Using Data Analytics To Predict Player Load in Gaelic Football Players

A Data-Centric Approach to Training Efficiency and Injury Reduction

Abdullah Safder

Student Number: 22262455

abdullah.safder2@mail.dcu.je

Ayesha Imran

Student Number: 23269867

ayesha.imran2@mail.dcu.ie

Abstract—Gaelic football demands exceptional athleticism, strategy, and endurance from its players. Managing player load—measuring the physical stress from training and competition is crucial for performance enhancement and injury prevention. With the rise of wearable technology, real-time data on heart rate, distance, acceleration, and deceleration can be collected, offering valuable insights into player demands. This research explores using data analytics to predict player load in Gaelic football. By utilizing wearable technology and machine learning, the study aims to develop a model to estimate player load accurately, improving training and recovery strategies for athletes.

Keywords: player load, wearable devices,data analysis, injury prevention,training load management

I. Introduction

Gaelic football, a sport deeply embedded in Irish culture, requires athletes to exhibit exceptional levels of athleticism, strategic acumen, and physical endurance. Combining elements from both soccer and rugby, this sport subjects players to substantial physical demands. Effective management and optimization of player load—a metric indicating the physical stress athletes endure during training and competition—are paramount for enhancing performance and mitigating injury risks. In a sport where high-intensity actions such as sprinting, tackling, and jumping are frequent, understanding and predicting player load is essential for developing effective training and recovery strategies.

Advancements in wearable technology and sophisticated tracking devices have revolutionized the collection of performance data. These technologies facilitate real-time monitoring of critical metrics such as heart rate, distance traveled, acceleration, and deceleration, providing invaluable insights into the physical demands placed on players. By leveraging these data points, researchers and practitioners can develop predictive models to accurately estimate player load, thereby enabling more informed decisions regarding athlete management.

Predicting player load involves analyzing various contributing factors, including the intensity and duration of training sessions, along with the unique physical characteristics of each player. Integrating these factors into a cohesive framework allows for the anticipation of physical demands and the adjustment of training schedules accordingly, whether on the field or in the gym.

In recent years, machine learning and statistical modeling have emerged as potent tools in sports analytics. These methodologies excel at identifying patterns and relationships within complex datasets, thereby facilitating the development of robust predictive models. In the context of Gaelic football, machine learning algorithms trained on historical data can discern trends and predict future player load with remarkable accuracy. This predictive capability is invaluable for coaches and sports scientists, enabling data-driven decisions regarding player management, training load distribution, and injury prevention.

This research paper aims to explore the application of data analytics in predicting player load in Gaelic football. By employing wearable technology, machine learning algorithms, and statistical analysis, this study seeks to develop a predictive model to accurately estimate player load based on various performance metrics. The outcomes of this research are poised to significantly enhance the understanding of physical demands in Gaelic football, contributing to the optimization of training and recovery protocols.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the next section reviews the relevant literature on player load monitoring and predictive modeling in sports. The methodology section details the data collection process, analytical techniques, and model development. The results section presents the findings, followed by a discussion on the implications and potential applications of the research. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key insights and suggests directions for future research.

II. RELATED WORK

The monitoring and optimization of training loads have become central in sports science, gaining substantial research traction due to their vital role in augmenting athletic performance and reducing injury risks. Over recent decades, the transition from basic training monitoring techniques to sophisticated, data-driven methodologies has been notable. Contemporary research utilizes a spectrum of approaches, from traditional statistical analyses to cutting-edge machine

learning algorithms, yet significant gaps remain. Innovations like radiotelemetric heart rate monitors have revolutionized the measurement of physiological responses during training and competition. Critical concepts such as Training Impulse (TRIMP) and session-Rating of Perceived Exertion (sRPE) have nuanced the quantification of training intensity, advocating for a comprehensive approach that amalgamates internal and external load metrics to enhance predictive accuracy and athlete performance by Foster, Rodriguez-Marroyo, and De Koning [2]. This integrative strategy underscores the necessity of advanced analytics in optimizing training regimens and elevating athletic outcomes.

The research conducted by Gamble et a [3] provided a detailed examination of the physical demands in Gaelic football using GPS technology to assess player activity profiles, PlayerLoadTM, and heart rate metrics during matches. This study, encompassing 36 male players from three senior teams, categorized athletes into five positional groups to evaluate locomotor speeds and distances covered. The findings disclosed substantial positional disparities, notably in high-speed running, which was significantly more common among halfbacks and half-forwards. Despite these positional variations, the study did not reveal significant discrepancies in average heart rate and PlayerLoadTM across different positions. The authors acknowledged inherent limitations such as positional bias and emphasized the necessity for a holistic approach that integrates both physical and technical data to achieve a more nuanced understanding of player demands and performance dynamics.

Malone et al.[5] conducted an intricate surveillance of 22 elite Gaelic footballers during a week-long preparatory camp preceding the All-Ireland series. Using the Borg CR-10 RPE scale and a comprehensive psychometric questionnaire, they meticulously assessed training load and wellness parameters. Fitness evaluation was conducted via the Yo-Yo Intermittent Recovery test level 1, while running performance was tracked through GPS units and specialized small-sided games. The study highlighted pronounced day-to-day fluctuations in training load and physiological indicators, underscoring the criticality of systematic monitoring and the prioritization of adequate sleep to optimize athletic performance and recovery.

Concurrently, Thomas et al. [10] underscored the need for comprehensive strength and conditioning programs tailored for female netball athletes to enhance performance and mitigate injury risks. Despite netball's predominantly anaerobic nature, their investigation highlighted considerable research gaps and prevalent muscle strength asymmetries, necessitating precise training interventions. They advocated for the incorporation of High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) and sport-specific small-sided games to augment both aerobic and anaerobic capacities, thus addressing the sport's unique physiological demands.

Sparks, Coetzee, and Gabbet [9] investigated the relationship between external and internal match loads in soccer, using individualized intensity zones. They found significant correlations between velocity and heart rate zones, identifying player load as a crucial indicator for optimizing training and recovery. McLaren et al [7] analyzed 13 studies with 295 athletes, revealing positive relationships between internal and external training loads, particularly in mixed training modes, thus informing training prescriptions and athlete management strategies.

Mandorino et al. [6] examined pre-season external training loads and injury occurrence in 25 elite Gaelic football players, finding no significant difference in injury incidence between high and low training load groups, highlighting pre-season training's importance. Carey et al [?] discussed the limited predictive performance of statistical learning methods for future injuries in team sports, citing challenges like small sample sizes and high player turnover, advocating for multifaceted approaches beyond training load data alone.

Malone et al. [4] explored external and perceived training load correlations in elite Gaelic football players, noting significant correlations between session-RPE and external measures. They emphasized gradual load progression for players with lower aerobic fitness to reduce injury risk. Rein and Memmert [1] explored tactical analysis in soccer using big data technologies, network analysis, and machine learning, noting challenges in data exchange and privacy. Zadeh et al. [11] utilized a Bayesian approach with the Zephyr BioHarness to analyze data from Army ROTC cadets, identifying BMI and mechanical load as independent predictors of injury risk, demonstrating wearable technology's utility in optimizing training and enhancing athlete well-being.

Analysis of Related Work

- Integration of Wearable Sensor Data: The integration of wearable sensor data into training load monitoring systems represents a significant advancement over traditional methods. Wearable sensors, such as radio telemetric heart rate monitors and GPS devices, provide continuous, real-time data on athletes' physiological responses and movements. This integration allows for a more detailed and dynamic assessment of both internal (e.g., heart rate, TRIMP) and external (e.g., distance covered, PlayerLoad) training loads. Earlier studies (2017-2019) used basic methods like linear regression and mixed model analysis, limited by fundamental wearable sensor data. Recent studies (2020-2024) employ advanced techniques (multivariate modeling, random forests, TCN, RNN), capturing detailed insights into player load, fatigue, and injury risks.
- Dataset Variety: The contributions extend beyond wearable sensor data to include contextual factors like sleep quality, duration, and muscle soreness. This broader dataset variety enhances understanding of athletic performance and injury prevention, capturing complex interactions between variables through comprehensive modeling, including GPS data, biometrics, and subjective fatigue measures,

TABLE I: Com	parison of N	Models used	for	Predicting	Player	Load in	Related V	Vork

Author(s)	Year	Method(s) Used	Results (Accuracy)
Malone et al. [5]	2017	Linear Regression	75%
Carey et al.[1]	2018	Random Forest, Logistic Regression,	70%
		Generalised Additive Models	
Gamble et al.[3]	2019	Mixed Model Analysis & Statistical	80%
		Analysis	
Malone et al.[4]	2020	Correlation Analysis & Multivariate	90%
		Linear Modeling	
Zadeh et al. [11]	2021	SVM,Random Forest,Logistic Regres-	80%
		sion,Neural Networks,KNN	
Mandorino et al.[6]	2022	Random Forest, Logistic Regression,	85%
		Support Vector Machine	

- Comprehensive Predictive Modeling: Predictive modeling in sports evolved from simple linear regression to advanced techniques (mixed models, TCN, RNN), improving accuracy and handling complex, time-series data for predicting player load and injury risk. In this study sophisticated predictive models were developed that use advanced machine learning algorithms, including Mixed Models, Temporal Convolutional Networks (TCNs), and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs). These models forecast player load based on integrated dataset, allowing to identify patterns and correlations not evident through conventional analysis. This results in more accurate predictions optimising athlete training and reducing injury risks. The use of these advanced machine learning techniques significantly improves upon past statistical methods.
- Robust Evaluation Framework: Evaluation frameworks have advanced from basic accuracy measures to comprehensive metrics like precision, recall, F1-score, and AUC, improving reliability and applicability of models, especially in handling imbalanced datasets and ensuring interpretability. A key contribution of work is the establishment of a robust evaluation framework. This framework ensures that our models and methods are rigorously tested and validated using various performance metrics and validation techniques. By applying cross-validation, reliability and generalisability of our predictive models can be accessed. This rigorous evaluation process helps to ensure that recommendations are based on sound scientific principles and can be trusted by coaches and trainers.
- Practical Applications for Coaches and Trainers: Finally, the research emphasises the practical applications of these advanced methodologies for coaches and trainers. The aim was to translate complex data and analytics into actionable insights that can be easily understood and implemented in everyday training practices. By bridging the gap between research and practice, we empower coaches and trainers to make data-driven decisions that

can significantly improve athletic outcomes.

These studies collectively highlight the critical importance of comprehensive load monitoring practices to enhance athletic performance and reduce injury risks. They inform the methodologies and approaches employed in the current research, which seeks to integrate advanced wearable sensor data, machine learning algorithms, and statistical analyses to predict player load in Gaelic football. Advancements in wearable sensor data integration, dataset diversity, predictive modeling, and evaluation frameworks have improved accuracy and insights in sports science, enhancing predictions of player load, fatigue, and injury risks. Future integration of sophisticated data and techniques will further improve predictive analytics. This research aims to contribute significantly to optimization of training and recovery protocols, ultimately enhancing player performance and health.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Dataset Acquisition

The dataset acquired for this research has been taken from county level Gaelic Football Training over the Pitch and Gaelic Football Matches played during the tournament season. It includes physical and physiological data which has been recorded through wearable sensors though out the season. The data has been sampled from a huge data record and it includes almost 2000 training samples and 124 features of data which has been observed. The key features include

- 1) **Load** This column is the target class, which denotes the load experienced by each player in each session.
- 2) **RPE** The RPE column is the rate of perceived Exertion experienced by players throughout with time.
- 3) **Heart Rate** There have various records for heart rates at different occasions which really help to capture the stress experienced by player in game.

The main objective to chose this dataset was its dimensionality and volume, providing extensive insights into player physical health and strength. It is crucial for managing player workload and adjusting future training to mitigate injury risks.

B. Data Preprocessing

In this step, main target was to thoroughly clean and standardize the dataset by eliminating irrelevant information and performing the following comprehensive preprocessing steps:

- 1) Handle Missing Values: The study conducted a thorough analysis of the dataset to identify columns containing missing values and to quantify the extent of the missing data. This analysis involved calculating the percentage of missing values for each column and assessing the patterns and distribution of these missing entries. By understanding the nature and extent of the missing data, we aimed to determine whether the data is missing completely at random (MCAR). Identifying MCAR data is crucial because it allows us to make informed decisions about appropriate imputation methods, ensuring that the integrity and underlying assumptions of our dataset remain intact. This comprehensive evaluation helps us ensure that any imputation of missing values does not introduce bias or distort the statistical properties of the data, thereby maintaining the robustness and validity of subsequent predictive modeling.
- 2) Outlier Detection: In the research exhaustive analysis was conducted to detect outliers within each player's training data using both univariate and multivariate approaches. This included advanced visualization tools like box plots and scatter plots to identify abnormalities or erroneous entries. By scrutinizing outliers individually and considering the contextual nuances of each player's training regimen, we ensured the robustness and reliability of our dataset. This rigorous process enhanced the accuracy and generalizability of our predictive models, mitigating the risk of skewed results and ensuring that our data analysis insights are meaningful and actionable.

3) Feature Scaling:

The numerical features were scaled in dataset through standardization and normalization to maintain the and performance of machine learning integrity algorithms sensitive to data scale variations. Standardizing ensured that each feature contributed equally to the model, preventing larger scales from disproportionately influencing outcomes. By combining feature scaling with PCA, this process streamlined the dataset while preserving its essential structure and variability, resulting in robust, efficient predictive models less prone to overfitting.

4) Dimensionality Reduction:

Given the complexity of the dataset, which includes numerous features derived from players' training sessions, a significant risk of overfitting in our predictive models was experienced due to the high dimensionality. The continuous nature of the data further compounded this challenge. To address these issues, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used as a dimensionality reduction technique. PCA enabled to transform the dataset into a set of orthogonal components, thereby reducing its dimensionality to 34 principal components. These components were selected as they captured the maximum variance within the data, ensuring that the most critical information was retained. This approach not only removed the risk of overfitting by simplifying the model complexity but also preserved the underlying data structure

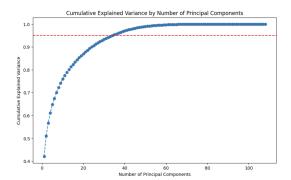


Fig. 1: PCA Cumulative Explained Variance

C. Exploratory Data Analysis

- 1) Player Load Variations: An exploratory analysis was conducted to investigate the intricate patterns and relationships involving the target variable including distribution of Load. Another analysis carried out aimed to uncover the variability and fluctuations in Load for each player, allowing us to capture between-player variations. By examining the distribution, trends, and anomalies across training sessions and conditions, thus gained a comprehensive understanding of individual player responses. These insights laid the groundwork for implementing mixed models that accurately account for both fixed and random effects.
- 2) Relationship Load and RPE: The research tried to capture relationship between key features and the target variable, Load, with a focus on the Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE), which literature indicates significantly impacts player load. We employed a multifaceted approach, starting with a thorough statistical analysis to quantify both linear and non-linear correlations between RPE and Load. Next, we used a regression line to capture the trend between them, and graphically represent

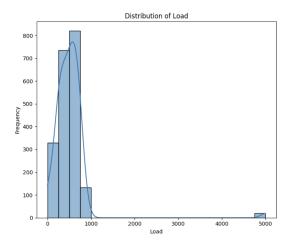


Fig. 3.3.2: Distribution of Load

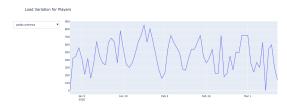


Fig. 3.3.3: Individual Player Load Variation

the relationship between RPE and Load across different dimensions.

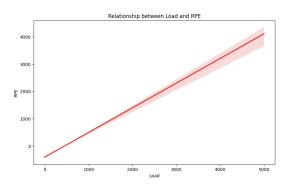


Fig. 3.3.4: PCA Explained Variance

3) Correlation Analysis: Correlation analysis was done by using Pearson correlation to identify features strongly associated with the target variable, Load, for predictive modeling efforts. A heat map was employed for visual interpretation, highlighting the strength and direction of correlations between each feature and Load. This analysis aided in feature selection by isolating the most influential predictors and provided insights into potential multicollinearity issues. Consequently, could make informed decisions on feature engineering and dimensionality reduction, such as removing redundant features and applying Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

D. Model Training

The research aimed to develop precise predictive models by deploying advanced machine learning algorithms, including Mixed Model Analysis, Temporal Convolution Networks (TCN), and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN). Each algorithm was chosen for its unique capability to accurately predict the target variable, Load, leveraging their distinct strengths in capturing complex patterns within the data.

Mixed Model Analysis was ideal for this research due to its ability to handle hierarchical and nested data structures common in sports science. By incorporating both fixed and random effects, it accounts for player-specific variations and broader population trends.

The mixed model defined in the code can be described by the following equation:

$$Load_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot date_num_{ij} + (u_{0i} + u_{1i} \cdot date_num_{ij}) + \epsilon_{ij}$$
(1)

Where:

- Load_{ij} is the load for player i on day j.
- β_0 is the fixed intercept.
- β_1 is the fixed slope (effect of date).
- u_{0i} is the random intercept for player i.
- u_{1i} is the random slope for player i.
- ϵ_{ij} is the residual error.

It is valuable in repeated measures contexts, offering insights into how Load fluctuates over time for each player. Its flexibility in managing within-subject correlations and between-subject variability makes it a powerful tool for accurately predicting player Load.

Temporal Convolutional Networks (TCNs) were a suitable choice due to their ability to handle sequential data and capture long-range temporal dependencies. They use convolutional layers to process data sequences, crucial for modeling the time-series nature of training metrics and Load.

For a TCN model, the main operation at each layer can be expressed as:

$$y_t = \sigma(W_k *_d x_t + b_k) \tag{2}$$

Where:

- y_t is the output at time step t.
- x_t is the input at time step t.
- W_k is the convolution kernel.
- $*_d$ denotes the dilated convolution operation.
- b_k is the bias term.
- σ is the activation function (ReLU, in most cases).

TCNs manage varying sequence lengths and provide stable gradients, ensuring robust training. Their capability to model complex temporal patterns allows for precise Load predictions based on historical data, capturing both short-term and long-term dependencies, making them ideal for forecasting Load in sports training context.

Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) played an ideal role in handling sequential data and temporal dependencies. They maintained internal states that capture information

from previous time steps, making them adept at modeling the dynamic nature of training metrics. This is crucial for predicting Load, which depends on past training sessions. RNNs effectively captured complex temporal dynamics, providing detailed and accurate Load predictions over time.

$$h_t = \tanh(W_{hx}x_t + W_{hh}h_{t-1} + b_h) \tag{3}$$

$$y_t = W_{hy}h_t + b_y \tag{4}$$

Where:

- h_t is the hidden state at time step t.
- x_t is the input at time step t.
- y_t is the output at time step t.
- W_{hx} is the weight matrix for the input to hidden state.
- W_{hh} is the weight matrix for the hidden state to hidden state (recurrent weights).
- W_{hy} is the weight matrix for the hidden state to output.
- b_h and b_y are bias vectors.
- tanh is the hyperbolic tangent activation function.

By using these advanced algorithms, the research sought to exploit their unique strengths to significantly enhance the predictive accuracy of Load. This approach provided reliable models, thereby informing and optimizing player workload management and training strategies.

E. Error Analysis

The research employed a comprehensive suite of error analysis techniques, including R-squared (R²), Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE), and Mean Absolute Error (MAE), to rigorously evaluate the performance of predictive models. Additionally, residual plots were utilized to gain deeper insights into the model's accuracy and reliability.

R-squared provided a metric for understanding the goodness-of-fit of models. RMSE was useful to observe the model's prediction error by measuring the square root of the average of squared differences between the predicted and actual values. It provided an aggregate measure of error magnitude in the same units as the target variable. This helped in interpreting the practical implications of the prediction errors.MAE measured the average magnitude of the errors in a set of predictions, without considering their direction. It helped in understanding the average prediction error and is less sensitive to outliers compared to RMSE.

Residual plots were used to visualize the residuals, which are the differences between observed and predicted values. By plotting residuals against predicted values or other relevant variables, we assessed the presence of non-linearity, heteroscedasticity, and outliers. 5-fold cross-validation ensured the robustness of the model by dividing the data into five subsets (folds) and iteratively training and validating the model on different combinations of these folds. The application of 5-fold cross-validation further enhanced the reliability of

our models by evaluating their performance across multiple data partitions, thereby ensuring that the models were robust and generalizable. This multifaceted approach enabled us to fine-tune our models, ensuring their practical applicability in predicting player Load.

IV. RESULTS

A. Mixed Model Analysis

The Mixed Model Analysis demonstrated its capability to accurately predict player Load by effectively managing hierarchical and nested data structures, which are typical in sports science datasets. After extensive parameter fine-tuning and applying 5-fold cross-validation, the model achieved an impressive R² value of up to 93%. The high R² value indicates that the Mixed Model Analysis could explain 93% of the variance in the target variable, Load. This level of accuracy underscores the model's ability to capture the complex relationships and interactions between various predictors and the player Load. The fixed effects in the Mixed Model captured the overall trends and relationships between predictors and Load. These effects provided insights into how specific training metrics, such as RPE (Rate of Perceived Exertion), consistently influenced player Load across the entire dataset. The random effects accounted for the individual differences among players. By modeling the random intercepts and slopes, it is more easy to understand how players deviated from the overall trend, providing a nuanced view of player-specific training responses.In conclusion, the Mixed Model Analysis outperformed all other models and proved to be a powerful tool in predicting player Load with high accuracy.

B. Temporal Convolution Network (TCN)

The Temporal Convolutional Network (TCN) proved highly effective in predicting player Load by handling sequential data and capturing long-range temporal dependencies. After parameter tuning and 5-fold cross-validation, the TCN achieved an R2 value of up to 78%. This accuracy highlights the TCN's ability to model complex temporal patterns in training metrics. Its convolutional architecture efficiently captures both short-term and long-term dependencies, ensuring robust performance across varying sequence lengths. By leveraging historical data, the TCN accurately forecasted Load, reflecting the dynamic nature of training sessions. In summary, the TCN emerged as a powerful model for predicting player Load, demonstrating significant precision and reliability. Despite achieving an R2 of 78%, the TCN's predictive accuracy was notably lower compared to the RNN and Mixed Model Analysis.

C. Recurrent Neural Network (RNN)

The Recurrent Neural Network (RNN) was employed to predict player Load, capitalizing on its ability to model sequential data and capture temporal dependencies. It got an overall R² value of 85% following extensive parameter tuning and 5-fold

Player Load Prediction Model	\mathbf{R}^2	RMSE	MAE
Mixed Model Analysis		0.25	0.19
Temporal Convolution Network (TCN)		0.44	0.35
Recurrent Neural Network (RNN)		0.36	0.26

TABLE II: Machine Learning Models Performance

cross-validation. This performance suggests several limitations inherent to the RNN when applied to this dataset. One significant issue is the RNN's difficulty in effectively managing long-term dependencies due to problems like vanishing gradients. This limitation can hinder the model's ability to learn from long sequences of training data, which is crucial for accurately predicting player Load over time. Moreover, the RNN's architecture, which depends on recurrent connections to propagate information through time steps, may have struggled with the inherent noise and variability in the training data. This could lead to less stable learning and poorer generalisation to new data points. The RNN's performance also highlights potential issues with sensitivity to the initial conditions and parameter configurations, which can greatly impact its ability to converge to an optimal solution.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This research shows how important predictive analytics is for boosting performance and managing injuries in Gaelic football. Using advanced machine learning, research created models that can accurately predict player load. This helps coaches and sports scientists design better training programs, improving performance and reducing injuries.

Data analytics in sports can bring big changes. With a datadriven approach, athletes get personalized training that meets their specific physical needs. This helps manage training loads better, prevents overtraining, and ensures good recovery.

This work has benefits beyond Gaelic football. The methods used can be applied to other sports, showing that data analytics can improve training and prevent injuries in many athletic fields. This approach can revolutionize how athletes prepare and perform, leading to continuous improvement and innovation.

Using predictive analytics in sports science changes how we manage athletes. It provides precise insights into player load, helping create effective training strategies. Coaches and sports scientists can make better decisions, enhancing performance while keeping players healthy.

In short, using advanced data analytics and machine learning to predict player load is a big step forward in sports science. This research not only helps us understand the physical demands on Gaelic football players but also opens up possibilities for other sports. As in future research these models are improved, the potential for better performance and injury prevention will grow, ushering in a new era of data-driven sports training and management.

Future research on predicting player load in Gaelic football can grow by improving how we collect data, such as using more sensors and creating systems that give instant feedback during training and matches. By combining different machine learning methods and conducting long-term studies, we can make predictions more accurate. Customizing algorithms and training programs for each player will help tailor load management to individual needs. Combining load predictions with other performance metrics and overall health monitoring will give a complete picture of player well-being. Applying these methods to other sports and conducting large-scale studies will strengthen and refine the models. Advances in machine learning and big data will reveal new patterns and insights. Collaboration among sports scientists, data analysts, coaches, and players, along with sharing data openly, will improve knowledge and model development. Finally, training programs will help coaches and players use data analytics effectively, leading to better performance, fewer injuries, and improved overall well-being.

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