

LEFT VENTRICULAR FUNCTION DURING EXERCISE IN TRAINED PRE-ADOLESCENT SOCCER PLAYERS

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Running Head: Cardiovascular responses in youth soccer

Abstract

It is unclear, what the underlying cardiovascular mechanisms are that give rise to the high level of aerobic fitness seen in youth soccer players. The aim of the study was to evaluate global and regional markers of systolic and diastolic function in a group of pre-adolescent soccer players during an incremental exercise test.

Twenty-two, male soccer players (SP) from two professional soccer clubs (age: 12.0 ± 0.3 years) volunteered for the study. Fifteen recreationally active boys (CON), of similar age (age: 11.7 ± 0.2 years) were also recruited. All boys underwent a cycle ergometer test to exhaustion. Cardiac dimensions were determined using M-mode echocardiography. During submaximal and maximal exercise, continuous-wave Doppler ultrasound techniques were used to derive stroke volume (SVIndex). Tissue-Doppler imaging was used to quantify systolic (S'_{adj}) and diastolic function (E; E'_{adj} and E/E') at rest and both submaximal and maximal exercise intensities. Speckle tracking echocardiography was used to determine peak longitudinal ϵ at submaximal exercise intensities. SP demonstrated significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) greater peak VO_2 values than CON (SP: 48.0 ± 5.0 vs CON: 40.1 ± 7.5 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹). Allometrically scaled to body surface area left ventricular end-diastolic volume (LVEDV) was larger ($P \leq 0.05$) in the SP (51.3 ± 9.0) compared to CON (44.6 ± 5.8 mL·BSA^{1.5}). At the same relative, submaximal exercise intensities, the SP demonstrated greater SVIndex, cardiac output (QIndex) and E. No differences were noted for peak longitudinal ϵ during

submaximal exercise. Factors that augment pre-load and LV volume appear to determine the superior aerobic fitness seen in the soccer players.

Key Words: Youth Soccer; Tissue-Doppler Imaging; Cardiac Strain; Exercise

Introduction

Adolescent and youth soccer within professional clubs is characterised by training and match-play intensities that are in excess of 70% of the maximal aerobic capacity of the young player¹. Furthermore, the tactical and technical training that these athletes undergo can generate physiological loads in excess of 85% of the maximal heart rate¹. This type of training load produces acute cardiovascular adjustments in stroke volume, cardiac output and total peripheral resistance that results in a transient volume overload² on the left ventricle (LV). Evidence exists to suggest that the physiological superiority of adolescent and youth soccer players compared to their recreationally active peers is a response to long-term training rather than any growth or maturity-linked effects³. Further, the impact of training status on LV structure and function at rest may help explain their superior physical performance capacity^{4,5}. Whilst the evaluation of cardiac structure and function at rest can provide some mechanistic insight with regard to exercise performance⁶, the interrogation of LV functional responses *during exercise* has greater potential to explain individual differences in physiological performance capacity^{4,7}. Previous work in this area has focussed upon identifying the determinants of superior aerobic capacity in both male and female, highly trained, adolescent soccer players^{4,7}. It is unclear, however, the impact that a reduced number of years of soccer training exposure would have on influencing cardiac morphology and function at both rest and uniquely during exercise in the pre-adolescent player.

The emergence of speckle tracking echocardiography (STE), which reliably assesses regional myocardial tissue deformation in the longitudinal plane of motion⁸ has the potential to provide further mechanistic insight into the link between LV performance and maximal aerobic capacity. There are a small number of studies that have characterised cardiac deformation *during exercise* in the child and adolescent populations^{8,9}. To date, this approach has not been adopted in highly trained pre-adolescent soccer players in an attempt to differentiate the impact of training status on regional LV function.

Consequently, the aims of this study were; 1) to evaluate LV morphology and global and regional markers of systolic and diastolic function at rest in highly-trained, pre-adolescent soccer players (SP) and healthy control participants (CON), 2) to compare global and regional LV systolic and diastolic responses at two, similar relative exercise intensities in the SP and CON and 3) to compare maximal exercise performance capacity (maximal aerobic capacity), as well as global markers of LV systolic and diastolic function at peak exercise intensity. It was hypothesised that the SP would demonstrate: 1) larger LV morphology and superior global LV function than the CON at rest; 2) no significant difference in global and regional markers of LV function compared to the CON during submaximal exercise and 3) greater QIndex and SVIndex at peak exercise compared to the CON.

Methods

Participants

Twenty-two highly trained youth soccer players (SP, mean age: 12.0 ± 0.3 years) and 15 recreationally active individuals (CON, mean age: 11.7 ± 0.2 years) volunteered to participate in

the study. The SP were recruited from two, Category One Youth Soccer Academies affiliated to two professional English Championship soccer clubs. The SP training profiles were as follows: 4.5 ± 1.5 years training, 11 ± 1 months per year training, 4 ± 1 training sessions per week and 9.4 ± 2.4 hours per week of training. The SP also played one competitive match per week and had been engaged in competitive soccer matches for 4 ± 2 years. The CON were all recreationally active. Recreational activity was defined as taking part in physical education classes at school and the occasional out of school sports activity. These participants, however, were not involved in any systematic training. All participants underwent a physical examination and completed a medical history questionnaire. Exclusion criteria included the use of any medications that would influence cardiovascular function and any personal or early family history of cardiovascular disease. Informed parental and participants' written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and the study was approved by Staffordshire University Research Ethics Committee.

Study Design

The study employed a prospective, cross-sectional, cohort assessment of cardiac and exercise performance in highly trained pre-adolescent SP and CON. Within testing sessions, repeated measures of a number of physiological variables were completed at rest and during progressive exercise. All testing took place at the training grounds of the two soccer clubs and at a local school for the CON participants. Participants were instructed to refrain from exercise on the day preceding the test. Furthermore, all participants were also informed to refrain from consuming

any drinks containing sugar or caffeine as well as the consumption of any food in the two hours preceding the testing session.

Protocol/Measurements

Physical activity and training questionnaires⁴ were completed prior to the testing. Following this, stature, sitting height and body mass were measured. Maturity status was quantified using both self-assessment, Tanner Stage method¹⁰ and maturity offset¹¹. Resting arterial blood pressure was recorded in the left arm by an automated blood pressure cuff (Boso, Medicus, Jungingen, Germany) and heart rate was assessed by a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) (CardioExpress SL6, Spacelabs Healthcare, Washington US). Resting echocardiographic measurements were taken in the supine position. This was then followed by resting echocardiographic measurements taken in an upright position on the cycle ergometer. Participants then completed a cycle ergometer test to volitional exhaustion, with echocardiographic and open circuit, breath-by-breath metabolic measurements obtained throughout. The participants pedalled at 60 rpm with an initial workload of 20 W and this increment was maintained until 60 W. Each stage was 3 minutes in duration.

Echocardiographic measurements were taken 90 s into each stage for the first three stages. After this third stage, the workload increments were adjusted on an individual basis until volitional exhaustion. Final echocardiographic measurements were taken immediately prior to peak exercise. Submaximal exercise inter-group comparisons were made at two relative exercise intensities (RE), to ensure that cardiovascular evaluations were made at the same approximate metabolic load. These intensities were at 40W in the SP, which equated to 46.7 ± 5.6 % VO_2peak and 20W in the CON, which equated to 46.5 ± 8.0 % VO_2peak . These two intensities were denoted

as RE (1). The second relative exercise intensity comparison was at 60W in the SP, this equated to 56.8 ± 6.0 % VO_2peak and 40W in the CON: 60.5 ± 10.4 % VO_2peak and denoted as RE (2).

Echocardiographic Measurements: *Resting indices of LV structure*

All echocardiographic procedures prior to and during the cycle ergometer test were performed by the same experienced sonographer (DO) using a commercially available ultrasound system (VividQ Ultrasound System, GE Ltd, Horton, Norway). Measurements of resting LV dimensions (LV end diastolic dimension [LVED], LV end systolic dimension [LVES]), diastolic wall thicknesses (interventricular septum [VSd] and posterior wall [PWd]) were made in accordance with American Society of Echocardiography (ASE) guidelines¹² using M-mode echocardiography. These parameters were scaled to the square root of body surface area¹³. Relative wall thickness (RWT) was calculated according to ASE guidelines in order to provide a marker of LV geometry. LV end-diastolic volume (LVEDV) and LV end-systolic volume (LVESV) were determined using the Simpson's biplane method from apical 4- and 2-chamber views¹². LVEDV and LVESV were then allometrically scaled¹³ to BSA^{1.5}.

Echocardiographic Measurements: *Indices of LV function at rest and during incremental exercise*

Following supine resting measurements, participants sat in an upright position on an electronically braked cycle ergometer (Lode, Corival, Groningen, Netherlands). Imaging of the left ventricle was performed at rest and at 1:30 s into each of the first three stages, from the focused, apical four-chamber view and the suprasternal notch with the participant in an upright,

but forward-leaning position on the cycle ergometer. Offline analysis included, peak early diastolic filling velocity (E). Where clearly discernible, the E wave was measured. During faster heart rates, however, fusion of the E and atrial (A) waves meant that a single peak diastolic filling velocity was measured, but still termed E for ease of comparison. Pulsed wave tissue-Doppler imaging determined peak longitudinal mitral, lateral, annular velocities in systole (S') and early diastole (E'). Both E' and S' were adjusted for heart size by LV Length¹⁴. Similar to conventional blood flow assessment, the peak diastolic myocardial velocity was utilized, when fusion of E and A' occurred. E/E' (E ratio) was calculated as an estimate of LV filling pressure and thus preload¹⁵.

Stroke volume (SV) was calculated using continuous-wave Doppler from the suprasternal notch to detect ascending aortic flow. The velocity-time integral (VTI) at rest and at peak exercise was calculated and multiplied by the resting, upright, LV outflow tract cross-sectional area.

Subsequently, rest and peak exercise cardiac output (Q) was determined by multiplying SV by the heart rate (HR) (as determined from the R-R interval from the same cardiac cycle on the ECG inherent to the echocardiographic machine). Acceptable reliability of the Doppler echocardiographic technique for estimating SV has previously been established by Rowland and Willers¹⁶. Both Q and SV were adjusted for body surface area (QIndex and SVIndex). Arterial venous oxygen difference (AVO₂) was computed as VO₂/Q.

A focused apical 4-chamber orientation of the LV was acquired and optimized to improve endocardial delineation using frequency and gain with a single focal zone placed mid LV cavity to reduce the impact of beam divergence. Frame rates were maintained as high as possible within

the working range of 40 to 90 fps. Subsequent offline analysis using dedicated speckle tracking software (Echopac V6.0, GE Healthcare, Horton, Norway) provided assessment of longitudinal strain (ϵ), systolic strain rate (SSR) and early diastolic strain rate (DSR) (as defined as the peak value in diastole allowing for early and late diastolic fusion). Global values were calculated as an average of six myocardial segments from the basal, mid and apical septum and lateral walls. Strain data was only analysed at the two relative exercise intensities [(RE (1) and RE (2)] due to poor feasibility of speckle tracking at higher heart rates. All images were digitally stored and analysed off-line. The average of three to five consecutive cardiac cycles was calculated and recorded. Good reliability of the in-exercise longitudinal ϵ data has also been established by this research team⁸.

Gas exchange measurements during exercise

Gas exchange data was obtained using an online gas analysis system (Cortex MetaMax 3B, Cortex Biophysik GmbH, Leipzig, Germany). The online gas analyser was calibrated prior to each visit according to the manufacturer's instructions, using a known gas concentration and a 3 L syringe for manual volume calibration of the flow turbines. Peak VO_2 was defined as the highest 15 s mean value during the final stage of exercise. This value was expressed relative to body mass. The criteria used to determine a true maximal effort were: 1) Participants demonstrated subjective evidence of exhaustion (hyperpnea, sweating and fatigue), 2) a maximal RER value greater than 1.0 or 3) a heart rate in excess of 180bpm⁴. HR was assessed by ECG and a Polar Heart rate monitor (Polar Electro, Kempele, Finland).

Statistical Methods

A one-way ANOVA was used for the inter-group comparisons of: 1) cardiac morphology data, 2) resting global and tissue-Doppler derived variables, 3) global and tissue-Doppler derived measures at the two relative exercise intensities and 4) maximal exercise intensity global and tissue-Doppler derived variables. A sample size of 22 SP provided a $(1-\beta)$ of 80% at an alpha level of 0.05. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 23 (NY, USA).

Results

There were small, but statistically significant inter-group differences in chronological age and stature, but all other physical or maturity status data were similar between groups (Table 1). The SP demonstrated a significantly higher peak VO_2 (SP: 48.0 ± 5.0 vs CON: 40.1 ± 7.5 $\text{mL} \cdot \text{kg}^{-1} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$; $P \leq 0.05$). All participants satisfied the criteria for an exhaustive effort on the cycle ergometer and there was no between group difference for maximal HR (SP: 189 ± 7 vs. CON: 186 ± 9 $\text{beats} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$).

Resting LV structure and function

The SP had significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) larger scaled $\text{LVES} \cdot \text{BSA}^{-0.5}$, $\text{VSd} \cdot \text{BSA}^{-0.5}$, $\text{LVEDV} \cdot \text{BSA}^{-1.5}$ than the CON (Table 2). Resting heart rate was significantly lower and resting SV index was significantly greater ($P \leq 0.05$) in SP than controls (Table 3). There was no significant between group differences in AVO_2 difference or QIndex at rest, but QIndex reserve (SP: 71 ± 4.0 vs CON: 66 ± 8 %) was significantly greater ($P \leq 0.05$) in the SP. Peak aortic blood flow velocity was significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) higher at rest in the SP compared to the CON. There was no inter-group difference in LVEF and S' at rest and no significant inter-group difference in S' reserve (SP: 60 ± 7 vs CON: 60 ± 11 %). Peak E was significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) higher in the SP compared to

the CON at rest, but all other indices of resting diastolic function were not different between groups (Table 3) including E'adj reserve (SP: 41 ± 12 vs CON: $45 \pm 16\%$).

LV function during submaximal and maximal exercise

At RE (1), SVIndex, QIndex and E were all significantly greater ($P \leq 0.05$) in the SP compared to the CON (Table 4 and see Figures 1-3). Significantly, greater QIndex and E values were also noted for the SP compared to the CON at RE (2), Table 4 and Figures 1-3. There were no inter-group differences for S'adj at RE (1) and RE (2). The only inter-group differences that emerged at maximal exercise were for peak aortic velocity and S' and in each case, SP presented with significantly ($P \leq 0.05$) greater values than CON (Table 3).

Longitudinal ϵ during submaximal exercise

No inter-group differences were identified for peak longitudinal ϵ at the two relative exercise intensities, RE (1): SP: -20.2 ± 3.2 vs CON: -20.5 ± 2.5 % and RE (2): SP: -19.3 ± 2.9 vs CON: -19.9 ± 2.1 %. Similarly, no significant inter-group differences were identified for SSR at the two relative exercise intensities. RE (1), SP: -1.4 ± 0.1 vs CON: -1.3 ± 0.2 1/s and RE (2): SP: -1.6 ± 0.3 vs CON: -1.6 ± 0.2 1/s. There was also no significant difference in DSR between the two groups; RE (1), SP: 2.2 ± 0.5 vs CON: 2.1 ± 0.4 1/s and RE (2): SP: 2.3 ± 0.3 vs CON: 2.0 ± 0.3 1/s.

Discussion

The major findings of this study were that there was evidence of larger LV morphology and greater peak aortic velocities and E at rest in the SP compared to the CON. Superior SVIndex, QIndex and E in the SP during submaximal exercise were identified. Based on the cardiac strain

data (peak longitudinal ϵ , SSR and DSR) there was no evidence to suggest that training status resulted in superior intrinsic contractility in the SP during submaximal exercise. There was, however, evidence of superior global systolic function (S' and peak aortic velocity) at maximal exercise in the SP.

There was some evidence to suggest that exercise-induced LV remodelling had occurred in the elite pre-adolescent SP based on linear dimensions and volume data. These morphologic changes suggest that highly trained SP can present some characteristics of the "Athlete's Heart", even at a pre-adolescent stage. This supports previous research in pre-adolescent soccer players¹⁷,¹⁸ and older male⁴ and female⁷ adolescent soccer players, who had been exposed to slightly longer, systematic soccer training (7-9 years of training). In a cross-sectional study, it is only possible to speculate, that the greater LVEDV seen in the SP is a by-product of training-induced increases in plasma volume¹⁹ and/or repetitive haemodynamic overload resulting in eccentric chamber hypertrophy²⁰. The similarity in morphological findings in the present study to that seen in the older, adolescent soccer players^{4,7} suggests either a genetic pre-disposition for a larger LV or exercise-induced, LV cardiac re-modelling in response to limited training exposure in the pre-adolescent soccer players. These findings are further supported by the conclusions from McLean et al's²¹ systematic and meta-analysis of the electrical and structural adaptations of the paediatric athlete's heart. In this comprehensive review, these authors concluded that clear evidence existed of exercise-induced cardiac re-modelling in the pre-adolescent years.

At rest, SP generated a greater SVIndex compared to CON, which is a likely consequence of an increased LVEDV in the presence of unaltered LVEF²². Left atrial evaluation was beyond the scope of the present study, but evidence exists to suggest that exercise-induced atrial re-

modelling exists in pre-adolescent athletes and this could influence SVIndex²³. As, these authors established a moderate relationship between increases in left atrial volume and increases in SVIndex at rest following a 5 month training period. Peak aortic velocity (a marker of systolic function) at rest was augmented in the SP and was also a product of the greater LVEDV seen in the young players. The only significant between group differences for global markers of diastolic function at rest was a higher E in the SP; that existed even after adjusting for differences in resting HR. A higher E in the SP, independent of HR, likely contributes to the increased LVEDV via a possible plasma-volume induced increase in pre-load¹⁹.

It is unlikely that this finding represents substantive evidence of superior diastolic function in the SP at rest, as there was a lack of inter-group differences in E'. The findings from the literature are equivocal, as enhanced^{24, 25} and unchanged²² E values have been noted in highly trained, child endurance athletes at rest.

At the two similar, submaximal relative exercise intensities, the SP demonstrated superior E, SVIndex and QIndex compared to the CON. This evidence suggests that when exercising at the same metabolic load, factors that augment pre-load (enhanced plasma volume and greater LVEDV) drive superior mitral in-flow, with concomitant increases in SVIndex and QIndex. Greater SVIndex was also identified in both adolescent male and female soccer players compared to recreationally active control subjects when exercising at absolute, submaximal workloads^{4, 7}. These authors speculated that increased ventricular volume acted as the pre-cursor for the elevated SVIndex seen in their study rather than any training-derived functional adaptation in diastolic function. LVEDV was not measured in either of these studies. The present

study indirectly confirms this hypothesis, as greater LVEDV values were noted in the pre-adolescent SP compared to the CON participants.

The superior QIndex reserve in the present study in the SP can potentially be explained by a longitudinal ϵ reserve. In the present study, LV mechanics were not investigated at maximal exercise. Nottin et al.²⁶ have hypothesized that a lack of difference in LV mechanics at rest between trained and untrained individuals represented a mechanical reserve on which athletes' can draw on at maximal exercise to enhance cardiac performance. This strain reserve reflects the LV capacity to enhance contractile function during exercise, irrespective of resting values (QIndex reserve), as seen in the SP in the present study. The importance of contractile reserve evaluation by exercise echocardiography has been highlighted in mitral regurgitation patients²⁷. Furthermore, QIndex reserve has been used in the past to explain the capacity of the LV to recover following heart failure²⁸. These findings have been supported by further Dobutamine stress echocardiography research²⁹ that has demonstrated a direct relationship between contractile reserve and improvements in LVEF following β -blocker therapy in patients with advanced chronic heart failure. The improved LVEF underpins the improved contractile reserve and provides the basis for the ability for CHF patients to respond to stress, as seen during exercise.

A paucity of research exists with regard to the quantification of diastolic function during upright exercise in children. Consequently, a novel aspect of the present investigation was the interrogation of global markers of diastolic function in an upright body position. This approach

mimics the posture for most sports activities and minimizes the confounding effects of altered body position on haemodynamic responses during exercise³⁰.

At the two relative exercise intensities, SP presented with greater E compared to CON. These findings mimic E data obtained in adolescent male and female soccer players (15 years) exercising at absolute workloads during upright cycle ergometer exercise^{4,7}. These authors demonstrated superior E in the SP during submaximal exercise, but this did not achieve statistical significance. There were no inter-group differences in E', when exercising at the two relative exercise intensities in the present study. These findings are similar to that seen in the adolescent male and female soccer players when exercising at absolute submaximal workloads^{4,7}.

At the two relative exercise intensities, there were no inter-group differences in E/E' (E ratio). E ratio is considered an indirect marker of left atrial pressure and these findings suggest that the increase in E in both SP and CON at the submaximal intensities was a product of enhanced LV relaxation properties, rather than the result of any elevated atrial pressures. A similar pattern was also noted in older adolescent male and female soccer players^{4,7}. Data from the present study suggests that there is no strong evidence to support the hypothesis that enhanced diastolic function during exercise in these highly trained pre-adolescent soccer players is responsible for their superior aerobic capacity. Based on the S' data, there was also no evidence of superior systolic function in the SP during submaximal exercise. These findings are similar to previous work from our research group in older, highly trained, adolescent male and female soccer players^{4,7}.

In the present study, there was no evidence that training status altered peak longitudinal ϵ at rest, which confirms data from elite, adult male cyclists²⁶. At the two, relative, submaximal exercise intensities, there were no inter-group differences in peak longitudinal ϵ and these findings support the global systolic measurements (S'). There is a paucity of research with respect to the quantification of regional wall deformation during exercise in pre-adolescent populations. Recent work by Pieles et al⁹ demonstrated a pattern of increased peak longitudinal ϵ from rest with a subsequent plateau during submaximal, supine cycle ergometry in recreationally active boys and girls (13.2 years). Furthermore, adult data during supine and semi-supine exercise also demonstrates a similar a pattern for peak longitudinal ϵ ^{31, 32}. The lack of inter-group differences in the present study in peak longitudinal ϵ , suggested no intrinsic differences in contractility during submaximal exercise.

Two markers of global systolic function (S'adj and peak aortic velocity) demonstrated significant inter-group differences at maximal exercise intensity. This may stem from the larger LVEDV seen in the SP inducing earlier and better stretching of myocardial fibres from a more efficient use of the Frank-Starling mechanism²⁰. The researchers acknowledge that this finding is not supported by the submaximal peak longitudinal ϵ findings and could represent a limitation of the tissue-Doppler approach to quantifying systolic function. The systolic findings at maximal exercise were somewhat similar to the pattern seen in highly trained, adolescent male soccer players⁴. This previous investigation demonstrated augmented peak aortic velocity values at maximal exercise in the adolescent male soccer players compared to their recreationally active peers, but they did not achieve statistical significance (SP: 231 vs. CON: 208 cm·s⁻¹). There were no significant inter-group differences for any markers of diastolic function at maximal exercise

intensity and this mimicked the findings previously seen in both the male and female adolescent soccer players^{4, 7}.

There were some limitations associated with the study. A cross-sectional design limits our ability to delineate the specific influence of training on our outcome measures and the use of speckle tracking echocardiography limits the frame rate that can be used. Consequently, strain and strain rate can only be determined at submaximal exercise intensities during upright cycle ergometry exercise. In addition, due to ethical constraints, plasma volume data was unable to be obtained from the participants. An extensive evaluation of bi-atrial and right ventricular function³³ was beyond the scope of the present study. It is possible, however, that an interrogation of these two areas would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of elite youth soccer training on morphological and functional adaptations in the pre-adolescent player.

In conclusion, there was some evidence in the present study of exercise-induced LV remodelling in the highly trained youth soccer players. The SP also presented with increased early diastolic filling and greater peak aortic velocity at rest compared to the CON; this contradicted our original hypothesis. Based on the tissue-Doppler and strain data, there was no real evidence to suggest that training status had any impact on submaximal diastolic and systolic function.

Superior systolic function and greater cardiac reserve were noted at maximal exercise intensity in the highly trained pre-adolescent soccer players compared to their recreationally active peers.

The similarity in the morphological attributes of the pre-adolescent SP at rest and their functional characteristics during submaximal and maximal exercise to that seen in the previous study with adolescent male soccer players⁴; suggests that the combined influence of genetic pre-disposition

and responsiveness to training influences cardiac morphology and functional adaptations in these young players. It is acknowledged that the *true* effect of high-intensity, intermittent soccer training on cardiac morphological and functional adaptations in highly trained young soccer players can only be answered through the longitudinal evaluation of these young athletes and this question warrants further investigation.

Perspective

The vast amount of published literature in this area has quantified cardiac morphology and function *at rest* in the highly trained, young, endurance athlete²¹ and demonstrated exercise-induced morphological and functional changes in these individuals. There is a paucity of knowledge of the impact that high-intensity, intermittent exercise (characteristics of soccer training and match-play) can have on changes in cardiac structure and function at rest and uniquely *during exercise*. This is particularly true in the pre-adolescent athlete that has not yet been exposed to the changes in the hormonal milieu during puberty, but is exposed to high volume and intensity training. While the primary focus of this study was not a screening study, it was also encouraging to see that the adaptations noted in the soccer players were not commensurate with any pathological structure and function in these young athletes.

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Figure Captions

Fig 1: QIndex responses of soccer players (n=22) and controls (n=15) at the two comparable, relative exercise intensities (RE (1) and RE (2)). The symbols denote the mean values.

Horizontal error bars denote the variability (SD) in relative exercise intensity (%VO₂max) and vertical error bars denote the variability (SD) in QIndex. At both RE (1) and RE (2), the SP demonstrated significantly greater QIndex responses than the CON. * denotes $p \leq 0.05$.

Fig 2: SVIndex responses of soccer players (n=22) and controls (n=15) at the two comparable, relative exercise intensities (RE (1) and RE (2)). The symbols denote the mean values.

Horizontal error bars denote the variability (SD) in relative exercise intensity (%VO₂max) and vertical error bars denote the variability (SD) in SVIndex. At RE (1), the SP demonstrated significantly greater SVIndex responses than the CON. There was no significant inter-group difference in SVIndex at RE (2). * denotes $p \leq 0.05$.

Fig 3: E responses of soccer players (n=22) and controls (n=15) at the two comparable, relative exercise intensities (RE (1) and RE (2)). The symbols denote the mean values. Horizontal error bars denote the variability (SD) in relative exercise intensity (%VO₂max) and vertical error bars denote the variability (SD) in E values. At both RE (1) and RE (2), the SP demonstrated significantly greater E responses than the CON. * denotes $p \leq 0.05$.