

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

Improvement of Repeated Sprint Ability for a Male Amateur Football Team through the Cometti Concatenations Method

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the improvement of the Repeat Sprints Ability (RSA), during a competitive season in amateur football players (Italian 4th Division, 2020-2021). Specifically, we intend to demonstrate whether through the use of the Cometti concatenations method, a significant increase in RSA can occur during twelve-week training mesocycle. Twenty (n=20) amateur footballers, participated in this study (age: 23±0.3; height: 184.4±5.5; body weight: 80.92±3.4; training experience: 8±0.3 yrs), without goalkeepers. In the pre-season (4 weeks, from July to August), the players performed Capanna test, to evaluate the RSA before the start of the season. Every player has been analysed with a K-GPS Live device 50Hz (K-Sport Universal STATS, Italy). After 12 weeks of training (in-season), based on specific workouts of Cometti method, the same players repeated Capanna test to check performance improvements and verify whether the training programme is effective. The aim was to determine whether the improvement in distance covered during the test is better, the same, or worse with respect to the pre-season. After 12 weeks of training, the difference between the first trial (pre-season) and the second one (in-season) is statistically significant (p<0.05). The results obtained suggest that the strength work is optimized as well as work times, and the RSA is improved. In addition, thanks to better physical shape which resulted in better performances of individual players, the team in the last period of the championship achieved more positive results in the matches played.

Keywords: *sprint performance, physical preparation, capanna test, aerobic evaluation*

Introduction

In recent years, numerous studies conducted on Repeated Sprint Ability (RSA) in team sports (football, rugby, hockey) have highlighted the key role played by this ability in performance. The training of RSA in football is well documented, since the performance of the competition is characterized not only by intermittent efforts often carried out at high intensity, but also by the presence of accelerations and decelerations that are determined in the frequent changes of direction and sense. The latter made by the players to determine useful disturbances to the game's economy (J. C. Barbero-Álvarez, Coutts, Granda, V. Barbero-Álvarez, & Castagna, 2010). RSA is considered the

ability to produce the best average performance over a series of short sprints (≤ 10 seconds), separated by short recovery periods (≤ 60 seconds), with a minimum decrease in maximum performance (Bravo et al., 2008; Castagna, D'Ottavio, Gabrielli, & Póvoas, 2020). Some benefits of RSA include improved VO₂ max, maximum aerobic speed and improved distance on the football specific yo-yo intermittent recovery test (YYIRT). A recent meta-analysis indicated that a repeated sprint training (RST) is useful for improving high intensity intermittent running and sprint performance (Martin, Sanchez-Sanchez, Ramírez-Campillo, Nakamura, & Gonzalo-Skok, 2018; Faude, Koch, & Meyer, 2012). These training modes usually include



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continuous aerobic training, aerobic interval training, or explosive leg training (Izzo et al., 2020a). The scientific literature in relation to the conditional preparation of the player, has produced descriptive training studies in various forms, reporting extremely interesting results for the training practice. In addition, the game analysis (time-motion analysis) has shown that the presence of attack and counterattack actions, supported by high intensity phases produced without interruption, are increasingly frequent and decisive for the outcome of the matches (Carling, Le Gall, & Dupont, 2012). In the topic relating to the RSA, two implementation arguments are distinguished, that of production and maintenance, which are characterized by continuity of exercise and recovery between exercises. Specifically, we talk about maintenance RSA, when the work and recovery ratio is less than 1:5; while it refers to production RSA, when the ratio is equal or higher (> 1:5). The experimentation both on the field and in the laboratory, has identified in the production mode the most effective method for the physiological development of the player's anaerobic capacity. In football, therefore, aerobic capacity is an essential skill, and the RSA methodology plays a decisive role, as it not only promotes metabolic improvement, but also neuromuscular development (D'Isanto, D'Elia, Raiola, & Altavilla, 2019). The player must improve the same muscle groups as the sprinter and add the football training to the ball which consists of a throw of the free leg. In the case of football, and especially during the competitive season, it is necessary to improve maximum strength with caution; it is therefore necessary to create combinations that match pre-fatigue and isometry. Cometti concatenations method is a widely used method in football for strengthening the lower limbs (Spencer, Pyne, Santisteban, & Mujika, 2011). This method of work is based on the combination of the various contraction regimes (eccentric, concentric, plyometric, isometric, and gesture-specific work). These contractions, in this case, may not even be analyzed separately. According to Cometti, the concatenations make it possible to couple situations very close to the competition needs with strength exercises, with the aim of transferring the new muscular stresses into the technical gesture, working on technical and conditional aspects (Cometti, Maffiuletti, Pousson, Chatard, & Maffulli, 2001). The same author suggests several examples of concatenations carried out with general and specific exercises and even gesture-specific exercises. This working principle can be applied during the training session by alternating series of different contraction regimes or performing repetitions with different contractions within the same series (Raiola, 2017). Concatenations are therefore combined exercises to work both on technical aspects and on conditional aspects which, if well designed, allow to optimize the work of force and optimize the working times. It is certainly a very particular exercise methodology, as indeed all strength exercises with or without overloads, but above all, it must be proposed to athletes suitable to withstand such loads (Impellizzeri, Rampinini, Castagna, Bishop, & Wisloff, 2007). To improve the synchronization of the drive units, it is necessary to work with heavy loads close to the maximum, indeed higher than the maximum, as in the case of eccentric work. The ability to repeat the sprint (RSA), can be evaluated through various types of field tests. However, the main field tests are the Capanna - Sassi test and the 5x30 m test. The Capanna-Sassi test consists of repeating a 20+20-meter shuttle line sprint 6 times, with a change of direction after 20 m and a recovery of 20 seconds between one sprint and the next. In a recent study, all players in a Scandinavian

National League were tested with both the Yo-Yo Intermittent recovery Test level 1 (Yo-Yo IR1) and with the RSA 7x30 m 30 "recovery test (Intermittent Endurance and Repeated Sprint Ability in Soccer Players). The study showed that intermittent high intensity endurance and the ability to repeat sprints should be considered semi-independent physical abilities. The group that achieved the highest Yo-Yo IR1 test values showed a decrease in the lowest RSA test. In addition, the group with the lowest results on the Yo-Yo IR1 test had the fastest decreases on the RSA test. In fact, a good strategy could be to train these two physical skills with two different and specific protocols. The purpose of this study is to verify whether a training mesocycle based on the Cometti concatenations method, carried out for twelve weeks, produces a significant improvement of the RSA.

Methods

Subjects

Twenty (n=20) amateur football players participated in this study (age: 23±0.3; height: 184.4±5.5; body weight: 80.92±3.4; training experience: 8±0.3 yrs) without goalkeepers. All athletes are free from musculoskeletal injuries, participated in ≥ 95% of training sessions per year. All athletes are amateur players by Italian football championship. To be included in the study, subjects had to 1) ensure regular participation in all the training sessions, 2) have competed regularly during the previous competitive season, and 3) possess medical clearance. Before entering the study, participants were fully informed about the study aims and procedures, and they provided written informed consent before the testing procedure. The study protocol was conformed to the code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki). The football team trained for approximately 1h three times per week (always on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) plus the official match played on Saturday or Sunday. The study was conducted during the 2020–2021 competitive season (i.e., from July to October). Before and after 12 weeks, each player completed Capanna test on the same grass surface.

Design

In the pre-season, after anthropometric measurements, all 20 players performed the Capanna field test. This test is one of the most popular in football for investigating the lactic acid characteristics of players. The test consists in repeating a shuttle sprint of 20+20 m six times, with a change of direction after the first 20 m and recovery of 20 seconds between one sprint and the next. The test is preceded by a 15-minute warm-up and a single maximum sprint that provides a reference data (criterion). It allows to measure the travel times of each individual sprint using a stopwatch connected to a system of photocells. From the data it was then obtained the time of the best test expressed in seconds (RSAbest), the average time related to all the tests (RSAMean) and the decrease in performance percentage (RSAdec) obtained from the ratio between the average time related to all the tests (RSAMean) and the best time of the test (RSAbest). The tests carried out followed the original test protocols present in the literature. Multiple athletes cannot be tested simultaneously. After that, specific workouts based on the Cometti concatenations method were carried out over a period of twelve weeks. These workouts after a general activation of about 25 minutes with the ball, initially involved a shuttle run performed at maximum speed on 4 sections of 20 meters each. Three sets were performed with a four-minute recovery time between them. The

second exercise consisted of running pace at an active recovery for a 30-meter stretch. Running pace at active recovery speed is approximately 65% of Maximum Aerobic Speed; for a mid-level player (with a VAM of 17 km/h) it is a question of covering 30 meters in about 10 seconds. Also, in this case, the same series number of the previous exercise were provided, with a similar recovery time between one series and another. The third exercise involved the execution of five to six semi-squat jumps for each of the four series, with a load equal to 30-35% of the maximum load. The fall could be performed in two ways: either by keeping the legs straight (without causing stiffening of the muscles of the lower limbs), with minimal angular variations (approximately 170° of the knee angle in the cushioning-inversion of movement) and short contact; or where the position of departure and arrival on the ground must always take place with the lower limbs in a semi-short stance (90-110° knee angle). With this exercise, the extensor muscles of the foot are stressed more. Finally, the final part of the session was dedicated to shooting on goal. Each player had six shots available to be executed at maximum executive power, compatible with the request to direct the ball at a specific target. In this case the distance of the shot was variable and at the discretion of the coach. Some variants included a series of sprints with stop and instant change of direction (20 m+10 m+20 m), or even the execution of a narrow slalom with the ball, at maximum speed, on a 15 m stretch with the cones spaced 1.5 m apart, or 4 repetitions of ½ squats performed with a load relative to 70% of the maximum, which allowed a maximum of 11 repetition maximum (RM). After 12 weeks of training based on specific workouts based on the Cometti concatenations method

(in season), the same players repeat Capanna test to check performance improvements and verify whether the training programme is correct. The first element was to determine whether the improvement in distance covered during a test is better, the same, or worse with respect to the pre-season.

Statistical analysis

Quantitative variables were presented using their mean and standard deviation and qualitative variables with their absolute frequencies and percentages. Furthermore, the normality of the distributions with the Shapiro Wilk test was determined, and independent sample t-test was conducted to combine the results obtained from the tests before the start of the specific training mesocycle, and at the end of it, after twelve weeks. The analyses were performed with 95% confidence interval and $p \leq 0.05$. The statistical analyses were performed with SPSS Statistics version 23.

Results

In the following tables and graphs, the times of the initial and final Capanna-Sassi test results are presented first, followed by the comparison of the results. Tables 1 and 2 show the times of the results of the Capanna test carried out before and after the training cycle. In addition, the data referring to each individual trial of each player during the execution of the pre and post training test are presented, in particular with regard to the RSA_{mean} (average time related to all trials), the RSA_{best} (best trial time), RSA_{dec} (RSA_{mean} / RSA_{best} ratio), RSA_{dec} and RSA of the six attempts made for the test. In the table the players are divided by role.

Table 1. The results obtained in the first Capanna test (pre-season)

Players	RSA _{best}	RSA _{mean}	RSA _{dec}	RSA _{change}	RSA ₁	RSA ₂	RSA ₃	RSA ₄	RSA ₅	RSA ₆
Defenders	7.27	7.73	6.20%	10.90%	7.32	7.50	7.60	7.83	7.93	8.12
Midfielders	7.29	7.69	5.40%	9.00%	7.35	7.49	7.58	7.87	7.94	8.03
Strikers	7.18	7.65	6.60%	11.90%	7.21	7.39	7.58	7.75	7.91	8.09
Mean±SD	7.24 ±0.05	7.69 ±0.04	6.00 ±0.01	10.60 ±0.01	7.29 ±0.07	7.46 ±0.06	7.58 ±0.01	7.78 ±0.06	7.92 ±0.01	8.08 ±0.04

Note: $RSA_{change} = (RSA_{last} - RSA_{first} / RSA_{first}) \times 100$; $RSA_{mean} = (RSA_1 + RSA_2 + RSA_3 + RSA_4 + RSA_5 + RSA_6) / 6$; $RSA_{dec} = [(RSA_{total} / RSA_{best} \times 6) \times 100] - 100$

Table 2. The results obtained in Capanna test (in-season)

Players	RSA _{best}	RSA _{mean}	RSA _{dec}	RSA _{change}	RSA ₁	RSA ₂	RSA ₃	RSA ₄	RSA ₅	RSA ₆
Defenders	7.24	7.58	4.60%	8.60%	7.27	7.38	7.52	7.64	7.77	7.91
Midfielders	7.11	7.55	4.70%	8.00%	7.24	7.36	7.50	7.63	7.73	7.85
Strikers	7.12	7.51	5.30%	9.40%	7.17	7.28	7.45	7.58	7.72	7.85
Mean±SD	7.19 ±0.07	7.54 ±0.03	5.00% ±0.03	8.70% ±0.07	7.22 ±0.05	7.34 ±0.05	7.49 ±0.03	7.61 ±0.03	7.74 ±0.02	7.87 ±0.03

Table 3 shows the improvements obtained in seconds between the first test (carried out in pre-season) and the second

test (carried out during the season).

Finally, Table 4 compares the values listed above taking into

Table 3. The improvement found, in terms of duration, in the execution of the two tests

Players	RSA _{best}	RSA _{mean}	RSA ₁	RSA ₂	RSA ₃	RSA ₄	RSA ₅	RSA ₆
Defenders	0.03	0.15	0.05	0.12	0.08	0.19	0.16	0.21
Midfielders	0.08	0.13	0.11	0.13	0.08	0.14	0.21	0.18
Strikers	0.06	0.14	0.04	0.11	0.13	0.17	0.19	0.24
Mean±SD	0.05 ±0.02	0.15 ±0.01	0.07 ±0.03	0.12 ±0.01	0.09 ±0.02	0.17 ±0.02	0.18 ±0.02	0.21 ±0.03

account the pre-training test and the post-training test. The values considered for the application of the t-test are those related to the values of the RSA_{mean}, i.e. the average time relating to all the tests carried out pre and post-training with the Capanna test. From here, to understand whether the null hypothesis is to be accepted or not, we take as a reference the Stat t value, which is 8.54, and we correlate it with the two-tailed t-test value. This is because in the alternative hypothesis it was assumed that the averages are different, so we should have a bilateral alterna-

tive hypothesis. For a two-tailed t-test, the critical value of the T-distribution for 20 df and $\alpha = 0.05$, is equal to 2.09. The range for accepting the null hypothesis is between -2.09 and 2.09. The presence of a statistically significant difference between the two evaluation moments was recorded ($p=0.000$). With the results obtained with the t-test, we can reject the null hypothesis, and we can accept the alternative hypothesis.

Figure 1 graphically shows the improvements recorded at the end of the training period in the variables described above.

Table 4. Independent sample t-test results (RSA_{best})

	N	Mean	SD	SE	t	p
Pre-season	20	7.69	0.04	0.46	8.54	0.00
In-season	20	7.54	0.03	0.45		

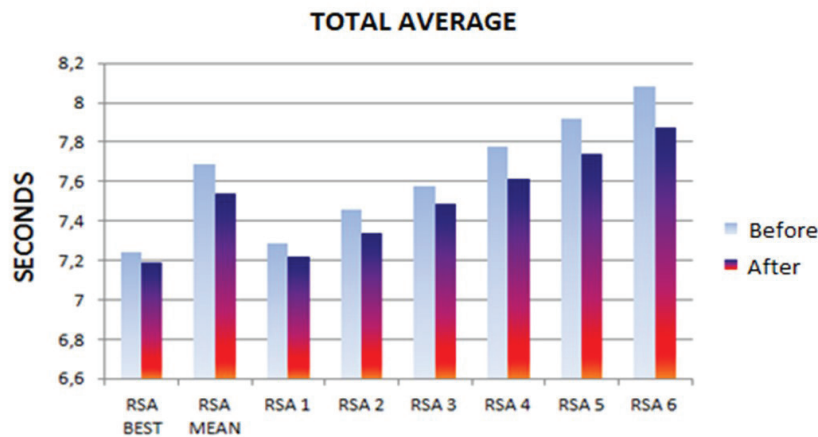


FIGURE 1. Results of Capanna Test pre-season and in-season

Discussion

From the results, the hypothesis of the study regarding the effectiveness of the Cometti method can be confirmed, as it effectively allows to improve the Repeated Sprint Ability by positively influencing motor performance. By observing the results of the group of players, it is possible to understand how to obtain a correct execution of the most important technical gestures, it is necessary to enable the players to respond to the multiple requests that constantly occur in the game. As shown in the tables, the data obtained by the players was grouped by position (7 defenders, 8 midfielders, 5 forwards). The results of these studies demonstrate the possibility of practically applying this operational monitoring tool presented as valid for the individual evaluation of players, since it has a real and significant impact on the result of the game. This study offers itself as a further contribution to strengthen the methodology presented since it produces greater effects than the training process to which the survey group was subjected. Different studies have highlighted repeated-sprint ability as important physical fitness components for soccer players (Rosch et al., 2000; Izzo et al., 2020b). Moreover, similar studies (Helgerud, Engen, Wisloff, & Hoff, 2001; Campa, Semprini, Júdice, Messina, & Toselli, 2019; Rampinini et al., 2009), reported improved soccer performance, assessed by the number of sprints and the number of involvements with the ball, after the implementation of an 8-week aerobic power training program. As regards the use of the Cometti concatenations method, several authors believe that if well designed, it allows to optimize the working time for competitive athletes, often

engaged in long and daily physical training sessions. In many cases, it also allows to vary the monotony of the exercises and to insert valid metabolic tasks that create the fatigue necessary to optimize individual recovery qualities (Ali, 2011; Altavilla, Riela, Di Tore, & Raiola, 2017). It must be said, however, that this form of training certainly does not contribute to refining the tactical and mental aspects, which are decisive for the leap in football quality, but it can well combine two secondary elements that support the player: conditional qualities and the specific gestures (Buchheit, Mendez-Villanueva, Delhomel, Brughelli, & Ahmaidi, 2010; Padulo et al., 2017). For the athlete not motivated to repeat the same training methods every day, it is preferable, however, to suggest other training solutions, more engaging and with adequate psychophysical commitment (Wragg, Maxwell, & Doust, 2000). Regarding the cognitive aspect, this work acquires a special meaning because it is the essence of a sports game (Chamari et al., 2005; Izzo et al., 2020c). The ability to adapt a learned behaviour quickly and effectively can only be acquired when the player is subjected from the beginning, and up to the high-performance phase, to a systematic development of his mental abilities (Helgerud et al., 2001). These are considered, more than in the past, as the fundamental and essential skills for good performance. Obviously, there is not just one training method that can be recommended to best improve RSA and all the factors believed to be responsible for performance decrements during repeated sprint tasks. This is not surprising, as RSA is a complex fitness component that depends on both metabolic and neural factors, among others (Buchheit et al., 2010; Dellal,

& Wong, 2013). Regarding practical applicability, as many studies to date have used amateur players, we consider that future research will have to recruit highly skilled team sports athletes and be extended to sport-specific test contexts with, in parallel, a high level of standardization and reliability of measures. The results obtained suggest that the strength work is

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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