

Bond University

Sports Law and Governance Journal

Volume 1 Issue 2

2025

Beyond the Playing Field: Rethinking Sport Safety in the Australian Defence Force

Robin Orr
Bond University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://slgj.scholasticahq.com/>



© Copyright the authors.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

BEYOND THE PLAYING FIELD: RETHINKING SPORT SAFETY IN THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

PROFESSOR ROBIN ORR*

1 INTRODUCTION

Sport has long been integral to military culture, valued for its physical and psychosocial benefits, including fitness, and teamwork. Within the Australian Defence Force (ADF), sporting participation is encouraged and sometimes compulsory. However, sport is also a leading cause of musculoskeletal injuries across military contexts accounting for a significant number of injuries and working days lost. While civilian injury-prevention programs (such as FIFA 11+ and Activate) have demonstrated success in reducing injuries, their direct application to military settings is problematic. Military personnel often face cumulative physical loads from occupational tasks and may engage in informal, opportunistic games under conditions of fatigue, limiting the feasibility of structured prevention strategies. This commentary argues that injury mitigation in the ADF requires context-specific approaches tailored to the unique demands of military life. These strategies should be developed and implemented at tactical, operational, and strategic levels, supported by governance frameworks such as the Military Risk Management Framework and ADF Sports Council. Without such targeted measures, reliance on civilian models risks undermining both injury prevention and the broader benefits of military sport.

2 BACKGROUND

“The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”. This famous quote, attributed to the Duke of Wellington (The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying, and Quotation, 1997), denotes the importance the military can place on sports participation; an importance shared by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) through history and in its current context (Orr et al., 2019). As such, sporting participation is encouraged (and in some instances compulsory (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2025)) in military personnel and can commence during initial training (Orr, 2010; Young et al., 2025). While considered to bring numerous benefits to personnel, from building fitness, strength, endurance, and agility, to fostering teamwork and “esprit de corps” (Department of Defence, 2000), sport is also a leading cause of injuries to the ADF, and wider international military forces (Department of Defence, 2000;

* Director of the Tactical Research Unit, Bond University.

Article cover image courtesy of the Australian Department of Defence, Image ID: 20250926_2222444_075

Lauder et al., 2000; Orr et al., 2020; Strowbridge & Burgess, 2002; Warfe et al., 2011). Sporting injuries can occur during initial training (Orr, 2010), when serving in a unit (Warfe et al., 2011), and even on combat deployments (Schweizer et al., 2021), impacting on the ability of military forces to raise, train, and sustain their personnel (Warfe et al., 2011).

3 INJURIES

In the ADF, sport may account for around 10-30% of reported musculoskeletal injuries (Department of Defence, 2000; Orr et al., 2020; Warfe et al., 2011), with these numbers potentially changing depending on season (i.e., winter versus summer sports (Rudzki, 2009), and reporting practices (underreporting injuries is well acknowledged in military populations (Smith et al., 2016; Wooldridge et al., 2023)). These injuries constitute a leading cause of non-combat related working days lost (Department of Defence, 2000). Sports commonly associated with causing injuries in the ADF include soccer, rugby (union and league), touch football, Australian rules football, and basketball/netball (Orr et al., 2020).

4 INJURY REDUCTION

High levels of sporting injuries are not unique to the ADF and are reported in the wider civilian population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). As such, various approaches have been undertaken to reduce sporting injuries in community and elite sport. The soccer “FIFA11+ injury prevention program” serves as an example. This 20-minute program—which was initially designed for amateur players and focusses on running exercises, strength, balance and plyometrics followed by cutting, bonding, and weaving movements—is purported to have reduced soccer injuries by around 30% (Sadigursky et al., 2017). Likewise, the 20-minute rugby “activate injury prevention programme”, which includes movement control, strength, and agility exercises, has been purported to reduce injuries by up to 67% (Barden et al., 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that these types of programs are often recommended for reducing injuries in military populations (Sherrard et al., 2002). Unfortunately, these recommendations often come without an in depth understanding of sport in the ADF, and more importantly, the ADF as a whole.

5 CHALLENGES

Military personnel generally do not have the flexibility afforded a sporting athlete. For example, soldiers often have military training or tasks immediately prior to playing a game. Program induced cumulative overload (PICO) arises as a result of additional training loads imposed on personnel due to their military training or work tasks. Such additional training and tasks can include military

drill, weapons training, obstacle course training, defensive and offensive operations activities (e.g., fire and movement), and similar occupational tasks (Orr et al., 2016). As such, military personnel can commence a sporting game already in a high state of physical fatigue. Likewise, personnel may play a sport that they are not familiar with, and being played during or just after a unit event. Examples include a Battalion sports competition, or a quick game after formal physical training (PT). These examples suggest that, while still having some potential merit, the differences between military sports and civilian sports may limit the application of civilian sport approaches to injury prevention.

6 THE WAY FORWARD

Given that the military sporting context differs from community sport, simply adopting civilian injury and safety measures is impractical. For example, requiring touch football to be played only on authorised fields with qualified referees would prevent quick, informal games after PT. While it could be argued that this would be beneficial, it would also impact the informal development of skills like teamwork, communicating while being physically active, and even situational awareness; skills that stems from these events. To mitigate sports-related injuries without losing these benefits, context specific (i.e., military environment) strategies must be developed, evaluated, and implemented at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. These strategies must be supported by governance to monitor and address emerging risks. Existing frameworks, such as the Military Risk Management Framework, and structures like the ADF Sports Council can be leveraged and strengthened to achieve this. Ultimately, new approaches, away from those generically adopted from civilian sports, are needed if this problem is to be effectively addressed.

REFERENCES

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Sports injury in Australia*. Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/sports-injury/sports-injury-in-australia>
- Barden, C., Hancock, M. V., Stokes, K. A., Roberts, S. P., & McKay, C. D. (2022). Effectiveness of the Activate injury prevention exercise programme to prevent injury in schoolboy rugby union. *Br J Sports Med*, 56(14), 812-817.
- Department of Defence. (2000). *Australian Defence Force Health Status Report*. Department of Defence. Australian Government Department of Defence. <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/2000/health/01.pdf>
- Department of Veterans' Affairs. (2025). 18.1.1 *The ADF policy on sport*. <https://clik.dva.gov.au/military-compensation-srca-manuals-and-resources-library/liability-handbook/ch-18-sport-and-fitness-activities/181-adf-and-civilian-sport/1811-adf-policy-sport>
- Lauder, T. D., Baker, S. P., Smith, G. S., & Lincoln, A. E. (2000). Sports and physical training injury hospitalizations in the army. *Am J Prev Med*, 18(3), 118-128.
- Orr, R., Knapik, J., & Pope, R. (2016). Avoiding Program-Induced Cumulative Overload (PICO). *J Spec Oper Med*, 16(2), 61-64.
- Orr, R., Schram, B., & Pope, R. (2020). Sports injuries in the Australian regular Army. *Safety*, 6(2), 23-33.
- Orr, R. M. (2010). *The Royal Military College–Duntroon physical conditioning optimisation review: Final report*. Royal Military College of Australia.
- Orr, R. M., Schram, B., Irving, S., Pope, N., & Pope, R. R. (2019). *ARP1706 Measuring occupational exposures to osteoarthritis in the lower limb in ADF job categories: Final Report*. Department of Veteran Affairs. <https://www.dva.gov.au/documents-and-publications/measuring-occupational-exposures-osteoarthritis-lower-limb-adf-job>
- Rudzki, S. J. (2009). *The cost of injury to the Australian Army* [Doctoral Dissertation, Australian National University]. ANU Open Research.
- Sadigursky, D., Braid, J. A., De Lira, D. N. L., Machado, B. A. B., Carneiro, R. J. F., & Colavolpe, P. O. (2017). The FIFA 11+ injury prevention program for soccer players: a systematic review. *BMC Sports Sci Med Rehabil*, 9(1), 18.
- Schweizer, M. A., Janak, J., Graham, B., Gurney, J. M., & Shackelford, S. A. (2021). Sports injuries among deployed US service members between October 2001 and December 2018. *Medical Journal, US Army Medical Center of Excellence (MEDCoE)*, 50-56.

- Sherrard, J., Lenne, M., Cassell, E., Stokes, M., & Ozanne-Smith, J. (2002). *Strategic direction and advice for increasing safe participation in physical activity in the Australian Defence Force: A report to the Defence Health Service*. M. U. A. R. Centre.
- Smith, L., Westrick, R., Sauers, S., Cooper, A., Scofield, D., Claro, P., & Warr, B. (2016). Underreporting of musculoskeletal injuries in the US Army: findings from an infantry brigade combat team survey study. *Sports Health*, 8(6), 507-513.
- Strowbridge, N., & Burgess, K. (2002). Sports and training injuries in British soldiers: the Colchester Garrison Sports Injury and Rehabilitation Centre. *J R Army Med Corps*, 148(3), 236-243.
- The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying, and Quotation. (1997). In E. Knowles (Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Warfe, P., Jones, D., & Prigg, S. (2011). Developing injury prevention strategies for the Australian Defence Force. *J Mil Veterans Health*, 19(3), 45-49.
- Wooldridge, J. D., Schilling, B. K., Young, D. L., & Radzak, K. N. (2023). Musculoskeletal injury concealment in the Reserve Officers' training corps: A survey of cadets' reporting behaviors. *Military Medicine*, 188(11-12), e3522-e3531.
- Young, M., Adams, B., Estevez, C., Hyde, C., & Westrick, R. (2025). Epidemiology of musculoskeletal injuries of US Coast Guard Academy cadets during initial military training from 2018 to 2023. *Military Medicine* usaf323.