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Letter to the Editor

Whether a Soccer Match is Won or Lost Depends Not only on the Individual Physical but also on the Individual and Collective Mental Performance

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Letter to the Editor

We were interested to read the article by Modric *et al.* about a study on whether physical performance makes a difference between winning and losing UEFA Champions League (UCL) soccer matches ^[1]. Physical performance data was collected using an optical tracking system from 98 UCL matches in the 2022/23 season that did not end in a draw after 90 minutes ^[1]. A linear mixed model was used to examine the differences in physical performance between winning and losing matches, taking into account match location, team formation, quality of opponent, playing time, red cards and differences between players, team and match ^[1]. It was found that wingers and forwards covered ~20% more high-intensity running distances in games won compared to games lost, and that central defenders and full-backs covered ~15% more high-intensity running distances in games lost compared to games won ^[1]. From this, it was concluded that winning was more physically demanding for offensive players and losing was more physically demanding for defensive players than vice versa, and therefore the recovery periods for offensive and defensive players should be extended after winning and losing games ^[1]. The study is noteworthy, but some points should be discussed.

The first point is that winning or losing a soccer match depends not only on physical condition but also on mental condition of the individual players, regardless of the division. Players who have experienced recent or prolonged disappointments (e.g. death or serious illness of a relative or friend, financial disasters, accusations of criminal activity including doping) may perform worse than players who have not experienced disappointing life events, despite being physically fit. Mental performance is also highly dependent on mental state, so a player with a balanced and cheerful disposition may perform better than a depressed, dogged or over-ambitious player.

The second point is that winning or losing can also depend on the team's performance and not just the characteristics of the individual players. The level of team spirit can depend on several factors. These include the trust of the individual personalities in each other, the quality of communication between the players, the team's will to win the game and the ability to motivate themselves and their teammates.

The third point is that success can also depend on the skills and personality of the coach, the ability of individual players to bring strengths and perspectives together to achieve common goals. The coach's approach and the orientation of the players, influencing their attitude towards the opponent and their assessment of their position in the team have a great influence on the outcome of each game.

The fourth point is that physical performance can also depend heavily on the individual player's diet, medical history and current medication, including doping substances. Physical performance can also depend on when players last ate and had sexual intercourse.

Lastly, it is recommended that the exploitation of chances is included in the analysis.

In summary, this interesting study has limitations that affect the results and their interpretation. Addressing these limitations could strengthen the conclusions and support the message of the study. All open questions need to be clarified before readers uncritically accept the conclusions of the study. When analyzing the factors that contribute to winning or losing a soccer game, not only physical performance but several other additional factors need to be included in the analysis.

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References

Modric T, Versic S, Jukic I, Sekulic D. Physical performance discriminating winning and losing in UEFA Champions League: A full-season study. *Biol Sport*, Jan 2025; 42(1):3-9. Doi: 10.5114/biol sport.2025.139076