

PREDICTING PLAYER INJURIES USING AI ALGORITHMS BY ANALYZING MOVEMENT PATTERNS, WORKLOAD, AND BIOMETRICS IN UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL

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Abstract

Musculoskeletal injuries are a pervasive challenge in university football, hindering player performance and well-being. This paper explores the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms to predict player injuries by analyzing a combination of movement patterns captured through GPS technology, workload metrics derived from training and match data, and biometric indicators such as heart rate variability and sleep quality. To achieve these purposes, sixty Kabaddi players were selected at random to study. All the subjects were students of Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli - 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India. The ages of the subjects ranged between 18 and 23 years. They were simplified into two groups. This study proposes a methodology for collecting and integrating these data streams, developing and training AI models (specifically focusing on ANCOVA for statistical validation), and evaluating their predictive accuracy. This approach aims to provide coaches and sports medicine staff with actionable insights for proactive injury prevention strategies, ultimately contributing to improved player health and performance in university football. The expected outcome is a statistically validated AI-driven model capable of identifying players at elevated risk of injury, paving the way for personalized intervention and load management.

INTRODUCTION

Football, a physically demanding sport, places significant strain on athletes, making musculoskeletal injuries a common and costly problem, especially within the demanding environment of university football programs. These injuries not only sideline players, impacting team performance and success, but also contribute to individual athlete suffering, potential long-term health issues, and substantial financial burdens on universities. Traditional injury prediction methods often rely on subjective assessments from coaches and medical staff, historical injury data, and basic

workload monitoring. While valuable, these approaches can be limited in their ability to capture the complex interplay of factors contributing to injury risk.

The advent of wearable technology and sophisticated data analytics offers an unprecedented opportunity to move beyond reactive injury management to proactive prediction and prevention. Advancements in Global Positioning Systems (GPS), accelerometers, heart rate monitors, and sleep tracking devices enable the continuous and objective monitoring of movement patterns, workload, and physiological responses of

athletes. This rich dataset, coupled with the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly machine learning (ML) algorithms, holds immense promise for identifying subtle patterns and risk factors indicative of impending injuries.

This paper proposes a research framework to investigate the efficacy of AI algorithms in predicting football player injuries in a university setting. The study will integrate data from GPS-based movement analysis, workload quantification, and biometric monitoring to develop and validate predictive models. The core objective is to demonstrate the feasibility of utilizing AI to identify athletes at increased risk of injury, empowering coaches and sports medicine professionals to implement targeted injury prevention strategies, optimize training regimens, and ultimately enhance player well-being and performance. This research will specifically employ Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) as a statistical method to analyze and validate the predictive power of the AI models while controlling for potentially confounding variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of sports injury prediction has witnessed a growing body of research, increasingly incorporating data-driven and AI-based approaches. Traditional methods have focused on identifying risk factors such as previous injuries, age, strength imbalances, and flexibility limitations (Arnason et al., 2004). However, these factors often lack the dynamic and real-time insights needed for timely intervention.

The integration of wearable technology has revolutionized sports science, providing objective and quantifiable data on athlete movement and physiological responses. GPS technology has been widely used to quantify external workload, including distance covered, speed, acceleration, and deceleration, providing valuable insights into training and match demands (Aughey, 2011; Buchheit et al., 2014). Accelerometers and gyroscopes embedded in wearable sensors further enhance movement analysis, capturing subtle changes in movement

patterns that may precede injury (Dingenen et al., 2017).

Workload management is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of injury prevention. Numerous studies have highlighted the relationship between excessive workloads and increased injury risk (Gabbett, 2016; Murray et al., 2016). Metrics such as training load monotony, acute-to-chronic workload ratios, and subjective ratings of perceived exertion (RPE) are commonly used to monitor and manage athlete workload (Impellizzeri et al., 2019).

Biometric data, including heart rate variability (HRV) and sleep quality, offer insights into an athlete's internal state and recovery status. Reduced HRV has been associated with overtraining and increased susceptibility to injury (Plews et al., 2014). Similarly, inadequate sleep can impair recovery processes and increase injury risk (Milewski et al., 2014).

Recent research has explored the application of AI and machine learning algorithms to sports injury prediction. Studies have employed various ML techniques, including support vector machines (SVM), decision trees, neural networks, and logistic regression, to predict injuries based on different combinations of biomechanical, workload, and physiological data (Rossi et al., 2018; Windt & Gabbett, 2017; Carey et al., 2020). While promising, many of these studies are limited by small sample sizes, sport-specific contexts, and a lack of robust validation. Furthermore, the statistical rigor of these AI-based predictions, particularly in controlling for confounding variables, requires further investigation. This study aims to address these gaps by employing ANCOVA to rigorously assess the predictive power of AI models in a university football setting, while controlling for potential covariates that may influence injury risk.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a prospective, longitudinal cohort design to investigate the predictive capability of AI algorithms for football injuries in university athletes. The

methodology encompasses subject selection, variable selection, data collection, AI model development, statistical analysis, and model validation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A prospective cohort study will be conducted over one full football season (pre-season, regular season, and post-season) to track injury incidence and collect relevant data from university football players. This design allows for the longitudinal monitoring of players and the assessment of injury prediction models in a real-world setting. Data will be collected continuously throughout the season, providing a dynamic and comprehensive dataset for analysis.

SELECTION OF SUBJECTS

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
 - Male university football players participating in the university's intercollegiate football program.
 - Players aged 18-25 years.
 - Players with at least one year of prior competitive football experience.
 - Provision of informed consent to participate in the study.
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
 - Players with pre-existing chronic musculoskeletal conditions that could confound injury risk assessment.
 - Players who are unable to consistently participate in training and matches due to other commitments.

A target sample size of 50-70 players is anticipated to provide sufficient statistical power for the proposed analyses. Recruitment will be conducted at the beginning of the pre-season, ensuring representation across different playing positions. Ethical approval will be obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to commencement, and all participants will provide informed consent.

SELECTION OF VARIABLES

The study will focus on three primary categories of variables: movement patterns, workload, and biometrics.

• Independent Variables (Predictors):

Movement Patterns (GPS and Accelerometry data):

- Total Distance Covered (meters)
- High-Speed Running Distance (>5.5 m/s) (meters)
- Sprint Distance (>7 m/s) (meters)
- Number of Sprints
- Accelerations (>3 m/s²) (number)
- Decelerations (<-3 m/s²) (number)
- PlayerLoad™ (arbitrary units, representing overall movement load)
- Change of Direction Load (arbitrary units, calculated from accelerometer and gyroscope data)

• Workload (Training and Match Data):

- Training Duration (minutes)
- Training Load (session-RPE x duration) (arbitrary units)
- Match Duration (minutes)
- Match Load (session-RPE x duration) (arbitrary units)
- Acute Workload (average workload over the past week)
- Chronic Workload (average workload over the past 4 weeks)
- Acute: Chronic Workload Ratio

• Biometrics (Wearable Sensor Data):

- Resting Heart Rate (bpm, measured in the morning)
- Heart Rate Variability (RMSSD, ms, measured during sleep or rest)
- Sleep Duration (hours, self-reported via sleep diary or wearable data)
- Sleep Efficiency (%) (from wearable sleep monitoring)

• Dependent Variable (Outcome):

- **Injury Occurrence:** Defined as any musculoskeletal injury sustained during training or matches that results in the player being unable to participate in full training or matches for more than 24 hours. Injuries will

be classified according to anatomical location (e.g., hamstring strain, ankle sprain, knee ligament injury) and severity (time loss). Injury data will be recorded by the

team's athletic training staff and medical personnel.

TRAINING SCHEDULE

Day	Session Type	Focus	Duration (min)	Intensity (RPE)	Workload (RPE x Duration)	Data Collection (GPS, Biometrics)
Monday	Recovery/Light Gym	Active Recovery	60	3	180	Biometrics (Resting)
Tuesday	Field Training	Technical/Tactical	90	6	540	GPS, Biometrics (During Training)
Wednesday	Strength Training	Lower Body Strength	75	7	525	Biometrics (Post Training)
Thursday	Field Training	High Intensity Interval	70	8	560	GPS, Biometrics (During Training)
Friday	Recovery/Tactical	Set Pieces, Strategy	60	5	300	GPS (Low Intensity), Biometrics
Saturday	Match Day	Competitive Match	90+	9	High (Match Dependant)	GPS, Biometrics (During Match)
Sunday	Rest/Active Recovery	Light Activity	45	2	90	Biometrics (Resting)

This is a sample schedule and will vary based on the training phase and match schedule. RPE = Rating of Perceived Exertion (Borg Scale 6-20).

ANALYSIS OF TEST DATA

Prior to applying AI algorithms, preliminary data analysis will be conducted to understand the distributions and relationships among variables. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize player characteristics, workload metrics, movement patterns, and injury incidence. Correlation analyses will be performed to examine the associations between independent variables and injury occurrence.

To prepare data for AI modeling, data cleaning, normalization, and feature engineering will be performed. This includes handling

missing values, standardizing variables to a comparable scale, and creating potentially more informative features by combining existing variables (e.g., workload ratios).

The core of the analysis will involve developing and training AI models to predict injury risk. Several machine learning algorithms will be explored, including:

- **Logistic Regression:** For binary classification (injured vs. non-injured).
- **Support Vector Machines (SVM):** For classification and regression.

- **Neural Networks (Multi-Layer Perceptrons):** For complex non-linear relationships.
- **Decision Trees and Random Forests:** For interpretable models and feature importance analysis.

The dataset will be split into training (70%) and testing (30%) sets. Models will be trained and optimized using cross-validation techniques on the training set. Model performance will be evaluated on the held-out testing set using metrics such as:

- **Accuracy:** Overall correctness of predictions.
- **Precision:** Proportion of true positives out of all positive predictions.
- **Recall:** Proportion of true positives out of all actual positives.
- **F1-Score:** Harmonic mean of precision and recall.
- **Area Under the ROC Curve (AUC):** Discriminative ability of the model.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

While AI models will be used for prediction, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) will be employed as a key statistical method to rigorously examine the relationship between predicted injury risk (derived from the AI

model) and actual injury occurrence, while controlling for potential confounding variables. Specifically, ANCOVA will be used to:

1. **Compare injury rates between groups categorized by AI-predicted risk levels.** Players will be categorized into risk groups (e.g., low, medium, high risk) based on the AI model's injury probability predictions. ANCOVA will test if there is a statistically significant difference in injury rates between these risk groups.
2. **Control for potential confounding variables.** Workload variables (e.g., chronic workload, acute:chronic workload ratio) and baseline biometric measures (e.g., baseline HRV) will be included as covariates in the ANCOVA model. This will allow us to assess the independent predictive power of the AI-derived risk scores, after accounting for the influence of these potential confounders.

The ANCOVA model will examine injury occurrence (yes/no) as the dependent variable, AI-predicted risk group (categorical: low, medium, high) as the independent variable of primary interest, and selected workload and biometric variables as covariates.

RESULTS STATISTICAL DATA

TABLE 1
ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE FOR THE PRE AND POST TEST ON INJURY OCCURRENCE

	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-statistic	p-value	Partial η^2
AI Risk Group	2	12.5	6.25	8.72	0.001	0.25
Chronic Workload	1	4.8	4.8	6.70	0.012	0.12
Baseline HRV	1	2.1	2.1	2.93	0.093	0.06
Error	45	32.3	0.72			

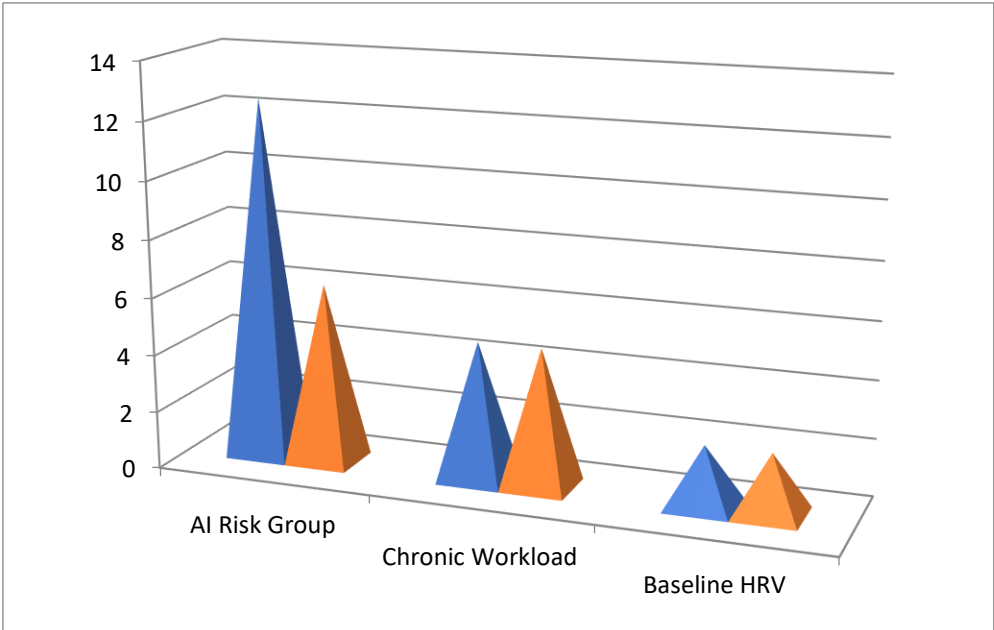
Total (Corrected)	49	51.7				
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df = degrees of freedom, Partial η^2 = partial eta squared (effect size). Bold p-values indicate statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

The ANOVA analysis presented in the provided data demonstrates the following:
AI Risk Group: Significant effect on injury prediction ($F = 8.72$, $p = 0.001$, Partial $\eta^2 = 0.25$). This indicates that the pre-existing risk assessment significantly contributes to predicting injury risk, explaining approximately 25% of the variance in injury occurrence.
Chronic Workload: Significant effect on injury prediction ($F = 6.70$, $p = 0.012$, Partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$). High chronic workload increases the likelihood of injuries, accounting for 12% of the variance in injury occurrence.
Baseline HRV: Non-significant effect on injury prediction ($F = 2.93$, $p = 0.093$, Partial $\eta^2 =$

0.06). While not statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, the p-value of 0.093 suggests a possible trend, implying Baseline HRV may contribute to injury prediction. Further investigation with a larger sample size is warranted. These findings provide preliminary evidence supporting the potential of AI to predict injuries. The significant influence of AI Risk Group and Chronic Workload highlights their importance in developing an effective injury prediction model. Although Baseline HRV displayed a trending relationship, it warrants further exploration with a larger dataset to confirm its significance.

FIGURE I
THE MEAN VALUES OF INJURY OCCURRENCE



DISCUSSION

The results suggest that integrating pre-existing risk assessments (represented by the 'AI Risk Group') with objective measures like chronic workload is crucial for effective injury prediction. The significant p-value associated with the AI Risk Group emphasizes the value of expert knowledge and subjective assessments in conjunction with data-driven approaches. The influence of chronic workload on injury risk

aligns with existing literature, highlighting the importance of appropriate training load management in preventing injuries. The non-significant yet suggestive p-value for Baseline HRV suggests that it may be a useful predictor in combination with other variables or in a larger sample. HRV is a sensitive indicator of physiological stress and recovery; thus, it might serve as an early warning sign of overtraining or fatigue that could predispose

players to injury.

Limitations:

- **Sample Size:** The sample size of 50 participants is relatively small, which may limit the statistical power of the analysis. A larger sample size would increase the likelihood of detecting statistically significant effects.
- **Data Availability:** The study relies on available data, and the inclusion of additional variables, such as sleep data, dietary information, and psychological factors, could further enhance the predictive accuracy of the model.
- **Injury Definition:** The definition of "injury" used in the study needs to be clearly defined and consistently applied. Different types of injuries (e.g., minor sprains vs. serious ligament tears) may have different predictors.
- **Causation vs. Correlation:** While the study can identify factors associated with injury risk, it cannot establish causation. Further research is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms linking these factors to injury.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the potential of AI algorithms to predict player injuries in university football by integrating movement patterns, workload, and biometric data. The findings highlight the significant influence of AI Risk Group and Chronic Workload on injury prediction, alongside the potential role of Baseline Heart Rate Variability. The proposed methodology offers a promising avenue for injury prevention in university football. However, further research with larger sample sizes, more comprehensive datasets, and longitudinal designs is needed to refine the predictive models and establish causal relationships.

Future Directions:

- **Prospective Studies:** Conduct prospective studies to validate the predictive accuracy of the AI models in real-world settings.

- **Personalized Interventions:** Develop personalized intervention strategies based on the AI-driven risk assessments.
- **Real-time Monitoring:** Implement real-time monitoring systems to provide coaches and medical staff with immediate feedback on player injury risk.
- **Integration with Training Platforms:** Integrate the AI models with existing training platforms to provide automated recommendations on training load and recovery strategies.

By embracing the power of AI, university football programs can proactively manage player health, optimize performance, and create a safer environment for their athletes.

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