

Adapting Training Load Based on the Menstrual Cycle in Women’s Football: Player Perception, Preferences, Barriers and Experiences

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Introduction

Women’s football has grown rapidly over the past three decades (Ventaja-Cruz et al., 2024), resulting in increased demands and professionalisation, triggering an increase in physical and psychological load (Scott, Lovell & Wilson, 2025). The menstrual cycle has been seen to be an important factor in training load design and implementation (Carmichael et al., 2021). Previous research on the impact of the menstrual cycle on athletes has typically focussed on quantitative performance measures and physiological responses (McNulty et al., 2020). Previous qualitative research has focussed on athlete perceptions of menstrual cycle in sport (Brown et al., 2021), how menstrual cycle related topics are discussed with staff (Clarke et al., 2022) as well as major barriers to the implementation of a menstrual cycle tracking strategy in athletes from a variety of sports (Carmichael et al., 2024). Quantitative research has focused on key markers and metrics for use within a menstrual cycle tracking strategy (French et al., 2025). However, limited research exists which aims to assess the barriers to, and preferences for, a menstrual tracking system specifically in female football.

Aims & Rationale

There appears a gap in the literature on specific barriers and athlete preferences for menstrual cycle tracking in female football. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore female footballer’s experiences of menstrual cycle tracking, as well as athlete preferences for how best to implement a menstrual cycle tracking system in women’s football.

Methods

Six female footballers competing at Tier 4 of the Women’s Football League Pyramid took part in semi-structured interviews. Ethical Approval was granted through a Newcastle College Group (NCG) Ethics Committee. Thematic Analysis was performed to elucidate key themes within the data.

Results

Individual experiences and perceptions of menstrual cycle impact	Communication, disclosure and the role of staff	Approach to tracking, monitoring and application
Variations in experience and tracking based on age and maturity	Comfort with disclosure may differ between individuals	Perceived benefits of tracking menstrual cycle, some athletes very positive tracking would help, others less concerned.
Variations in Impact of cycle on mood and physical state	Impact of predominantly male staff base may have an impact on willingness to disclose	Perceived risks and concerns of tracking and implementation.
Potential for psychosomatic issues i.e. if being made too aware of impact of cycle.	Barriers to honest reporting may present themselves, particularly if minutes may be managed or load adjusted without discussions	Media and cultural shifts in how people share details of their cycle and more openness to disclosure
Perceptions of Injury risk vary among participants		Advice for implementation which would create adherence.
“I guess it is just placebo a little bit. Like I do sometimes wonder, am I actually in a bad mood or do I just know that I'm due on in a day or two? So feel like I ought to be in a bad mood, you know what I mean?”	“I think one of the best ways to address it really is for the coach to be the one to kind of put it out into the open at first. Yeah. Because that, I guess it's a bit of a relief, isn't it? Like, okay, he said it's fine to talk about that kind of stuff.”	“I almost think it is better to like know where you're at because then you can kind of prepare for that, I guess.”
“I know if I'm going to a training session and I'm in that kind of phase, like I'm very aware going into it that like I'm probably going to be a bit miserable today... but I almost think it is better to like know where you're at because then you can kind of prepare for that, I guess.”	“If you know, you're not feeling great or there's a problem, we're more likely, I think, to talk to our teammates about it and then somehow communicate the problem to the coach.”	“Keep it fairly simple is probably the best way to get buy-in because if it's, there's like, I don't know, too much stuff that you've got to track and it requires like more time and effort, that might stop people from like adhering to it.”

Discussion & Conclusion

The results of this study could be used to provide strength and conditioning practitioners with a better understanding and awareness of perceptions of female footballers and specific views and experiences in relation to menstrual cycle tracking. These findings may help practitioners more effectively administer menstrual cycle tracking in female football, creating a strategy which may be more likely to create adherence and ‘buy-in’ as well as be more effective at appreciating the individual differences between players and their lived experiences.

Practical Recommendations

Keep tracking simple and ‘user friendly’ in order to create ‘buy-in’ and adherence
Collect data and track cycles in order to be aware of the potential for performance or mood fluctuations, but do not necessarily seek to pre-empt changes to normal mood or performance. This, according to participants, would allow you to rapidly adapt if needed, but not get too caught up with micro-managing the training process.
Adapt tracking strategies to individual preferences and unique needs. No one size fits all approach.
Making ‘recommendations’ and explaining what the research suggests may happen based on different stages of an athlete's cycle would be encouraged. Recommendations and suggestions were seen to be preferred to instructions and control.
Most participants stressed that disclosing to a male coach may be more challenging for some athletes than if a female coach or member of staff were available to discuss tracking and cycle symptoms.
Coaches being open about how they are willing to discuss and track cycles was seen to be a positive. Outlining at the earliest possible opportunity that you, as a coach or Sport Scientist/ Strength and Conditioning Coach, are happy and willing to work with athletes based on their cycle, was seen as a positive action which would foster increased buy in and compliance with a tracking strategy.

References

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