
47 influence of playing surface on injury risk might therefore be specific to injury site and type,
48 in part explaining the equivocal nature of the epidemiology literature.

49 Contemporary developments in GPS-based micro-technologies such as the tri-axial
50 accelerometer have provided an in-vivo measure of external loading in sports such as soccer.

51 ^{13,14} Brown and Greig used tri-axial accelerometry to retrospectively analyse the loading
52 response to a lateral ankle sprain injury sustained by a professional soccer player.¹⁵ When
53 compared with the squad mean for the same training session, the injured player elicited
54 increased magnitude of loading in the mediolateral plane. The loading pattern was
55 consistent with the mechanism of lateral ankle sprain injury and highlights potential
56 association between loading response and injury risk. Total loading as relates to
57 accumulated workload via exposure to training and competition has also been strongly
58 associated with injury occurrence in elite youth soccer,¹⁶ and collegiate football.¹⁷
59 The GPS unit is typically worn in a customised vest which positions the accelerometer at
60 approximately C7, a location primarily based upon enhancing satellite reception for the
61 GPS-derived analysis metrics. However, recent studies have highlighted the sensitivity of
62 loading magnitude to unit placement, with alternative sites being developed in response to
63 specific injury risk.^{18,19} In a sport-specific example, Greig and Nagy compared C7 vs L5
64 loading given the prevalence of lumbar injuries in cricket fast bowlers.¹⁸ In relation to the
65 high prevalence of ankle injuries in soccer, Greig et al. recently used a mid-tibia placement
66 to quantify loading during functional rehabilitation tasks aligned to ankle sprain injury.¹⁹
67 The mid-tibia site was selected as providing anatomical relevance to the ankle (given the
68 prevalence of ankle sprain injury in soccer), without constraining movement. Furthermore,
69 the PlayerLoad metric can be calculated in each axial plane, providing greater richness of
70 data in respect to the mechanism and aetiology of ankle sprain injury, and with high
71 ecological validity.^{15,18,19} The aim of the current study was therefore to quantify the
72 influence of playing surface on the loading response to soccer-specific activity, with loading
73 quantified at C7 and mid-tibia.

74

75 **Methods**

76 *Design*

77 The study was a repeated-measures design. To increase the ecological validity of our study,
78 all analyses were conducted on regulation soccer pitches. Three experimental trials were
79 completed in a randomized order, dictated by playing surface: natural turf (Grass), 2nd
80 generation ‘astro-turf’ (Astro) comprising a sand-based surface with short synthetic grass,
81 and third-generation artificial turf (3G) comprising long synthetic grass with shock
82 absorbent rubber crumb infill between the grass fibres.

83 The soccer-specific field test ²⁰ was standardised between trials, so that the playing surface
84 and the location of the GPS unit were the independent variables. The total accumulated
85 PlayerLoad in the anteroposterior, mediolateral and vertical planes were the primary
86 dependent variables. To account for confounding variables that might influence the loading
87 response, test performance was quantified in terms of distance covered. Additional outcome
88 measures in rating of perceived exertion (RPE) and a visual analogue scale (VAS) measure
89 of lower-limb muscle soreness were also recorded to reflect the perceptual influence of
90 playing surface.

91 *Participants*

92 Fifteen amateur male soccer players (22.13 ± 2.36 years) participated in the current study.
93 Inclusion criteria specified that in addition to weekly matches players had typical training
94 volumes ≥ 3 sessions \cdot week⁻¹, had not suffered an injury in the 6 months prior to the
95 commencement of the study, were outfield players with ≥ 6 years competitive experience.
96 All bowlers provided written consent, and the project was approved by the departmental
97 research ethics committee, in accord with the Helsinki Declaration.

98 *Procedures*

99 Players completed three experimental trials, interspersed by a minimum of 72 hours.²¹ A
100 familiarisation trial was completed with all players prior to testing to facilitate maximal
101 effort on the soccer-specific field test. Players were requested to refrain from vigorous
102 exercise, alcohol and caffeine for 48 hours prior to the testing. All sessions were conducted
103 at the same time of day to avoid any confounding interference from circadian rhythms, and
104 specifically between 12:00 to 15:00 hrs to reflect competition practice of this cohort. Given
105 the focus on playing surface, meteorological conditions were assessed during testing²² to
106 ensure the sessions occurred on dry days with minimal wind (4 - 5 m/s) and consistent
107 temperatures. The surfaces were dry prior to the sessions, with watering of the turfs
108 occurring on the preceding day to the testing. Players completed a standardised pre-test
109 warm-up reflecting match-day practice, and incorporating a further two familiarisation laps
110 of the exercise protocol at a sub-maximal speed.

111 Each testing session comprised completion of a protocol designed to represent movements
112 that are exhibited in soccer on a regular occurrence, shown schematically in Figure 1.²⁰ The
113 test is of 16.5 min duration, with players completing 40 repetitions of 15 sec bouts of high
114 intensity (HI) activity, interspersed with 10 sec bouts of low intensity (LI) active recovery.
115 An auditory signal informed the participants of the start and end of each bout of activity. At
116 the end of each bout of HI activity, the participant would stop at the nearest cone before
117 commencing the 10 second period of active recovery. The LI active recovery phase
118 comprised the completion of a walk to the recovery area and back to the cone where the
119 participant finished the last bout of HI activity.

120

121 ** Insert Figure 1 near here **

122

123 During each testing session the player was fitted with three GPS devices (MinimaxX S4,
124 Catapult, Scoresby, Australia) located at C7 and the posterior aspect of the mid-tibia of the
125 dominant leg (DL, defined as preferred kicking leg) and non-dominant leg (NDL). The
126 accelerometer (Kionix KX94, Kionix, Ithaca, New York, USA) embedded within the GPS
127 unit collects uni-axial data at a sampling frequency of 100 Hz. Subsequently, the total
128 accumulated PlayerLoad™ is calculated based on the rate of change in acceleration.²³ In the
129 current study PlayerLoad is calculated discretely in each of the mediolateral,
130 anteroposterior and vertical planes of movement. Overall distance covered during each trial
131 was obtained from the GPS devices to ensure standardised performance across the testing
132 conditions.

133 Post-exercise, a rating of perceived exertion (RPE) was collected with the implementation
134 of the Borg 6 – 20 scale to determine the participant's overall sense of exertion. A 100mm
135 visual analogue scale (VAS) was used to assess the muscle soreness of the lower limbs,
136 when in a squat position.²⁴ The 100mm scale was anchored via the phrases 'not sore at all'
137 and 'worst pain'.

138 *Statistical Analysis*

139 A repeated-measures general linear model (GLM) was chosen as an appropriate parametric
140 test to investigate main effects for playing surface and GPS location in uni-axial PlayerLoad
141 in each plane. A surface \times location interaction was also examined. This model was adapted
142 to one-way ANOVAs for the assessment of the perceptual measures (RPE, VAS) and
143 distance covered to quantify the main effect for playing surface. The assumptions of
144 normality associated with the general linear model were assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk
145 test to ensure model adequacy, with none of the variables violating any of the assumptions.
146 Where significant main effects or interactions were observed, post-hoc pairwise
147 comparisons with a Bonferroni correction factor were applied. Main effects were supported

148 with partial eta squared (η^2) calculated as a measure of effect size and classified as small (\leq
149 0.059), moderate (0.060 – 0.137), and large (\geq 0.138). All data are subsequently presented
150 as mean \pm SD, with statistical significance accepted at $P \leq 0.05$. All statistical analysis was
151 completed using PASW Statistics Editor 22.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).
152 All statistical analysis was completed using PASW Statistics Editor 22.0 for Windows
153 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

154

155 **Results**

156 Figure 2 summarises the influence of playing surface and GPS location on total
157 accumulated PlayerLoad, defined as the sum of the three planes. There was no main effect
158 for surface ($P = 0.55$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$), but there was a significant main effect for unit location
159 ($P < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.823$). Post-hoc testing revealed that total loading was significantly
160 higher at each mid-tibia than at C7 ($P < 0.001$), but no difference between the dominant
161 and non-dominant limbs ($P = 0.70$). There was no surface \times location interaction ($P = 0.98$,
162 $\eta^2 = 0.003$).

163

164 ** Insert Figure 2 near here **

165

166 This same pattern was evident in each axial plane, as summarised in Table 1. There was
167 no main effect for surface in the anteroposterior ($P = 0.31$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$), mediolateral ($P =$
168 0.70, $\eta^2 = 0.006$), or vertical ($P = 0.76$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$) loading. There was a significant main
169 effect for unit location, with loading significantly lower at mid-tibia than at C7 in all
170 planes ($P < 0.001$), but with the two limbs no different to each other in all planes ($P \geq$
171 0.27). There was no surface \times location interaction in any plane ($P \geq 0.83$, $\eta^2 \leq 0.012$).

172

173

** Insert Table 1 near here **

174

175 Figure 3 summarises the influence of playing surface and GPS location on the relative
176 axial contributions to total load. There was no main effect for surface in the
177 anteroposterior ($P = 0.60$, $\eta^2 = 0.008$), mediolateral ($P = 0.56$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$), or vertical ($P =$
178 0.45 , $\eta^2 = 0.013$) relative planar contributions to loading. There was a significant main
179 effect for unit location ($P < 0.001$) in all relative planar contributions (anteroposterior $\eta^2 =$
180 0.777 ; mediolateral $\eta^2 = 0.042$; vertical $\eta^2 = 0.081$). The vertical contribution to loading
181 was significantly higher at C7 than mid-tibia ($P < 0.001$), with no difference between
182 limbs ($P = 0.92$). In contrast, the anteroposterior and mediolateral contributions to loading
183 were significantly lower at C7 than mid-tibia ($P < 0.001$), with no difference between
184 limbs ($P = 0.20$ and $P = 0.13$ respectively). The average relative contributions to loading
185 in the AP:ML:V planes was 25:27:48 at C7 and 34:32:34 at mid-tibia. There was no
186 surface \times location interaction in any plane ($P \geq 0.26$, $\eta^2 \leq 0.042$).

187

188

** Insert Figure 3 near here **

189

190 There was no significant main effect for playing surface on the total distance covered
191 during the soccer-specific field test ($P = 0.75$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$), with distance maintained at an
192 average of 1890m across all trials. Similarly, there was no influence of playing surface on
193 post-exercise RPE ($P = 0.98$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$) which was consistent at 15.6 across trials, or on
194 post-exercise VAS scores consistent at 45.5mm ($P = 0.61$, $\eta^2 = 0.023$).

195

196 **Discussion**

197 The aim of the current study was to investigate the influence of playing surface on the
198 mechanical loading response to soccer-specific exercise. Playing surface was found to have
199 no effect on the loading response, when considered as a total accumulated value or when
200 considered in each axial plane. Since loading magnitude has been associated with increased
201 risk of injury,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ this suggests no increased risk of injury when using artificial surfaces
202 rather than natural turf, supporting the majority of epidemiological studies.^{5,6}

203 Playing surface also had no influence on performance quantified as total distance covered,
204 or on perceptual markers of effort and subsequent localised muscle soreness. Whilst
205 previous research has identified no surface effect on prolonged soccer activity,^{8,10,11} issues
206 have been raised in terms of players' perceptions of an increased risk of injury when playing
207 on artificial turf.²⁵ Players have specifically reported that artificial surfaces are more
208 physically demanding,^{24,26} which is contrary to the perceptions of the players in the current
209 study. These differences might simply be founded in the relative exposure and
210 familiarisation with artificial surfaces and the nature of the physical task, and therefore direct
211 comparison between studies should be treated with caution. In the present study the lack of
212 a surface effect in performance and perceptual measures were consistent with a lack of
213 surface effect in the loading response.

214 A secondary aim of the current study was to compare the loading elicited at C7 in
215 comparison with a lower-limb site used to generate greater validity in respect to injury
216 incidence in soccer. In the current study the unit placement was sensitive to both the
217 magnitude and pattern of loading, with the mid-tibia eliciting significantly higher total
218 loading magnitudes in all planes, and greater relative contributions to loading in the

219 anteroposterior and mediolateral planes. The reduced load at C7 might partly be attributed
220 to the dissipation of load through the kinetic chain.²⁷ However, the calculation of
221 PlayerLoad is based only on the rate of change of acceleration, and the different planar
222 contributions of loading suggest a technical response. The soccer-specific exercise test used
223 is designed to incorporate the multi-directional and high intensity activity characteristic of
224 soccer. A lower relative loading at C7 most likely reflects running economy in these
225 experienced players, maintaining a relatively constant displacement of the mass centre. In
226 contrast, the displacement of the lower limb to facilitate changes in direction and speed will
227 increase the relative frequency and magnitude of changes in acceleration. The foot is
228 displaced relative to the mass centre to moderate direction and speed, and the mid-tibia unit
229 is therefore likely to follow a more changeable trajectory than the unit at C7, thereby
230 accumulating greater PlayerLoad. The greater relative mediolateral and anteroposterior
231 contributions to loading at the mid-tibia highlight this technical response. This creates a
232 location-specific loading pattern, and further highlights the limitations of C7 data in relation
233 to the mechanism of lower limb injury. The C7 site is typically used with the unit placed in
234 a customised neoprene vest and located so as to optimise satellite signal reception for the
235 generation of GPS data and derivatives in distance, speed and acceleration. However the
236 tri-axial accelerometer is not constrained by the same requirements, and has previously been
237 used in indoor sports²⁸ and within a clinical rehabilitation context.¹⁹ The placement of the
238 accelerometer can then be tailored to a bespoke consideration of injury location. Previous
239 applications have considered lumbar spine injury in cricket¹⁸ and ankle sprain injury in
240 soccer.¹⁹

241 Greig et al. recently highlighted the efficacy of lower-limb mounted GPS units to quantify
242 the planar loading response to functional rehabilitation drills designed to challenge the
243 mechanism of ankle sprain injury.¹⁹ In the current study the soccer-specific test is both

244 intermittent and multi-directional, and performed at high intensity. This is designed to
245 replicate the physical challenge of soccer match-play,²⁰ but also presents relevance to
246 common mechanism of injury.¹ The loading response will also be task-specific, and as such
247 direct comparison between studies is limited and care should be taken when generalising
248 beyond the experimental paradigm used. Furthermore, all players were injury free at the
249 time of testing, and the sensitivity of this methodological approach to changes in loading in
250 response to previous injury warrant consideration. The prospective screening for injury
251 using this methodological approach, in addition to the influence of playing surface is also
252 worthy of future investigation and longitudinal study. Artificial surfaces have been
253 associated with a decreased risk of knee injury but an increased risk of ankle injury,^{1,29} and
254 thus specific tasks might be designed based on the mechanism of specific injuries. Brown
255 and Greig further developed the planar loading metric to consider bilateral asymmetry in
256 loading, but this retrospective study used data collected at C7.³⁰ The acceleration data
257 collected at the lower limb might be able to identify bilateral and ipsi-lateral imbalances in
258 loading, differentiating between inversion and eversion loading for example. The analysis
259 might then also become increasingly aligned to the mechanism of injury, whilst retaining
260 the high ecological validity provided in the experimental design. There is also suggestion
261 that the increased risk from artificial surfaces might lie in the repeated exposure and
262 subsequent increase in overuse injuries,³¹ and thus longitudinal considerations of loading
263 would also be beneficial.

264 **Conclusion**

265 A comparison of natural turf, second generation atsroturf and third generation artificial turf
266 revealed no surface effect on the performance, perceived exertion, or mechanical loading
267 elicited during a soccer-specific test. However, placement of the accelerometer was
268 sensitive to the magnitude and pattern of loading. A mid-tibia placement (used to reflect the

269 high incidence of ankle sprain injury in soccer) elicited higher absolute loading than the
270 typical C7 placement, and greater relative contributions in the mediolateral and
271 anteroposterior planes. Clinical reasoning is therefore dependent on unit placement. The
272 sensitivity to planar loading patterns indicative of the task-specific technical challenge
273 highlights potential in the management and monitoring of loading during training and
274 rehabilitation.

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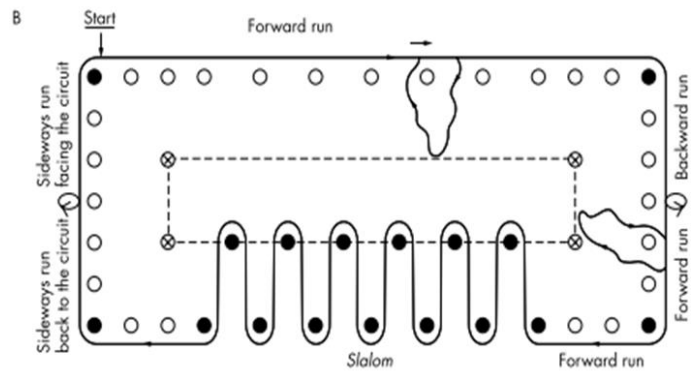
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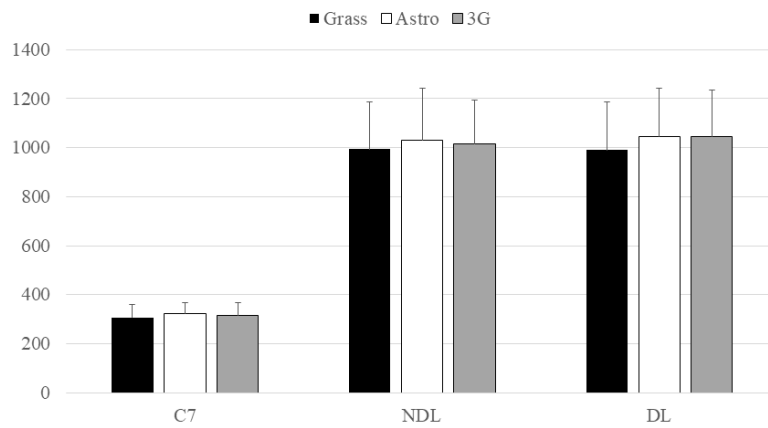
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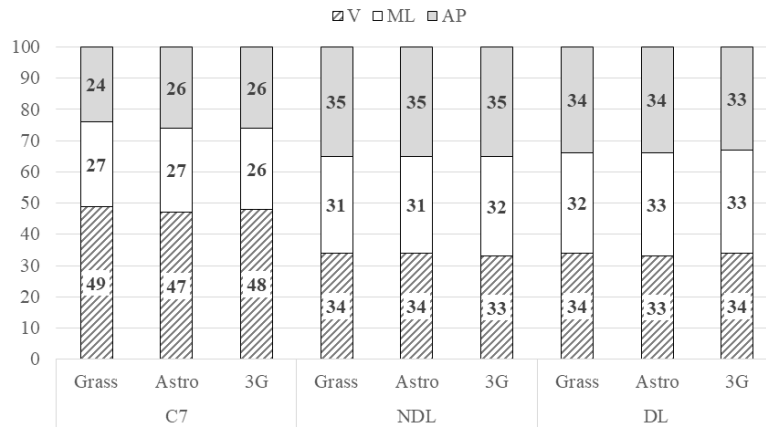
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365 Figure 1. Schematic representation of the soccer-specific exercise test (Bangsbo and
 366 Lindquist, 1992).



367

368 Figure 2. The influence of playing surface and GPS location on Total PlayerLoad.



369

370 Figure 3. The influence of playing surface and GPS location on planar contributions to
 371 Total PlayerLoad.

372

373 Table 1. The influence of playing surface and GPS location on planar loading.

Axial Plane	GPS Location	Playing Surface		
		Grass	Astro	3G
V	C7	148.90 ± 24.67	152.66 ± 28.21	152.47 ± 25.82
	DL	336.39 ± 55.47	347.39 ± 57.71	347.56 ± 52.68
	NDL	337.84 ± 59.01	344.82 ± 61.21	340.41 ± 54.54
ML	C7	76.35 ± 19.39	84.20 ± 11.81	81.92 ± 21.21
	DL	342.77 ± 76.86	354.15 ± 86.94	353.80 ± 76.62
	NDL	345.54 ± 80.48	361.18 ± 88.63	351.26 ± 69.40
AP	C7	82.47 ± 19.05	87.82 ± 19.12	82.20 ± 20.55
	DL	311.84 ± 69.40	343.95 ± 59.54	342.81 ± 71.60
	NDL	311.39 ± 60.03	324.03 ± 70.77	323.66 ± 65.86

