

1 **Technique selection ‘the coaches challenge’ influencing injury risk**
2 **during the first contact hand of the round off skill in female**
3 **gymnastics**

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31 **Abstract**

32 The importance of technique selection on elbow injury risk has been identified for the key
33 round off skill in female gymnastics, with a focus on the second contact limb. The aim of this study
34 was to shift the focus to the first contact limb and investigate the biomechanical injury risk during
35 parallel and T-shape round-off (RO) techniques. Seven international-level female gymnasts
36 performed 10 trials of the RO to back-handspring with parallel and T-shape hand positions.
37 Synchronized kinematic (3D motion analysis system; 247 Hz) and kinetic (two force plates; 1235
38 Hz) data were collected for each trial. The t-test with effect size statistics determined differences
39 between the two techniques. No significant differences were found for vertical, anterior posterior
40 and resultant ground reaction force, elbow joint kinematics and kinetics. Specifically, the results
41 highlighted that change in technique in RO skills did not influence first contact limb elbow joint
42 mechanics and therefore, injury risk. The findings of the present study suggest the injury potential
43 of this skill is focused on the second limb during the parallel technique of this fundamental
44 gymnastic skill.

45 **Keywords:** gymnastics, fundamental skill, upper extremity, prevention

46

47 **Introduction**

48 A unique aspect of gymnastics is the need for the upper extremities to support gymnast's full
49 body weight (DiFiori et al., 2006). During skills and routines, gymnasts land repetitively on the
50 hands whilst tumbling on the floor and performing vaulting (Daly et al., 1999). The consequence of
51 upper limbs being weight-bearing causes high impact loads to be distributed through the wrist and
52 elbow (Webb and Rettig, 2008); these repetitive loads can lead to both acute and chronic injuries
53 (Davidson et al., 2005). There is previous evidence that a major career ending injury site in female
54 gymnastics is the elbow joint complex (Chan et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1989), which is susceptible
55 to micro traumatic lesions and typically stems from the abduction load (Hume et al., 2006; Koh et
56 al., 1992). Furthermore, Magra et al. (2007) demonstrated that the abduction position and
57 corresponding internal adduction moment of the elbow produced abduction loading and probably
58 contributed to some of the overuse injury patterns such as valgus extension overloading. These
59 repetitive loads cause lesions to the elbow, including medial collateral ligament strains, medial
60 epicondyle traction injuries and osteochondritis dissecans of the capitellum (Frostick et al., 1999;
61 Koh et al., 1992). Chronic injuries resulting from skills that are well learned, basic or moderately
62 difficult have been shown to be most common, and these occur with highest frequency on the floor
63 exercise (Lindner and Caine, 1990). The major challenge for coaches and athletes is the selection of
64 technique, considering that the same skill can be performed with a number of different techniques.
65 Technique selection may have an impact on injury and the evolution of the skill and is an important
66 area for research (Cossens, 2012; Farana et al., 2014, 2016).

67 The round-off (RO) (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique) is a fundamental
68 gymnastics skill and a key movement in the development of elite female gymnasts, owing to its
69 association with learning more complex skills. Two common techniques are used to perform RO,
70 the parallel hand position and the T-shape hand position (Figure 1).

71 *Insert Figure 1 Above Here*

72 Injury risk and skill technique selection have been examined in technical coaching articles
73 (Sands and McNeal, 2006) and empirical biomechanics research (Farana et al., 2014, 2016), in
74 which the risk associated with the choice of hand placement during a back handspring and the RO
75 was demonstrated, respectively. Sands and McNeal (2006) suggested that by turning the hands
76 inward during a back handspring, the female gymnast reduced both the risk of injuring the elbow
77 and the risk of damage to the wrist. Farana et al. (2014) and Farana et al. (2015) showed that
78 different hand positions during the RO among female gymnasts significantly influenced elbow
79 loading and biological variability on the second contact limb. More specifically, the T-shape
80 position of the hands reduced peak vertical, anterior–posterior, and resultant ground reaction forces
81 (GRFs), decreased loading rates and internal adduction moment indicating a safer technique for the

82 RO. However, a limitation of this previous research is that only the second contact limb during the
83 RO was investigated and there is, to date, no information about first contact limb mechanics.
84 Therefore, there is a need to examine the first contact limb mechanics and the role it plays. For
85 example, during the T-shape technique when, as previously reported (Farana et al., 2014), there is a
86 significant decrease in the peak GRFs and elbow joint abduction loading, it remains unknown
87 whether the first limb acts as an associated compensatory mechanism. Hence, this study focused on
88 examination of the first contact limb and the effect of different hand positions on the injury risk
89 factors.

90 In a study that examined ground reaction forces transmitted to the upper extremities, Panzer
91 et al. (1987) found that during the Tsukahara vault, elbow joint reaction forces ranged from 1.7 to
92 2.2 BW. Moreover, Seeley and Bressel (2005) observed a bi-modal force trace depicting vertical
93 reaction forces (VGRF) for the first hand and then the support phase during the round-off of a
94 Yurchenko vault. However, these authors did not use separate force plates for each hand and as
95 such, could not fully comment on the underlying mechanics and injury risk. To our knowledge,
96 there has been no detailed investigation of the first contact limb mechanics during the RO skills
97 which may have implications for injury risk. In general, there is a lack of research focused on the
98 interaction between impacting upper limbs in sports like gymnastics. The need for this research is
99 supported theoretically to develop a better understanding of the stochastic nature of injury.

100 Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate injury risk factors including impact
101 forces, elbow joint kinetics and kinematics in the first contact limb for both parallel and T-shape
102 RO techniques. This research hypothesised that variation in the hand position of the second contact
103 limb would affect mechanics of the first contact limb elbow joint which may be related to injury.
104 The data presented in this paper were obtained from the same subjects as in Farana et al.'s (2014)
105 study, in which changes in impact loading as well as elbow kinematics and kinetics for the second
106 contact limb were investigated. Such a sample choice, in our opinion, will facilitate a meaningful
107 comparison. The current research provides original insight into technique selection and the potential
108 interaction of support limbs during fundamental skills in female gymnastics.

109

110 **Material and Methods**

111 *Participants and Protocol*

112 Seven international level female gymnasts participated in this study. The gymnasts were
113 members of the junior and senior national gymnastics team of the Czech Republic with average
114 training and competition experience of 14 ± 2 years. Their mean (\pm SD) body height was $162.9 \pm$
115 3.9 cm; body mass 56.7 ± 5.2 kg and age 20.7 ± 1.6 years. All gymnasts were injury free at the time
116 of testing. More details about preferred technique of each gymnast were previously described by

117 Farana et al. (2014). Informed consent from the participants was obtained before the
118 commencement of the study which was performed in accordance with the guidelines of the Ethics
119 and Research Committee of Human Motion Diagnostic Centre. The research was conducted in the
120 Biomechanical Laboratory. The gymnasts completed their self-selected warm up and completed a
121 number of practice RO trials using both techniques. A thin gymnastic floor cover mat (dimension
122 20 mm, Baenfer, Germany) was used that was taped down onto each force plate to replicate the feel
123 of a typical gymnastics' floor. Additionally, landing mats were used to provide safety for the
124 gymnasts' landing. After the warm up and practice, all gymnasts performed 10 trials of RO with a
125 parallel hand position from a hurdle step to a back handspring, and 10 trials of RO with a T-shape
126 hand position from a hurdle step to a back handspring in random order and separated by a one-
127 minute rest period.

128

129 *Measures*

130 Two force plates (Kistler, Switzerland) embedded into the floor determined GRF at a
131 sampling rate of 1235 Hz. Depth of the transducer was set as the sum of the manufacturer depth for
132 the specific force plate and the depth of the mat (Farana et al., 2014). The force plates were
133 synchronized with a motion-capture system (Qualisys Oqus, Sweden) consisting of eight infrared
134 cameras collecting kinematic data at a sampling rate of 247 Hz. The global coordinate system was
135 set with the z-axis as vertical, y-axis as anterior-posterior and x-axis as medio-lateral.
136 Retroreflective markers and two clusters containing three markers each (19 mm diameter) were
137 attached to the gymnasts' upper limbs and trunk (C-motion, Rockville, MD, USA), they were also
138 placed bilaterally on the upper arm and forearm (Figure 2). Markers and clusters were bilaterally
139 placed on each participant at the anatomical locations previously described by Farana et al. (2014).
140 Two photocell timing gates were used to control hurdle step horizontal velocity which was
141 standardized at range of 3.3 to 3.7 m/s (Farana et al., 2013).

142 *Insert Figure 2 Above Here*

143 Raw coordinate data were processed using Visual 3D software (version 4; C-motion,
144 Rockville, MD, USA). All upper extremity segments were modelled as a frusta of right circular
145 cones and the trunk as an elliptical column. The local coordinate systems were defined using a static
146 calibration trial in the handstand position. All analyses focused on the contact phase of the first
147 contact hand during the RO. Kinematic variables included sagittal (+ flexion, – extension), frontal
148 (+ adduction, – abduction) and transverse (+ internal rotation, – external rotation) elbow angles and
149 these were calculated using XYZ (mediolateral-anteroposterior-longitudinal) order of rotation.
150 Kinetic variables included peak vertical GRF (VGRF), anterior-posterior GRF (APGRF), resultant
151 GRF (RGRF), and loading rates of these forces. In addition, net three-dimensional internal elbow

152 joint moments in the sagittal (+ flexion, – extension), frontal (+ adduction, – abduction), and
153 transversal (+ internal rotation, – external rotation) planes were quantified by the Newton-Euler
154 inverse dynamics technique, using the segmental inertial characteristics, hand, forearm and upper
155 arm markers positions, and GRFs during first hand contact time (Selbie et al., 2014). Net internal
156 elbow moments were expressed in the local coordinate system of the upper arm. The coordinate and
157 force plate data were low-pass filtered using a fourth-order Butterworth filter with a 12 Hz and 50
158 Hz cut off frequency, respectively. The GRF and moment data were normalised to body mass.

159

160 *Statistical Analysis*

161 Statistical tests were used to examine the effects caused by the independent variables “hand
162 position” (a parallel hand position versus a T-shape hand position) on the dependent variables (i.e.,
163 impact forces, elbow joint angles and moments of force) of the first contact hand. Mean values of
164 the 10 trials for each gymnast in each technique were calculated for all measured variables and used
165 in statistical analysis. The Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed the normality assumption for the data and a
166 paired t-test was performed. The level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Effect sizes (ES) were
167 calculated using Cohen’s d and presented as < 0.2 trivial; $0.21 - 0.5$ small; $0.51 - 0.8$ medium and $>$
168 0.8 large (Cohen, 1988). To provide further information regarding differences between parallel and
169 T-shape hand positions, the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the mean difference was derived in
170 order to minimise the occurrence of a type I error. Statistical tests were processed using IBM SPSS
171 Statistics 20 Software (IBM SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

172

173 **Results**

174 Descriptive statistics with means, standard deviations and statistical results for the two
175 techniques and the first contact limb are presented in Table 1. No significant differences were found
176 for peak VGRF, APGRF, RGRF (Figure 3A) and VRGF loading rates (Figure 3B). As shown in
177 Figure 3B, a significant difference, although small effect sizes were found for peak APGRF ($p =$
178 0.033 , $ES = 0.40$) and RGRF loading rates ($p = 0.025$, $ES = 0.22$) for the parallel hand position.
179 Furthermore, no significant differences were observed for peak elbow flexion, abduction and
180 internal rotation angles (Figure 3C), and corresponding internal extension, adduction and external
181 rotation moments (Figure 3D).

182

Insert Table 1 Above Here

183

Insert Figure 3A-D Above Here

184

185 **Discussion**

186 Elbow injury in gymnastics is a potential career ending injury and represents a meaningful
187 risk to the longevity of sports performers. Building on research that has examined the mechanical
188 injury risk of the second contact limb (Farana et al., 2014), the aim of this study was to investigate
189 elbow joint injury risk factors during the first contact limb for both parallel and T-shape RO
190 techniques.

191 The hypothesis highlighted that different hand positions of the second contact limb would
192 affect the mechanics of the first contact limb elbow joint, revealing injury risks that were currently
193 not apparent. Table 1 and Figures 3A and 3B show that for both techniques there were no
194 significant differences in peak VGRF, APGRF, RGRF, and VGRF loading rates. However, there
195 were significant increases in APGRF and RGRF loading rates in the parallel technique (Table 1 and
196 Figure 3B). Although these higher loading rates during the parallel position may be considered an
197 upper extremity injury risk factor, the magnitude of these values was still lower than this previously
198 reported at the second contact limb (Farana et al., 2014). However, the small effect size for these
199 differences in the current study must be taken into account when interpreting these data. With this
200 in mind the findings of the present study are consistent with those of Seeley and Bressel (2005) who
201 stated that the second contact limb during the RO phase of the Yurchenko vault experienced an
202 increase in peak VGRF and APGRF. Although it must be noted that Seeley and Bressel (2005) did
203 not use independent force plates for each hand and the overall support phase was measured only on
204 one force plate (both hands together). The advantage of having two independent force plates, as in
205 the current study, allows a more valid inter limb comparison.

206 In the current study, no significant differences were observed in the abduction angle (Figure
207 2C) and corresponding internal adduction moment (Figure 3D) for the first contact limb (Table 1).
208 Moreover, when comparing the first and second contact limb elbow internal adduction moment
209 reported by Farana et al. (2014), there is a decrease by 0.32 N/kg in the parallel technique. Within
210 gymnastics research, these factors have been previously associated with elbow joint injury risk
211 factors (Farana et al., 2014; Koh et al., 1992). Interestingly, a large standard deviation in the
212 abduction angle for the first contact limb was observed and indicated high intra and inter-individual
213 variability for both techniques (Table 1 and Figure 3C). Although the movement variability is an
214 important factor from an injury prevention perspective (Farana et al., 2015; Hamill et al., 1999), a
215 possible explanation for this might be that the variability observed in the first limb could provide a
216 mechanism to control the variability and load in the second limb. This pattern of variability has
217 been previously observed in other gymnastics skills where end point variability is reduced to control
218 skilled performance (Hiley and Yeadon, 2012).

219 In comparison to the second limb (Farana et al., 2014), there is a decrease in the first contact
220 limb internal rotation in both techniques. The difference in the transverse plane movement patterns

221 between the first and second limb highlights the greater first contact limb external rotation.
222 Consistency in the first limb external rotation between the two techniques is in contrast to the
223 differences reported with regard to the second limb, i.e. limb abduction loading of the elbow
224 decreases with the T-shape technique (Farana et al., 2014). In terms of the aetiology of elbow
225 injury, a higher abduction load, as reported during the parallel technique, has been associated with
226 the marker of medial collateral ligament strain (Hume et al., 2006; Hurd et al., 2011) predisposing
227 gymnasts to traction injuries on the medial side and compressive injuries to the posterior and lateral
228 structures (Farana et al., 2014).

229 In both techniques, a higher elbow extension moment was observed for the first contact limb
230 compared to the second contact limb (Farana et al., 2014). It may be speculated that in combination
231 with relatively low elbow flexion in the first contact limb, there may be an increase in loading on
232 the extensor muscles that further may increase the risk of posterior elbow injuries (e.g. triceps
233 tendinitis) (Badia and Stennett, 2006). The reduced elbow flexion in the first contact limb did not
234 expose the elbow joint complex to an increased abduction load, which is in contrast to the role of
235 elbow flexion highlighted by Fornalski et al. (2003).

236 Findings from the current study show that the first contact limb is exposed to a lower
237 mechanical load and further reinforces and supports the use of the T-shape technique of the RO skill
238 (Farana et al., 2014, 2015). When considered in relation to previous research, the findings of this
239 study concur with the recommendation that the T-shape technique may help reduce injury. These
240 results have implications for coaches and clinicians, when potential risk factors are identified and
241 the process of technique selection is made to be more objective and safe. Conclusions from this
242 study must be considered with the sample size in mind; however, the current study benefited from
243 the use of elite international level gymnasts and has a high degree of ecological validity. In addition,
244 different performance levels, genders and stages of learning need to be considered as factors that
245 may influence the occurrence of injury.

246 The current study extends knowledge and understanding about different hand positions
247 during the RO skill in female gymnastics. These results demonstrate that technique selection in the
248 RO skill did not influence first contact limb elbow joint mechanics and external forces. These
249 findings suggest that technique selection for the fundamental gymnastics skill of the RO would be
250 better focused on the second hand contact and that the first hand does not act as an influencing
251 factor. The combination of ecological validity and a scientific approach provides a useful insight
252 into technique selection that will help coaches, athletes and clinicians.

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Table

Table 1 Summary of the GRF, loading rate, kinematic and kinetic variables ($N = 7$)

Variable	Parallel position	T-shape position	p	95% CI		Effect Size	Effect
				Lower	Upper		
<i>Peak GRFs (BW)</i>							
VGRF (BW)	1.18 ± 0.20	1.17 ± 0.18	0.963	-0.09	0.09	0.05	Trivial
APGRF (BW)	-0.39 ± 0.08	-0.36 ± 0.10	0.168	-0.06	0.01	0.33	Small
RGRF (BW)	1.26 ± 0.21	1.20 ± 0.20	0.097	-0.01	0.13	0.40	Small
<i>Loading rate (BW/s)</i>							
VGRF (BW/s)	15.16 ± 7.11	13.91 ± 6.38	0.344	-1.16	2.76	0.19	Trivial
APGRF (BW/s)	-6.50 ± 2.00	-5.71 ± 2.00	0.033*	-1.50	-0.09	0.40	Small
RGRF (BW/s)	15.72 ± 7.06	14.32 ± 6.81	0.025*	0.25	2.56	0.22	Small
<i>Elbow Angles (°)</i>							
Flexion	24.91 ± 7.23	23.80 ± 7.74	0.311	-1.33	3.54	0.15	Small
Abduction	-2.60 ± 11.77	-1.44 ± 9.61	0.250	-3.38	1.06	0.11	Trivial
Internal rotation	22.21 ± 11.03	22.91 ± 10.89	0.179	-1.85	0.43	0.06	Trivial
<i>Elbow Moments (Nm/kg)</i>							
Extension	-0.84 ± 0.18	-0.86 ± 0.16	0.379	-0.03	0.07	0.12	Trivial
Adduction	0.43 ± 0.21	0.41 ± 0.13	0.558	-0.05	0.12	0.11	Trivial
External rotation	-0.11 ± 0.07	-0.10 ± 0.07	0.490	-0.04	0.02	0.14	Trivial

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; GRF, ground reaction forces; VGRF, vertical GRF; APGRF, anterior–posterior GRF, RGRF, resultant GRF; BW, body weight; BW/s, body weight per second; °, degrees; Nm/kg, Newton-meter per kilogram; values for elbow angles and moments for transversal plane (+) internal rotation, (-) external rotation; for frontal plane (+) adduction, (-) abduction; for sagittal plane (+) flexion, (-) extension; A 95% CI (confidence interval) represents the differences between condition mean.

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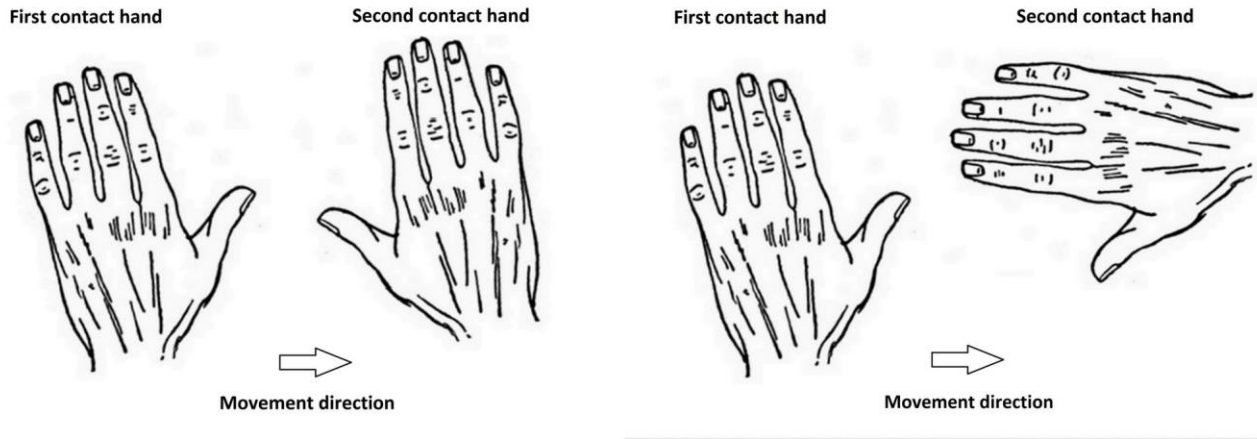
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Figure Captions

Figure 1 - Hand positions: parallel (left) and T-shape (right) for the round-off skill.



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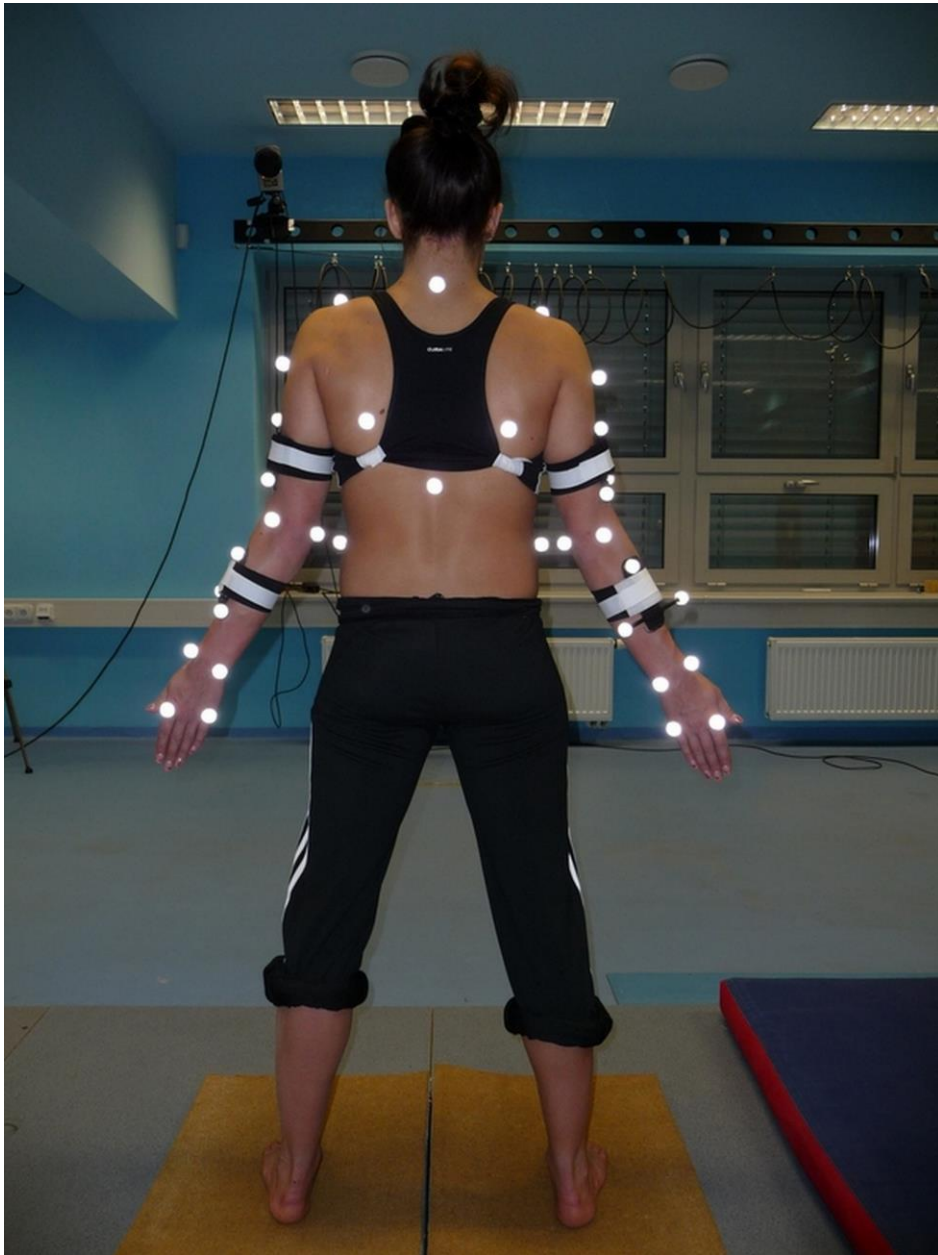
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374 Figure 2 - Position of the reflective markers on the gymnast's body



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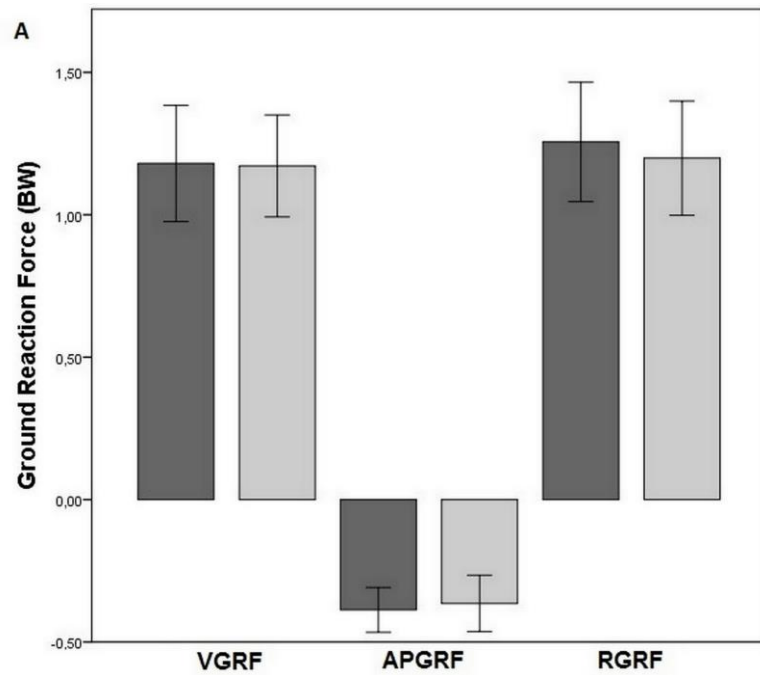
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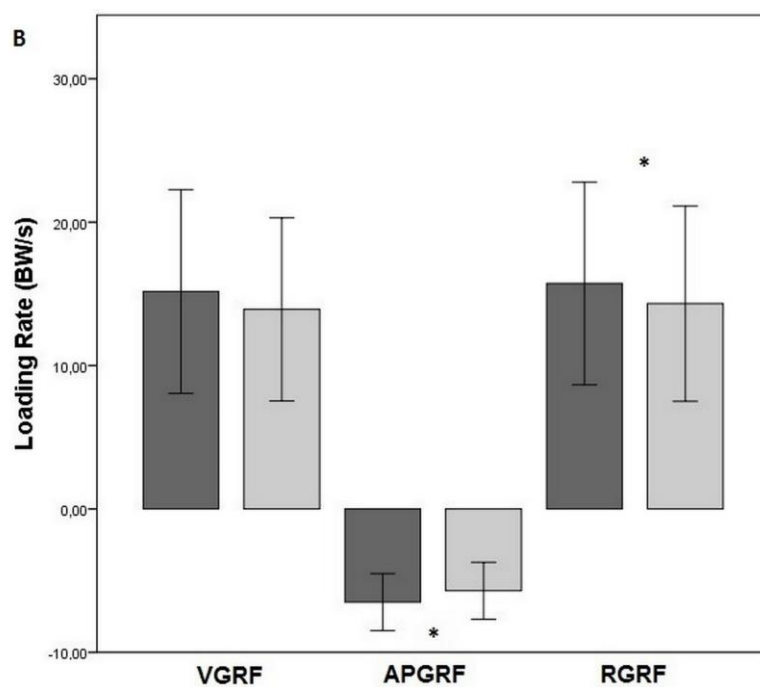
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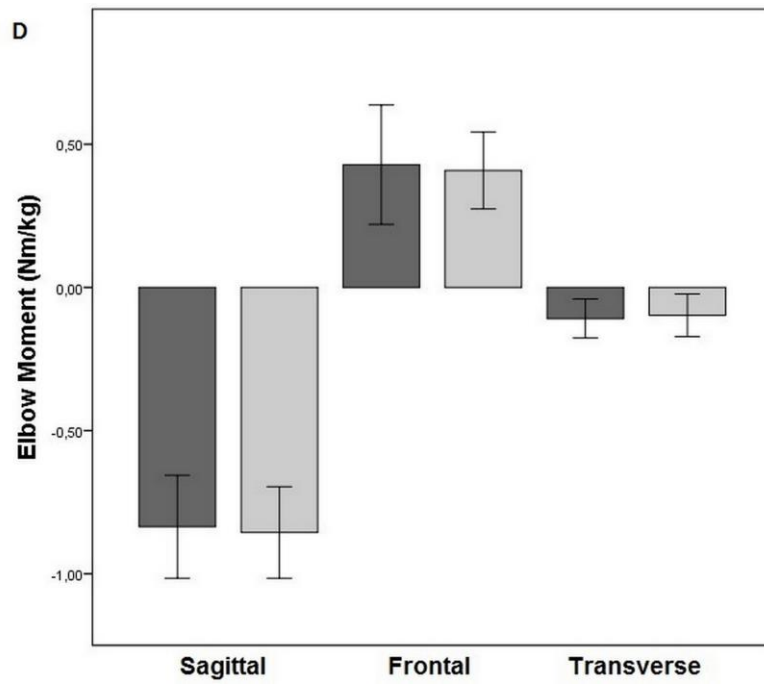
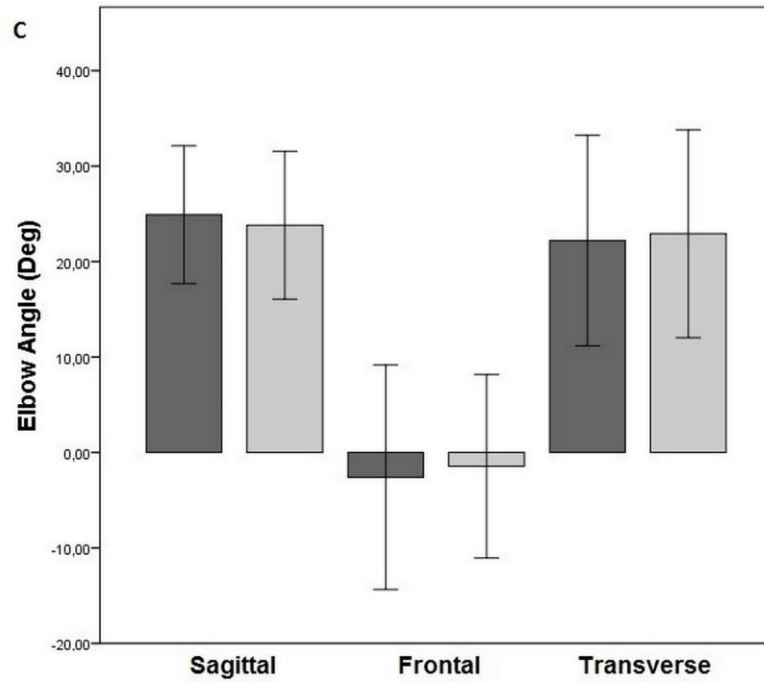
385 Figure 3 - Means and standard deviations for (A) peak ground reaction force, (B) loading rates, (C)
386 peak elbow joint angles, and (D) peak elbow joint moments across all participants for the parallel
387 (black) and T-Shape (grey) technique. *significant differences between techniques ($p < 0.05$).



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