

Press Release

Women footballers more likely to 'tear it like Gazza' than 'bend it like Beckham'

It has happened to Gazza, to Darren Gough, to Alan Shearer and to many other sports players. All three have suffered the serious and career threatening knee injury, the anterior cruciate ligament tear, sidelining them from the game for several months. Now a recent medical study presented by Professor Graham Smith, Chairman of the Society of Sports Therapist at the 14th International Congress of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy in Barcelona has revealed that the injury is a growing problem in female footballers and girls are nearly three times more likely to suffer the condition than their male counterparts.¹ For all of those budding female Beckham's out there, it's a worrying situation.

Football, for so long regarded as a male bastion, is now the fastest growing and number one female sport in England, recently overtaking netball. Played in over fifty countries world-wide, there are now 700 women's teams in England and 1100 girl's teams. 55,500 girls and women play in affiliated league and cup competitions.²

Back in 1991, a nation watched in horror as Paul Gascoigne's reckless tackle on Nottingham Forest's Gary Charles suddenly brought his cup final to a very abrupt end. Just as with David Beckham's metatarsals and more recently the scaphoid bone in his wrist, Gazza was also subject to ferocious press scrutiny and the ACL tear became an overnight subject of discussion for the whole country.

Research now shows that female soccer players are faced with the real prospect of suffering this very painful injury although it won't necessarily be as a result of a mistimed tackle à la Mr Gascoigne.

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Professor Smith explained:

'83% of the injuries reported came from non-contact situations and equally 83% of the injuries occurred in matches not in training.'

He continued:

'The game is about fast movements, changes of speed, sudden changes of direction. Jumping and landing with bent knees is of course much safer than with straight legs. Men tend to naturally play with a lower centre of gravity than females which gives them a wider base of support. However, there is evidence to show that as female players get tired they adopt a more upright posture than their male counterparts which gives them a higher centre of gravity. Consequently, if you land when the knee is almost straight the ligaments are tight and a dynamic adjustment is needed to retain balance, so putting the ACL at risk.'

The study compiled by Professor Smith, from the PhysioTech Clinic, Glasgow and Rosemary Stevenson, Sports Therapist from Kent and former student at London Metropolitan University, revealed that half of the clubs in the women's premier league who were profiled revealed at least one ACL injury during the seasons 1998-2001.

Professor Smith went on to state :

'Previous studies had shown the fifteen to eighteen age range as being most vulnerable to this injury but our results showed a new trend developing in nineteen to twenty five year old players. Fifty eight per cent of the ACL injuries reported, occurred in this age bracket.'

Professor Smith, who heads the lead organisation for Sports Therapists in the UK, offered the following advice to female soccer players:

'While much more research is needed from a medical standpoint, clubs, players and coaches can start helping themselves. It is vital that players play on good surfaces and are wearing the right footwear.'

He added, 'Equally, coaches have a significant role to play. Most of the injuries are occurring in games and not during training. Females who train for perhaps just two nights a week will spend most of their time on skills work. But they need to be working on endurance and

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plyometrics which is explosive power training to help them develop adequate levels of fitness to cope with the game.

One would also question whether women's football at this time is geared towards helping players get adequate and appropriate treatment to help them to return to sport quickly.' He added

The women's game is developing at a rapid pace. England has in fact been chosen to host the 2005 UEFA European Women's Championships which will serve to further develop the current rise in popularity.

The statistics are already showing a seriously worrying trend. It is important that the medical profession, players, coaches and the governing bodies, get together to give this ticking time-bomb some serious attention.

END

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NOTES TO THE EDITOR

- A. The ACL is one of four knee ligaments that joins the thigh bone(femur) and shin bone(tibia). It attaches to the front (anterior) portion of the tibia and runs diagonally up attaching to the rear of the bottom of the femur. It plays a crucial role in stabilising the movements of the knee.

References:

1. Mary Lloyd Ireland, Michael Gaudette, Scott Crook: ACL injuries in the female athlete: Journal of Sports Rehabilitation 1997, Vol. 6, pp97-110.
2. [www.http://thefa.com/](http://thefa.com/)
3. Professor Graham N Smith, Rosemary Stevenson, A Study of Anterior Cruciate Ligament Injuries within the Women's Premier Soccer League of England and Wales.

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