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ENHANCING ENDURANCE PERFORMANCE LEVEL OF YOUNG ELITE SOCCER PLAYERS USING AGILITY EXERCISES WITH THE BALL

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Abstract
Purpose: The aim of the research was to investigate the effect of agility with ball exercises on the endurance performance of young elite football players.
Methods and Materials: The researchers used the quasi-experimental research approach with a sample of 16 Iraqi youth elite football players chosen purposively to participate in the study and divided equally into two groups: experimental and control. Subjects were put through a training schedule of 3 days per week for 8 consecutive weeks where the coaches applied a skill-based football training program plus the agility based football drills only for the experimental group. All players were tested by the Barrow agility test before and after this training protocol and results were calculated.
Results: In the experimental group, a significant difference (p=0.000) was found between the pre-test and post-test average of the Barrow Dribbling test.
In comparison between both control and experimental groups in the Barrow dribbling post-tests, the independent t-test analysis found that the experimental group performed better than the control group with clear significant differences (p=0.000).
Conclusion: Football coaches must encompass agility with ball exercise training in their training plans in order to develop the endurance performance of young elite soccer players.

Keywords: *Agility, Football, Elite Players, Training Protocol, Skills' Testing, Endurance.*

1. Introduction

Physical conditioning of soccer players is a complicated process because they must perform multiple movements that call for strength, power, speed, agility, balance, stability, flexibility, and endurance (Bloomfield et al., 2007; Gorostiaga et al., 2004; and Helgerud et al., 2001). Soccer players, like athletes in other sports, require fundamental training components (physical, skilled, tactical, and psychological), which when combined enhance a player's level of performance and move him closer to obtaining the desired performance. Players must therefore possess the physical prowess to move swiftly and forcefully using their anaerobic and aerobic capacities to carry out prolonged, demanding attacking and defensive maneuvers (Tsunawake and colleagues, 2003; Karacabey, 2013; Stolen and colleagues, 2005; Jovanovic and colleagues, 2011; Rienzi and colleagues, 2000).

Soccer is distinguished by its intense physical contact, which results in a comparatively high risk and rate of injury to amateurs, professional players, and young players during practice and competition. Players need higher physical fitness level and more intensive training, especially at the professional level (Horicka et

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al., 2018; Woods et al., 2001; Andersen et al., 2004; Junge et al., 2004; Le Gall et al., 2006; Deehan et al., 2007; Kofotolis et al., 2007; Pfirrmann et al., 2016).

A research of the variables that can assist peak performance must be conducted since the application of science and technology is highly helpful in enhancing football achievement. Agility is one of the crucial elements that can help and improve performance in soccer (Jovanovic et al., 2011; Palmizal et al., 2019).

As a soccer player moves in all directions and continuously modifies his body positions on the ground or in the air to deal with the ball or in his conflict with the opponent for that, agility is a crucial physical quality, according to Julien et al. (2008). In order to save effort and prevent injury, he must solve motor duties quickly and fluidly. Therefore, it is essential for coaches to consider the specifics of the game, as well as the players' actions and responsibilities, while organizing their training.

It has been established that agility is a crucial aspect of soccer play (Jovanovic et al., 2011). According to Jullien et al. (2008), young professional soccer players' agility test results were enhanced by a brief (3-week) agility training program.

It is one thing to be able to quickly and precisely alter the direction and location of body motions when the body is in motion without losing equilibrium or awareness of the body (Perdima, 2017). Additionally, agility implies the responsiveness of all bodily motions to a single stimulus by altering speed or direction (Spiteri et al., 2013; Nimphius, 2018). According to these two quotations, agility, which is often defined as the capacity to change course skillfully and rapidly when running or walking in peak condition, is a physical factor that is always used in sports. Agility, which is most commonly characterized as a rapid shift in motion direction, is related directly to performance and indirectly to several fitness factors and qualities, endurance is one of those factors (Altug et al., 1987; Šimonek, Horička, & Hianik, 2016).

Football coaches want to make their players perform at their peak throughout the game, but their main concern is whether they can maintain that level of performance throughout the game or keep up with the opposition and maintain an advantage over him. Performance endurance is the capacity to deliver this degree of good performance and to continue with it throughout the two halves of the soccer game. It is a comprehensive ability of the physical and skilful traits and talents that a football player must possess. Thus, having a football player in general and the young player in particular who rises to carry performance is important. Here, agility plays a key role in developing and enhancing this performance because it sets the player apart from other players, whether in terms of physical performance or skillful performance, and subsequently, tactical performance. Additionally, agility helps the player avoid injury when there is strong friction or when falling. It also helps the player conserve energy and postpone fatigue.

1.1 Literature Review

Studies investigated the impact of specific training methods on football performance. Some of them measured the impact of agility based training method on soccer performance and came up with a consensus of significant impact of this training model on elite soccer players' performance.

Tayawi, (2015) investigated the effect of complex exercises (physical - skill) in developing performance endurance and some basic skills for advanced futsal players. The researcher used the experimental method on a sample of (16) players divided into equal experimental and control groups representing Al-Alam Sports Club- Iraq for the sports season (2013-2014). Results displayed that the compound exercises used in the experimental group had a significant impact on the development of endurance performance (short, medium, and long) as well as the skills' development (rolling, handling, close shooting).

According to Milanovic et al. (2013), a 12-week conditioning program that included training with speed, agility, and quickness (SAQ) had an impact on the agility performance of young soccer player. Soccer

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players were split into both experimental and control groups at random. Field tests such as the Slalom, Slalom with ball, Sprint with 90° turns, Sprint with 90° turns and ball, Sprint with 180° turns, Sprint with backward and forward running, and Sprint 4 x 5 m were used to evaluate agility performance. Results showed that practically all measures of agility, both with and without the ball, showed statistically significant gains ($p < 0.05$) between pre and post training, with the exception of the sprint with backward and forward running.

Additionally, Nurkadri et al. (2021) conducted an Indonesian study with the goal of enhancing the dribbling abilities of 22 young, elite football players through coordination and agility training. The findings of this study demonstrated a substantial association between coordination and agility and ball dribbling abilities, with significant p values of ($p=0.046$) and ($p=0.037$), respectively.

The significance of this study is in creating a variety of unique agility with the ball workouts and attempting to determine how much of an influence they have on the performance endurance of young, elite soccer players from Iraq. Following up on the Salah al-Din Governorate's youth football league for the previous season (2020–2021), the researchers found that there was a decline in overall performance during the final 30 minutes of football games, as evidenced by the players' frequent mistakes and slow and weak movement and skill flow. The researchers ascribe these findings to the participants' inability to successfully complete the football game due to their insufficient level of endurance. Based on this research problem, the researchers tried to prepare a specific training model including agility with ball exercises wondering whether these exercises influence the endurance and skills performance of Iraqi young elite football players. They hypothesize that there will be significant differences between the initial and final performance endurance tests' results of the experimental group (group trained with agility with ball exercises).

Finally, studies that discussed this problem and tested the above hypothesis within the Iraqi football settings were lacking. Therefore, the aim of the research was to investigate the effect of agility with ball exercises on the endurance performance of Iraqi young elite football players.

2. Methods

2.1.Study Design

The study used a quasi-experimental, applied deductive quantitative case study research design with non-randomized pretest-posttest groups.

2.2.Sample Characteristics

Sixteen youth football players (age=23.86±1,72 years; body weight = 65,30±7,37kg; height=173±0,07cm) were chosen purposively to participate in the study. Participants were regular youth football players playing to AL- Alam football club in Iraq, in the season 2020-2021. Participants were equally divided into two groups, the experimental, and the control group.

Five months prior to the initial tests or throughout the training regimen, none of the participants had sustained any injuries. Exogenous anabolic-androgenic steroids, other medicines that could have altered research participants' physical performance or hormonal balance, and dietary supplements were not included in their diets. The study's participants were fully informed, provided with a consent form to sign, and made aware of their right to withdraw at any time.

This study complies with the ethics committee of Tikrit University, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Iraq, with the approval date of 31-1-2022, and approval number of 7-40-167.

2.3.Training Protocol and Testing Procedures

2.3.1. Training Protocol

Subjects were put through an 8-week regular skill-based football training program during the study's intervention phase. For three days a week (Saturday, Monday, Wednesday), both the experimental and control

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groups participated in their team's technical and tactical training programs. In addition to the skill-based football training activities, only the Experimental group did the agility based football drills training program for about 30-40 minutes, before the initial training session using a high intensity (80%) interval training method. The training protocol included twelve agility with ball exercises of suitable duration and repetition. All details about the training protocol were found in Appendix (1).

2.3.2. Testing Procedures

The Barrow Ball dribbling and passing test (Al Douri, 2015) was used to determine the performance endurance tests for young soccer players. The researchers used the following tools to conduct this test: a soccer ball, a soccer goal (0.70 cm), a stopwatch, a rectangular grass court of length (10 * 16) feet, and five plastic cones.
Performance method: The player dribbles the ball using the Barrow method between the five fixed plastic cones, then passes it in an area 12 meters away, consisting of three targets with a height of (0.70) cm and a width of (1.5) meters each, as in Figure (1), then the performance is repeated for four times. Every player have 3 trials and the best trial time is recorded.

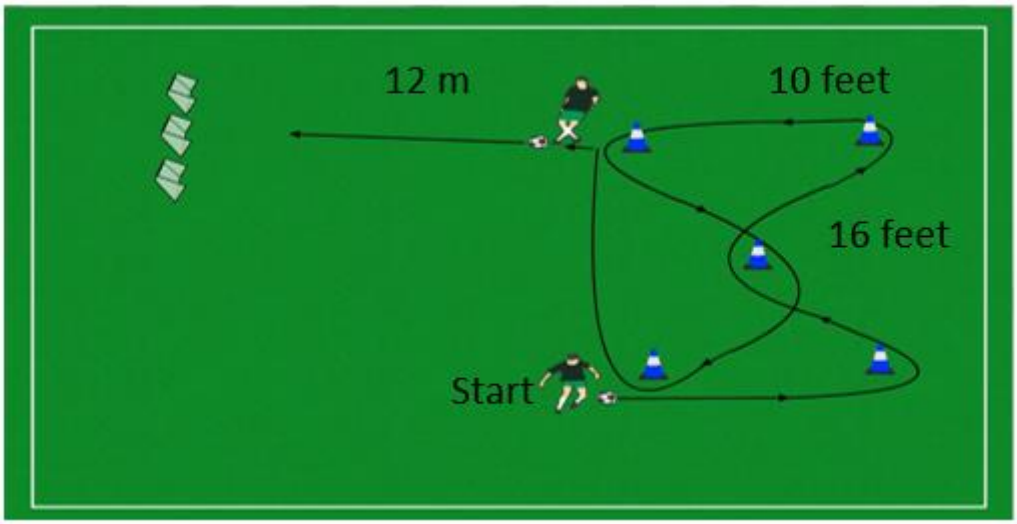

Figure 1: Barrow Ball Rolling and Handling Test

2.4. Statistical Analysis:

For all variables, descriptive data (mean & SD) were calculated. The significant differences between the mean participants' scores for each group (pretest vs. posttest) were determined using a paired T-test. An independent t-test, however, was employed to identify any significant variations in post-test averages between the experimental and control groups. All statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS Windows software, version 25. The Level of Confidence (L.O.C.) was set at 95% for all tests, and the p value was set at 0.05

3. Results

The paired T-test analysis has been conducted to determine the significant differences within sample groups. In the control group, no significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test time averages of the (BD Test) Barrow Dribbling test (p= 0.692). Results of the control group tests were shown in table (1).
In the experimental group, a significant difference (p=0.000) was found between the pre-test and post-test time average of the Barrow Dribbling test. Results of the experimental group tests were shown in table (2).

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In comparison between both control and experimental groups in the Barrow dribbling post-tests, the independent t-test analysis found that experimental group performed better than the control group with clear significant differences in time average (p=0.000) as this result was shown in table 3.

Table 1: Pre-test and post-test comparison analysis of control Group

Variable	Control Group Pre-test	Control Group Post-test	t	df	p
BD Test	Mean± SD	Mean± SD			
Time in Sec.	92.12± 3.94	90.25± 4.26	1.376	7	0.692

Table 2: Pre-test and post-test comparison analysis of Experimental Group

Variable	Experimental Group Pre-test	Experimental Group Post-test	t	df	p
BD Test	Mean± SD	Mean± SD			
Time in Sec.	91.75± 3.49	82.12±3.31	10.73	7	0.000

Table 3: Post-test comparison analysis of control and experimental groups

Variable	Control Group Post-test	Experimental Group Post –test	t	df	p
BD Test	Mean± SD	Mean± SD			
Time in Sec.	90.25± 4.26	82.12±3.31	5.823	7	0.000

4. Discussion

This study was conducted for the purpose of investigating the effect of agility with ball exercises on the endurance performance of young elite football players.

The training protocol consisted of 8 week program with a volume of three sessions per week including (12) agility with ball exercises, with appropriate duration and intensity.

The study results determined significant differences between the averages of the pre and post-tests of the experimental group as well as the averages of the two post-tests of the experimental and control groups with superiority of the experimental group averages. As the experimental group is the one who carried out the agility with the ball exercises, the researchers attribute this performance development to the adequate preparation of agility with the ball exercises, depending on the scientific sources and the practical experience of the researchers in the field of specialization, soccer training, which were inspired by some cases of playing during matches with the ball, and this is confirmed by (Abdulfattah & Shaalan, 1994) that the effect of training is achieved to its maximum extent if it is using the basic skills of the same game during training, indicating that the design of the different exercises depends on the same form and method of performance in football and the use of the same football skills with or without the ball.

In addition, the authors attribute several factors that have influenced the performance such as the clarity of the goals for which the agility with the ball exercises were developed, reducing errors and changing body positions in various directions, and the commitment of the research sample to training, as well as observing the principles of sports training in terms of the specificity of the game, rationing and harmony between the components of the training load (size intensity and inter-rest). When players train regularly for weeks and months, physiological adaptation to this effort or work will occur, which works to improve the individual's

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physical and functional capabilities, as well as improves effectiveness and ability to withstand performance and various other technical aspects associated with the specialized activity (Salamah, 2000).
The movements that are represented by changing the positions of the body across the ground or in the air, such as diving from the bottom of the barrier or jumping from a band with changing the player's movement and direction with or without the ball, or changing the positions of his body with the performance of some football skills gave the exercises the desired effect and performed them smoothly and accurately through repetition. Mahmoud (2011) points out that the soccer player needs agility in trying to succeed in integrating a number of basic skills into one frame or changing from one skill to another in his speed and direction in a sound rhythm on the ground or in the air in an easy and smooth way.

The researchers also consider that the performance endurance, which expresses the physical level associated with the skill aspect during the performance of the soccer player, through which he is able to carry out the duties that fall upon him during the match, as (Sirajedine, 2007) indicates that performance endurance is a complex physical ability of endurance and agility, which means the player's ability to perform motor skills in harmony, smoothness, and flow, with the possibility of repeating them for a long period of time without reaching the stage of fatigue.

In comparing our results to another research findings in the same area of study, we could conclude that our experimental group results were in line with the results of Tayawi, (2015) who investigated the effect of complex exercises (physical - skill) in developing performance endurance and some basic skills for advanced futsal players and found that the compound exercises used in the experimental group had a significant impact on the development of endurance performance (short, medium, and long) as well as the skills' development (rolling, handling, close shooting).
In addition, our study results shares similarity with Milanovic et al. (2013) who determined the effects of a 12 week conditioning program involving speed, agility and quickness (SAQ) training and its effect on agility performance in young soccer players. The statistically significant improvements ($p < 0.05$) between pre and post training were evident for almost all measures of agility, with and without the ball, with the exception being the Sprint with backward and forward running.
Finally, our study results were consistent with the results of Nurkadri et al. (2021) who found that both coordination and agility have a significant relationship with the ability to dribble the ball with significant p values of ($p=0.046$) and ($p=0.037$) respectively.
As a general result, the agility with ball exercises training model have a positive impact on endurance performance in football. The study findings contributes in providing recommendations for developing tailored interventions and programs aiming at improving the football players' performance. However, the reduced sample size and conducting a gender based intervention were considered clear limitations to the study.

5. Conclusion

As a general result, the agility with ball exercises achieved a development in the endurance of the players' performance when comparing the results of the pre and post-tests of the experimental group and in favor of the post test.
The experimental group achieved a development in performance endurance when comparing the results of the two post-tests of the experimental and control groups, in favor of the experimental group tests.
However, the control group did not achieve any development in performance endurance when comparing the results of the pre and post-tests of the control group. The researchers recommend that football coaches must encompass agility with ball exercise training in their training plans in order to develop the endurance performance of young elite soccer players.

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Future Iraqi research in this area must include larger sample size from different football sport clubs especially professional league players and must also include a female gender and age group analysis.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix 1: Eight Week Agility with Ball Training Program for Experimental Group

Table 1: Agility with ball exercises training model.

Agility with the	Exercise Content

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Ball Exercises	
Exercise 1	Players run with the ball inside the middle circle area In different directions and speeds while avoiding collision with the colleague and upon hearing the signal from the coach lie down on the ground and then get up and return to running.
Exercise 2	Ball passing between two players within two cones 2 m apart. The distance between the players is 10m. The first player passes the ball to the second player, sits on the ground, and then gets up to receive the ball back from his colleague.
Exercise 3	The player dribbles the ball between 6 cones back and forth. Upon completion of the exercise, he returns to the starting line. The distance between every 2 cones is 2m
Exercise 4	Running with the ball along the field and upon hearing the signal, the player leaves the ball and runs sideways five steps to the right and returns to the ball in the left direction and continues running with the ball forward.
Exercise 5	Two players stand beside two cones, the distance between them is 15 m. The first player passes the ball to the second player, then turns around his cone and get ready to receive the ball from the colleague who in turn performed the same drill, the exercise continues until the end of the allotted time.
Exercise 6	2 players on two cones 20 m apart. Ball rotation around the cone and then rolling the ball to a quarter of the distance between the two cones then passing the ball to a colleague who receives the ball and do the same drill.
Exercise 7	The player runs with the ball towards the barrier, which is 5 meters apart and 1 meters high, to pass the ball from below, and then passes the ball from the bottom of the second barrier, which is 3 meters apart from the first barrier and 50 cm high. Then he get the ball and dribble it to the starting point (cone). The drill continues until the end of this exercise.
Exercise 8	The player dribbles the ball between 5 cones, the distance between cones is 1m, then he turns at an angle of 45 degrees to a barrier on the right, 10m away and 1m high, to pass with the ball below it, and then pass the ball to a small goal with a height and width of 1m, 12m away, and return to the starting line to repeat the drill again.
Exercise 9	Rolling forward on the penalty arc and getting up to receive the ball from the coach in different positions and turning from behind the cone and then shooting at the regular goal. The attempt is repeated 4 times, two on the right side and two on the left side.
Exercise 10	The player sits with his back facing the goal, 5 m from the penalty area arc, and throws the ball with both hands to the back, then gets up, catches up with it, and shoots it at the goal. The performance is repeated 4 times.
Exercise 11	The two players stand on two cones 10 m apart, every player runs the ball towards the other at the same time, then they fake and pass the teammate without colliding with him, and continue to roll the ball around the two cones and return it with the same previous action until the end of the exercise.
Exercise 12	Controlling the ball near the penalty arc for 10 seconds, and at the signal from the coach, the player rotates behind the person and makes a wall tackle with the colleague on the side of the penalty arc and shoots the ball directly at the goal.

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Table 2: Weekly training sessions schedule

Intervention Weeks	Day 1 Exercise #	Day 2 Exercise #	Day 3 Exercise #	Reps	Sets	Rest /Reps	Intensity level
Week 1	1-2-3-4	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 2	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	9-10-11-12	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 3	9-10-11-12	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 4	1-2-3-4	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 5	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	9-10-11-12	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 6	9-10-11-12	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 7	9-10-11-12	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	3-4	1	3m	70-80%
Week 8	5-6-7-8	1-2-3-4	9-10-11-12	3-4	1	3m	70-80%