

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

Analysis of the Relationship between Team Ranking in the Premier League Table and Football Players' Injuries: A Case Study of the Iranian Premier League

Amir Hossein Labbaf¹, Jafar Ketabchi²

¹Department of Motor Behavior & Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8353-7932>; Email: amirhosseinlabbaf@spr.ui.ac.ir, ²Department of Health and Sports Medicine, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0975-6149>; Email: j.ketabchi@ut.ac.ir.

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between team ranking in the Premier League table and the rate of football players' injuries. This descriptive-analytical research was conducted using a cross-sectional method over a three-season period (2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024). The statistical population included players from 16 Iranian Premier League football teams across these three seasons, and a census sampling method was employed. Data were collected from official team medical reports, the Premier League football website, and reputable sports resources. Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, linear regression tests, and analysis of variance in SPSS version 26. The findings revealed that teams lower in the Premier League table experienced a significantly higher number and severity of injuries. An inverse correlation between team ranking and the number of injuries and a positive effect of players' average age and rest time between matches on the severity of injuries were identified. Furthermore, severe injuries were more frequently observed in the second half of matches (63%) and among defenders (42%). This research demonstrated that teams' ranking in the league table is directly related to the number and severity of player injuries, particularly in lower-ranked teams that are more vulnerable due to psychological pressure and limited resources.

Keywords: Team Ranking, Premier League, Player Injuries, Football, Football Analysis

Introduction

Football, as one of the most popular and dynamic sports worldwide, has a profound impact on various aspects of social, economic, and cultural life for individuals and communities. This sport is not only an arena for showcasing players' physical and tactical skills but also an environment for experiencing psychological challenges and physical pressures (Yiapanas et al., 2023). Among these, sports injuries are one of the most significant concerns for players, coaches, and football team managers. The impact of these

injuries can extend beyond physical limitations, leading to decreased team performance, increased medical expenses, and even altering the fate of teams in competitions (Horan et al., 2023). Globally, injuries not only affect individual player performance but also sometimes lead to changes in team lineups, coaches' strategic approaches, and even the final results of matches (Chang et al., 2024).

Player injuries in football depend on various factors, including the type of training, players' physical condition, the intensity of

Correspondence:

**Montenegro
Sport**

Amir Hossein Labbaf
Department of Motor Behavior & Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran; <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8353-7932>
Email: amirhosseinlabbaf@spr.ui.ac.ir.

matches, and even the team's psychological and social characteristics (Borg et al., 2021). However, one factor that has received less attention in research is the team's position in the league table. This factor, due to its direct impact on players' psychological pressure, coaches' strategies, and even the quality of team management, can play a crucial role in the rate of injuries. Teams at the top of the league table usually face challenges in maintaining their position. Tight match schedules, participation in international competitions, and the need to maintain physical and mental readiness at high levels put these teams at risk of injuries. On the other hand, teams at the bottom of the table face different but equally serious challenges. To stay in the league, these teams are usually forced to overexert themselves, sometimes beyond their players' capacity. The psychological pressure resulting from the competition to remain in the league and intense game strategies can increase the risk of injury among these teams' players. Meanwhile, mid-table teams may experience less stress, but they are still vulnerable due to limited resources or the lack of comprehensive injury prevention programs.

Scientific research in the field of sports injuries in football has usually focused on factors such as match intensity, type of training, players' physical condition, and their individual characteristics (Jiang et al., 2022), but the relationship between a team's position in the league table and the rate of injuries has received less attention. Examining the relationship between a team's position in the league table and the rate of player injuries, in addition to identifying common patterns, can help improve understanding of the physical and psychological challenges of this sport. Studies have shown that social, economic, and managerial factors may also indirectly affect this relationship (Kvillmo et al., 2023; Lutter et al., 2022). For example, teams with more financial resources usually have access to better equipment, more professional medical staff, and more advanced injury prevention programs, which can reduce the level of injuries. In contrast, teams that do not have such facilities are more likely to face more injuries. This issue is particularly evident in leagues with limited economic conditions and tight match schedules, such as the Iranian Premier League.

In the Iranian Premier League, this issue has been less scientifically investigated. Given the added pressures in this league due to tight scheduling, financial constraints, and competitive demands, analyzing player injuries and their relationship to team standings can be insightful. This analysis is of great importance not only for improving team performance but also for sports policymakers and club managers, as it can lead to a reduction in the economic and human costs associated with sports injuries. One notable point in this regard is the impact that injuries can have on attracting sponsors and club marketing (Hamdi et al., 2024). In professional leagues, reducing the number of injuries can help attract more financial support, improve the economic conditions of clubs, and enhance the quality of competitions (Greenwell et al., 2024).

In football, injuries are naturally part of the game, but given the competitive and high-pressure nature of this sport, the occurrence of injuries can become a major problem (Aiello et al., 2023; Krill et al., 2020). In this regard, differences in various factors such as team management, players' physical condition, and teams' competitive situations can affect the severity and frequency of these injuries. For example, top-table teams that also participate in international competitions face tighter schedules, which puts more physical and mental pressure on players. This pressure may increase the likelihood of injuries due to the high number of matches, the need for long-term travel, or competing with stronger teams to maintain their position. On the other hand, bottom-table teams that are struggling to survive may also find themselves in similar situations. The pressure to maintain their position in the league can motivate players to participate more

intensely in matches, even if it means playing in unsuitable physical conditions. This situation can lead to injuries such as muscle strains, joint injuries, and even fractures. In this case, the psychological pressure of fighting for survival, especially in the final weeks of the league, can be a key factor in increasing injuries.

At the managerial level, the policies and decisions made by clubs can have a significant impact on the rate of injuries. Teams with limited financial resources or those that have not properly invested in injury prevention are more likely to face more problems with their players' health. In contrast, teams with access to advanced medical equipment, specialized medical staff, and preventive programs can usually more effectively prevent or minimize injuries. In addition, better planning and strategies for managing match congestion can also affect the reduction of injury risk (Paul, 2023). Therefore, identifying effective managerial and organizational patterns in this area is one of the important areas of research that should be addressed.

In this regard, a more detailed study and analysis of the relationship between a team's position in the league table and the rate of injuries can help provide useful and scientific solutions to reduce injuries. This will not only help improve the physical and mental condition of players but also have positive effects on team results. Especially in the Iranian Premier League, where teams face challenges such as tight match schedules, financial constraints, and lack of facilities, such an analysis can help improve competitive conditions and reduce sports injuries. In this regard, attention to the economic and social issues governing clubs can also be included in future analyses to clarify more complex dimensions of the problem of injuries in Iranian football.

Given the importance of injuries in professional football and their impact on team performance, analyzing the relationship between a team's position in the table and the rate of injuries is not only a scientific necessity but also a practical need for managers, coaches, and sports officials. This research can help them develop optimal strategies to maintain player health and improve overall team performance in domestic and international competitions. Moreover, given that Iranian football has witnessed significant growth in domestic competitions and the presence of teams in international competitions in recent years, research in this area can contribute to more effective and data-driven decision-making.

In this research, focusing on the Iranian Premier League, the relationship between a team's position in the league table and the rate of player injuries is examined. This study aims to provide practical insights for reducing injuries and improving team management and can contribute to increasing the quality of competitions and reducing the financial and human burden caused by sports injuries.

Methods

This research is of a descriptive-analytical type, conducted using a cross-sectional method over a three-season period (2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 seasons). The main objective of this study was to examine the relationship between team ranking in the Premier League table and the rate of player injuries. The statistical population of this research included all 16 teams present in the Iranian Premier League during these three seasons and their players. Due to the nature of the topic and the availability of data, a census sampling method was used, and all players of the teams were included in this study. Data on player injuries were collected through official team medical reports, the official website of the Iranian Premier League, and other reputable sports databases. Injuries were classified based on the number of recorded cases in each team and their severity (mild, moderate, severe). Also, information on teams' positions in the league table was obtained through the official results of

the Iranian Football League Organization at the end of each half-season and the end of the season. The variables of the present research include the following:

- Independent Variable: Team ranking in the Premier League table

- Dependent Variable: Number and severity of player injuries

- Control Variables: Number of matches played, average age of players, and rest time between matches

The following approaches were used for data analysis:

1. Descriptive Statistics: To calculate the mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution of injuries in each team.

2. Inferential Statistics: To examine the relationship between team ranking and the rate of player injuries, linear regression and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used.

3. Statistical Software: Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 26 software.

To ensure data validity, injury information was confirmed by sports medicine specialists and team coaches. Also, data reliability was ensured by checking the consistency of information in various sources and comparing them.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Considerations

The authors acknowledge the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion in research. While this study focused on male professional football players in the Iranian Premier League, future research should aim to include female players, players from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and consider the impact of cultural factors on injury rates. We recognize that the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other populations.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

In this research, data related to 16 teams present in the Iranian Premier League over three seasons were collected and analyzed. Table 1 shows the distribution of the average number of injuries based on their severity (mild, moderate, and severe) and the team's position in the league table.

The results show that teams in lower positions in the table experienced, on average, more injuries at all three severity levels.

Table 1. Distribution of the Average Number of Injuries Based on Severity and Team Position in the Premier League Table

Team Rank	Average Mild Injuries ($\pm$ SD)	Average Moderate Injuries ($\pm$ SD)	Average Severe Injuries ($\pm$ SD)
1-4	12.8 ($\pm$ 3.1)	6.4 ($\pm$ 2.5)	2.1 ($\pm$ 1.0)
5-8	14.2 ($\pm$ 4.0)	8.3 ($\pm$ 2.8)	3.6 ($\pm$ 1.3)
9-12	16.5 ($\pm$ 3.8)	9.6 ($\pm$ 3.2)	4.2 ($\pm$ 1.7)
13-16	18.9 ($\pm$ 4.5)	11.8 ($\pm$ 3.5)	5.3 ($\pm$ 2.0)

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson correlation analysis between the research variables.

To examine the relationship between team ranking in the league table and the number of injuries, Pearson correlation analysis was used.

The results showed that there is a significant inverse correlation between team ranking and the number of injuries ($r = -0.65$, $p < 0.01$). This means that lower-ranked teams had more injuries. Also, a positive correlation was observed between the average age of players and the severity of injuries ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis between Research Variables

Variables	Team Rank	Average Player Age	Number of Matches	Rest Time	Injury Severity
Number of Injuries	-0.65*	0.48*	0.31	-0.22	0.72**
Injury Severity	-0.54**	0.68*	0.25	-0.18	-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Analysis of the Relationship between Team Rank and Player Injuries

Seasonal Variation Analysis

The variation in the rate of injuries over the three studied seasons was examined using ANOVA. Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of the number of injuries in the three

different seasons.

The results showed that there is a significant difference in the average number of injuries between different seasons ($F = 4.21$, $p < 0.05$). The highest average number of injuries was observed in the 2021-2022 season, which may be due to the tight match schedule caused by COVID-19 related restrictions.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Number of Injuries in Three Different Seasons

Season	Mean Number of Injuries	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
2021-2022	15.4	3.2	10	20
2022-2023	12.8	2.7	8	18
2023-2024	11.9	2.5	7	16

Linear Regression

To examine the effect of team ranking in the Premier League table on the number of injuries, a linear regression model was performed. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis.

The results showed that the team's position in the league table has a significant effect on the number of injuries ($\beta = 0.145$, $p < 0.01$). This means that the lower the team's rank, the

higher the number of injuries.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

To examine the difference in the number of injuries among the four rank groups, ANOVA was used. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the average injuries in these groups ($F = 8.74$, $p = 0.002$). Tukey's post-hoc test also

Table 4. Results of Linear Regression Analysis to Examine the Relationship between Team Rank and Number of Injuries

Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	Significance Level (p)
Team Rank	0.145	0.032	4.531	0.001
Average Player Age	0.102	0.045	2.267	0.028
Rest Time Between Matches	-0.098	0.041	-2.390	0.021

showed that teams ranked 13-16 had significantly more injuries than teams ranked 1-4 ($p < 0.01$).

Analysis of Injury Severity

Table 5 presents the results of the injury severity analysis based on team rank.

The results show that in lower-ranked teams, the proportion of

severe injuries is higher than in top-ranked teams.

The findings indicate that the team's position in the Premier League table is significantly related to the number and severity of player injuries. Teams that are ranked lower in the table experience more injuries due to increased pressure, stress from staying in the league, and possibly lower quality facilities.

Table 5. Relative Distribution of Injury Severity Based on Team Position in the Premier League Table (Percentage)

Team Rank	Mild (%)	Moderate (%)	Severe (%)
1-4	60.5	30.2	9.3
5-8	56.8	33.2	10.0
9-12	52.4	34.5	13.1
13-16	49.1	36.2	14.7

More Detailed Analysis of Injury Severity

For a more detailed examination of injury severity, the data were classified based on player position and half of the match (Table 6).

The results showed that defenders of lower-ranked teams experienced the highest rate of severe injuries (42%). Also, the distribution of injuries by halves of the match showed that 63% of severe injuries occurred in the second half.

Table 6. Distribution of Injury Severity by Player Position and Half of the Match

Player Position	Mild Injuries (%)	Moderate Injuries (%)	Severe Injuries (%)	Total (%)
Goalkeeper	20	15	10	45
Defender	25	20	42	87
Midfielder	22	18	25	65
Forward	18	22	20	60
Half of the Match	Mild Injuries (%)	Moderate Injuries (%)	Severe Injuries (%)	Total (%)
First Half	30	28	37	95
Second Half	40	32	63	135

Discussion

The impact of a team's position in the league table on the rate of player injuries is one of the important and less-studied topics in Iranian football. The findings of this research show that various factors affect the number and severity of injuries, and lower-ranked teams usually have more involvement with moderate and severe injuries.

One of the most important findings of this research is the strong correlation between a team's position in the league table and the rate of player injuries. The data showed that teams in lower positions in the table experienced the highest rate of injuries. These teams are at greater risk due to the stress and psychological pressure of trying to stay in the league. The psychological pressure resulting from the fear of relegation and reduced financial and moral support puts these teams' players in a situation that leads to increased injuries (Powell & Gaffiero, 2025). In addition, weaknesses in medical infrastructure and lack of access to advanced equipment for faster treatment and injury recovery in these teams exacerbate the situation (Law & Bloyce, 2019).

On the other hand, top-ranked teams, due to better access to financial resources, advanced health and medical facilities, and

better training program management, have been able to minimize injuries. Also, due to their more successful performance and having specialized technical and medical staff, these teams can use their players rotationally and put less physical and psychological pressure on them. These findings emphasize that teams' position in the league table is not only a performance indicator but also a factor affecting player health. Policymaking to improve the situation of lower-ranked teams can have a positive impact on reducing sports injuries (Lutter et al., 2022).

Another important finding of the research was the distribution of injury severity among players according to their playing position. The data showed that defenders, especially in lower-ranked teams, experienced the highest rate of severe injuries. This is due to the nature of these teams' games, which are often based on tight defense and more physical confrontations. Defensive players in lower-ranked teams are usually under more pressure and spend more time in high-pressure and dangerous situations (Prieto-Lage et al., 2022).

In addition, the analysis of injury timing showed that severe injuries mainly occurred in the second half of the game. This finding shows that fatigue from the game and decreased player

concentration in the final minutes can lead to an increased risk of injury. This emphasizes the importance of appropriate training programs to increase players' physical endurance and the use of rapid recovery techniques between halves. Also, using substitute players with good physical condition in the final minutes of the game can help reduce injuries.

Examining seasonal changes in the number of injuries revealed noteworthy points. The data showed that the highest number of injuries occurred in the 2021-2022 season. This significant increase could be due to the tight match schedule caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sudden changes in match scheduling, reduced rest time, and restrictions on team training due to health protocols severely affected players' health. In addition, reduced group interactions and team training may have led to decreased coordination and increased risk-taking during games.

These findings suggest that managing the match schedule and more careful planning can have a significant impact on reducing injuries. It is suggested that in similar situations in the future, leagues help reduce potential injuries by setting flexible schedules and providing sufficient time for player recovery (Page et al., 2023).

The statistical findings of this research showed that a team's position in the league table has a direct and significant effect on the number and severity of injuries. Lower-ranked teams, due to limited resources and the need to repeatedly use their key players, are at greater risk. Also, the analyses showed that the average age of players is directly related to the severity of injuries. Older players are more prone to severe injuries due to decreased physical ability and endurance. This emphasizes the importance of managing older players and providing appropriate training and treatment programs for them.

In addition, the results showed that the number of player injuries is strongly related to the quality of teams' medical and treatment infrastructure. Teams with more advanced facilities and professional medical staff have been able to significantly reduce the rate of injuries. These findings suggest that investing in sports health and treatment is essential as one of the main priorities of league teams.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between team ranking and player injuries in the Iranian Premier League, it is important to acknowledge its limitations.

This study focused exclusively on male professional football players in the Iranian Premier League. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to female players, amateur leagues, or football contexts in other countries.

Data on player injuries were collected from team medical reports, the official league website, and other sports databases. While efforts were made to ensure data reliability, the accuracy and completeness of these records may vary. Self-reported injuries or injuries not documented in official reports may not have been captured.

This study demonstrates a correlation between team ranking and injury rates, but it does not establish a causal relationship. Other factors not examined in this study may contribute to the observed findings.

Although we controlled for several potential confounding variables, such as player age and rest time between matches, other factors, such as training intensity, player fatigue, and specific playing styles, could have influenced the results.

The unique socio-economic and cultural context of the Iranian Premier League may limit the transferability of these findings to other settings. Factors such as financial constraints, infrastruc-

ture limitations, and cultural attitudes towards injury management may play a significant role.

Clinical, Research, and Policy Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for clinical practice, future research, and sports policy, particularly within the context of the Iranian Premier League.

The observed correlation between lower team ranking and increased injury rates highlights the need for targeted clinical interventions. Sports medicine professionals working with lower-ranked teams should be prepared to manage a higher volume and severity of injuries. This may necessitate increased staffing, improved diagnostic and treatment resources, and the implementation of more intensive rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, clinicians should be vigilant in addressing the psychological factors that contribute to injury risk in these settings, such as player stress and pressure.

Future research should delve deeper into the specific factors contributing to the increased injury risk in lower-ranked teams. Longitudinal studies could examine the impact of financial constraints, training load management, and access to medical resources on injury incidence over time. Qualitative research could explore the lived experiences of players and staff in these environments, providing valuable insights into the social and psychological dimensions of injury. Additionally, comparative studies between leagues with varying levels of financial investment could further elucidate the role of resource disparities in injury causation.

The results of this study underscore the need for policy interventions aimed at reducing inequities in player welfare. Governing bodies and league organizers should consider implementing policies that promote a more equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that all teams have access to adequate medical care, training facilities, and support staff. This could involve financial assistance programs, mandated minimum standards for player care, or the implementation of strategies to optimize match scheduling and reduce player burden.

Conclusion

This research showed that injuries, as one of the main factors affecting the performance of Iranian Premier League teams, are directly related to several variables such as team position in the league table, player age, and the quality of medical infrastructure. Lower-ranked teams experience the most injuries due to psychological pressures and lack of resources. By implementing the suggestions provided, conditions can be created to reduce injuries and increase the quality of Premier League competitions. This not only leads to improved player health but can also have a positive impact on the league's attractiveness and overall team performance.

To reduce the number and severity of injuries in the Premier League, the following suggestions are offered:

- Equipping lower-ranked teams with advanced medical facilities such as modern imaging equipment, physiotherapy facilities, and necessary medications can have a direct impact on reducing players' recovery time.
- Providing special financial support to lower-ranked teams to improve training and treatment conditions can be helpful.
- Match scheduling should be such that players have enough time to recover. In case of emergencies such as a pandemic, providing longer mid-season breaks is recommended.
- Designing training and recovery programs based on players' physical and psychological needs, especially for older players, can be effective.
- Providing training courses on injury prevention, fatigue management, and proper use of recovery techniques can play an important role in reducing injuries.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amir Hossein Labbaf: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. Jafar Ketabchi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Data sharing statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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