

Researchers summarize aspects of athlete workloads in football organizations across the world

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QUT researchers Associate Professor Geoffrey Minett, Associate Professor Vince Kelly and QUT PhD student Lewis Fazackerley. Credit: Queensland University of Technology

QUT researchers have conducted an overview of athlete workloads in the premier codes of football across the world with insights from some

big international names in high performance sport.

QUT Ph.D. student Lewis Fazackerley said the perspective article, "The Annual Training and Competitive Calendar in Elite Football: A Road To The Holy Grail?" published in the *International Journal of Strength and Conditioning* provided a summary of important aspects and intricacies of athlete workloads across the season in a range of football codes, including Soccer, Rugby League, Rugby Union, the AFL, and NFL.

"The aim was to stimulate discussion on what all the major football organizations are currently doing in terms of player workloads," Mr. Fazackerley said.

"Not a lot has been done on looking at specific match calendars from a workload perspective.

"That's why we gathered a number of high-profile performance managers to get their input, so that we can really share that information. We were trying to provide a bit of a vehicle to say, look, we have started, and we encourage organizations to go on and do more," Mr. Fazackerley said.

QUT researchers Mr. Fazackerley, Associate Professor Geoffrey Minett and Associate Professor Vince Kelly from the QUT School of Exercise & Nutrition Sciences, canvassed the opinions of nine high-performance staff—who are listed as co-authors—for the paper.

Five of the nine hold a Ph.D. in Sports Science and some are world-renowned performance managers, including staff who had worked in: EPL English Premier League—Arsenal Football Club; Premiership Rugby UK—Newcastle Falcons Rugby Club; NFL (National Football League)—Seattle Seahawks; Top 14 French Rugby—Stade Français Paris; New Zealand All Blacks; Football Australia; Super

Rugby—Queensland Reds, and AFL—Adelaide and Melbourne Football Clubs.

Mr. Fazackerley said the main takeaway from the research findings is that sporting organizations can learn from one another.

"People get a bit head in the sand with their own sport, and we wanted to offer an opportunity to say, 'this is what's going on around the world in [different sports](#) and different codes,'" he said.

In professional football, annual training and match calendars differ markedly worldwide, making it challenging to compare codes.

In Australia, the NRL has 27 rounds with three byes in the regular season, the AFL 24 rounds with one bye and the A-League 26 rounds with a mid-season break. All codes then have a finals series with a reduced number of qualifying teams.

"The codes here in Australia are all relatively similar the AFL, NRL and the A-League in terms of the number of games and kind of the structuring of the length of the off-season, and pre-season," Mr. Fazackerley said.

"But they are vastly different to EPL football for example, they will play for close to 48 weeks of the year. And then in contrast, the NFL will play 17 games in the 18-week season, and they'll have a four-month off-season period."

The England rugby model stands out because it is the only code that has a cap on the number of games in which a player can take part.

"The RFU have a maximum of 32 games over 20 minutes, or 30 full game equivalents, and then they are not allowed to play any more in that

season, so they have to manage player gametime and games for these athletes as well," Mr. Fazackerley said.

Professor Kelly said if you take the example of an England representative player, they will play in the Six Nations, they will play in the end of season tour matches, but also then then their club competition.

"If you added them all up, there is more than thirty. So, they have got to pick and choose which ones they are going to play for. Particularly in a British Lions year.

"But, again, it comes down to the structure and the players are contracted by the rugby union rather than here where the players are contracted by the clubs. So, the RFU have a bit more control," Professor Kelly said.

"And they also have regulations around if they do go and play a representative game, then they are required to have one game off in the following four weeks as well, to manage the players' workload and well-being," Mr. Fazackerley said.

Professor Minett said such a restriction wouldn't go down well with State of Origin-focused NRL fans.

"Post-Origin games, we've seen who's played in the subsequent weeks, and both New South Wales and Queensland discussing stars that won't be there for the next regular season round.

"And culturally, former players and commentators saying, 'We back up, that's what we do.' Whether that's the best thing for the player and whether it's the best thing for the [game](#), that's probably the big question," Professor Minett said.

The NFL is the most contrasting code of football—players must have

quite different skill sets for the various positions. But another difference the research highlighted was the strength of the NFL players bargaining agreement.

"NFL players have got much more time off to begin with and the club cannot train them in the off-season. They have financial incentives to come back to training early, but it is not required, some players will return early, some might not.

"If they want to keep themselves up to standard, they've got to find their own performance coach, as opposed to Australia where it's all club based."

"There's definitely been more concussion-based research in the states and there are more restrictions on things such as contact during the preseason period for NFL athletes, limiting the amount they can do and there has to be a progressive increase as well," Mr. Fazackerley said.

"The RFU in England also recently brought in restrictions on contact for rugby in the pre-season as well."

Professor Minett said there might also be a cultural aspect in terms of the way that you look at the season structures in lower tier competitions.

"For example, American football is a big college sport and the way their seasons are structured are much shorter than what you see in codes in Australia and Europe," Professor Minett said.

The researchers partnered with the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) after pre-COVID discussions with the NRL's Workloads and Balance Committee.

Associate Professor Vince Kelly said the committee wanted to get a

sense of whether their players were playing enough games, or too many games and how that might affect a future broadcast deal.

"The starting point was: 'let's have a look all around the world at who does what and how many games different sports play, and do they have any limitations?'" Professor Kelly said.

"Broadcasting arrangements drive scheduling and to an extent season structure, and that was what the NRL needed work out: "We just can't just keep increasing the number of games. We have got to look after the players."

"And that is, that is why we planned a series of studies, and this was the starting point," Professor Kelly said.

"Because obviously they would also be concerned about salary caps in squad sizes as well, they do not necessarily just want to increase the squad. That is driven by dollars again—bigger squads costs more money."

More information: Lewis Fazackerley et al, The Annual Training and Competitive Calendar in Elite Football: A Road To The Holy Grail?, *International Journal of Strength and Conditioning* (2023). [DOI: 10.47206/ijsc.v3i1.211](https://doi.org/10.47206/ijsc.v3i1.211)

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