Review Article

Multidimensional Determinants of Successful Return to Sport after Anterior Cruciate Ligament Reconstruction: A Narrative Review

Ebrahim Piri[1], Amir Ali Jafarnezhadgro[2,*]

[1] PhD in Sports Biomechanics, Department of Sports Biomechanics, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Sports Biomechanics, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran

*Corresponding author: Amir Ali Jafarnezhadgero; Department of Sports Biomechanics, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran. Tel: +98-9105146214; Email: amiralijafarnezhad@gmail.com

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Abstract

Securing a durable and effective reintegration into athletic activities after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction (ACLR) via surgery, constitutes an intricate and multifactorial endeavor. While most patients express strong optimism for unrestricted sports resumption, empirical outcomes reveal a notable disparity: only approximately 50% of individuals regain their prior competitive level, and among this group, one in five encounters a subsequent anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) rupture. In recent years, numerous assessment frameworks have been introduced to gauge postoperative readiness and mitigate the likelihood of recurrent injury. Nevertheless, contemporary studies indicate that a significant number of sports practitioners do not fulfill conventional clearance benchmarks, and notably, achieving these benchmarks does not invariably safeguard against a second injury, thereby calling into question their prognostic utility. This observed limitation implies that prevailing evaluation methods may possess inadequate discriminative capacity. The results derived from such assessments arguably mirror the caliber and comprehensiveness of the preceding rehabilitative intervention, thus inviting a rigorous reappraisal of standard therapeutic regimens. A pivotal inquiry emerges regarding the adequacy of contemporary preparation strategies in equipping athletes for the rigorous, dynamic, and stochastic challenges inherent in field and court sports. This integrative narrative analysis consolidates seminal findings from the last fifteen years, concentrating on three pivotal domains: 1) contemporary methodologies for evaluating return-to-sport readiness, 2) the architecture and efficacy of postoperative rehabilitation protocols, and 3) the conceptualization of the return-to-sport process as a sequential continuum. These dimensions are examined through a unified and overarching analytical framework.

Keywords: Anterior Cruciate Ligament; Return to Sport; Rehabilitation

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Background

Ruptures of the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) represent a frequent occurrence within athletic disciplines that require rotational maneuvers, sharp turns, and sudden directional shifts activities characteristic of team- and court-based athletics (1). For sportspersons pursuing competitive-level athletic participation post-injury, surgical intervention via ACL reconstruction (ACLR) is typically advised (2). The process of clearing an individual for sport re-entry is a multifaceted component of holistic clinical decision-making, integrating bio-psycho-social considerations and thereby presenting a substantial clinical challenge. Despite a strong patient predisposition towards expecting a full and unrestricted return to play, epidemiological data reveal a stark reality: a mere 55% of athletes, regardless of competitive tier, ultimately resume their prior level of sport involvement (3). Compounding this issue, available evidence suggests a secondary injury incidence rate of roughly 20% within the population that does return to sport (4). These collective findings underscore a pressing demand for the refinement of existing postoperative management frameworks. The present narrative synthesis endeavors to deliver a broad-scope examination of pivotal developments and accumulated knowledge from the recent 15-year period, centering its discourse on three interrelated domains: contemporary evaluative techniques for sport clearance, the substantive elements and implementation of restorative protocols, and the conceptualization of sport re-entry as a continuum of progressive reintegration.

Evaluating Readiness for Sport Resumption

Assessment Frameworks and Their Constraints: The prevailing paradigm for determining sport re-entry is anchored in criterion-based decision-making within a defined temporal structure. Consequently, multifaceted assessment batteries have been established, integrating objective physical parameters such as muscular strength, hop performance, and movement kinematics alongside subjective evaluations of psychological preparedness. Typical components encompass isokinetic or handheld dynamometry for strength quantification, unilateral hop tests, jump-landing analyses [e.g., the Landing Error Scoring System (LESS)], and patient-reported outcome measures assessing self-efficacy and perceived function (5).

While these batteries are designed to identify athletes prepared for competition with minimized re-injury liability, their predictive efficacy is subject to debate. Although achieving passing scores correlates with a greater probability of returning to sport –implying a role for general athletic proficiency, multiple analyses report no statistically significant reduction in second ACL injury incidence among those meeting all established criteria. Some investigations indicate that failing to satisfy criteria elevates re-injury risk (6); however, methodological disparities, particularly regarding the cohort under analysis (all patients versus only returners), complicate interpretations. Notably, one study posited that meeting criteria reduced ipsilateral injury risk but potentially heightened contralateral risk, though this finding has faced methodological scrutiny. A subsequent reevaluation suggested that passing assessments might indeed lower the aggregate risk of a second injury, yet persistent concerns regarding the sensitivity and specificity of these tests remained (7). Thus, contemporary assessment batteries may lack the precision required for reliable long-term prognostications.

Closing the Divide between Clinic and Field: A fundamental shortcoming of current evaluation practices lies in their ecological disparity –the chasm between the controlled clinical setting and the dynamic, stochastic reality of competitive sport. Predominant tests measure closed skill and predictable actions, whereas ACL injuries overwhelmingly transpire in open, reactive environments replete with opponents, teammates, and unpredictable stimuli. Sports demanding pivoting place a premium on complex physical attributes like repeated sprint capacity, reactive agility, and sport-specific endurance qualities often compromised post injury due to detraining.

Evaluating jump-landing biomechanics in a fresh, premeditated clinical context may fail to capture authentic movement strategies under game-induced fatigue and pressure. Emerging data illustrate discernible biomechanical differences when athletes are assessed in laboratory versus field conditions, revealing the limited ecological validity of conventional assessments (8). To mitigate this, a transition towards field-based evaluation is advocated. Wearable inertial measurement units (IMUs) present a portable option for real-world motion analysis, though their integration into routine practice is hindered by cost and analytical complexity. Alternative instruments, such as the Cutting Movement Assessment Score (CMAS) (9), enable video-based scrutiny of cutting mechanics. Furthermore, incorporating neurocognitive dimensions like decision-making under duress can augment test complexity to better simulate sporting demands. However, validated reactive agility protocols for the post ACLR demographics are presently lacking. Future investigative efforts should prioritize the development of ecologically sound, field-based testing paradigms that amalgamate wearable technology and cognitive challenges.

Transcending a Uniform Approach: Readiness for sport cannot be distilled to isolated metrics of strength or hopping proficiency. While historical rehabilitation adhered to standardized regimens, the contemporary understanding acknowledges pronounced inter-individual variability in recovery pathways. Research demonstrates that certain patients satisfy return-to-sport benchmarks early, whereas others exhibit persistent deficits in domains like movement quality or strength, even when hop symmetry is attained (10). The absence of a universally accepted, standardized criterion set further obfuscates cross-study comparisons. Moreover, as the number of mandated tests increases, so does the probability of failing at least once –a statistical reality termed the "penalty of multiple testing". In lieu of rigid pass/fail models, a personalized, dynamic strategy is recommended. Developing individualized athlete profiles, regularly updated through serial assessments (e.g., every 2-3 months), facilitates progress tracking and pinpoints specific strengths and deficiencies. For instance, an athlete might demonstrate recovered strength by six months but persist with hazardous landing mechanics, while another may excel in hop tests at nine months yet display considerable quadriceps weakness (11). Initiating evaluative measures early in the rehabilitation timeline, not solely at discharge, enables data-informed program modulation. Benchmarks should also be phase-specific; the criteria for commencing running differ from those for initiating on-field rehabilitation (OFR) involving cutting maneuvers. Prioritizing quadriceps strength before introducing high-demand agility drills is critical, as deficits are associated with elevated re-injury risk. However, consensus on phase-specific milestones is lacking, necessitating that clinicians employ expert reasoning to customize the testing and rehabilitation trajectory. This iterative process enhances patient engagement and cultivates a genuinely individualized reintegration pathway.

The Substance of Rehabilitation

Preventing Insufficient Training Stimulus: The results of return-to-sport assessments directly mirror the caliber of the preceding rehabilitation program. Despite the implementation of structured protocols, a substantial proportion of patients fail to meet established performance benchmarks (11). This raises pertinent questions regarding the adequacy of conventional rehabilitation in preparing athletes for the specific demands of their sport. Evidence indicates that augmenting training intensity and volume via progressive strength conditioning can markedly improve performance on return-to-sport tests. Regimens founded on established resistance training principles, which systematically increase load from under 50% to over 80% of one-repetition maximum (1RM), have demonstrated superior outcomes (12). This underscores the imperative of providing an adequate physiological stimulus (13). Furthermore, preoperative rehabilitation may potentiate postoperative recovery. To optimize preparedness for high-demand athletics, rehabilitation must eschew under-loading and guarantee comprehensive physical conditioning.

The Influence of Communication and Cuing: The manner in which clinicians communicate instructions profoundly affects motor learning and psychological outcomes. Explicit cues that foster an internal focus of attention (on body movements) can induce overthinking and disrupt automatic movement patterns. Conversely, instructions promoting an external focus (on the movement's effect on the environment) facilitate implicit motor learning, often yielding superior movement quality, performance, and skill retention. Preliminary research supports the application of external focus cues to enhance jump-landing technique post ACLR, although broader integration into clinical practice awaits further substantiating evidence (13).

Fostering Psychological Readiness: An ACL injury constitutes a significant psychological event. Kinesiophobia (fear of re-injury) is a predominant obstacle to sport resumption. While enhanced physical capacity often correlates with improved psychological readiness [e.g., higher scores on the ACL-Return to Sport Index (ACL-RSI)], some athletes require targeted psychological support despite being physically prepared. Clinicians can cultivate a positive rehabilitative milieu by applying self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Practical strategies include collaborative goal-setting, providing autonomy-supportive (rather than controlling) feedback, and organizing group training sessions to bolster social support. Disparities between patient expectations and actual outcomes can engender frustration and diminished motivation. Refining communication strategies may enhance satisfaction, motivation, and psychological readiness, though additional research is needed to confirm these benefits (14, 15).

Integrating Neurocognitive Training: ACL injury entails not only mechanical disruption but also neural compromise, given the ligament's role in proprioceptive afference. Graft implantation necessitates subsequent cortical reorganization. Considering the substantial neurocognitive demands of sports requiring rapid, pressured decision-making, rehabilitation should incorporate cognitive challenges. Dual-task exercises, memory drills, and sport-specific decision-making scenarios can progressively increase cognitive load (16). Initiating with low-complexity tasks and gradually advancing to high-load simulations helps prevent overload. This integration of "brain training" is currently underutilized yet represents a critical omission in traditional programming. Further inquiry is required to evaluate its impact on return-to-sport outcomes (16).

Executing OFR: OFR is indispensable during the latter recovery phases, serving as a bridge between clinic-based therapy and unrestricted sport participation. It addresses sport-specific physical and psychological demands, aiding athletes in rebuilding chronic training load tolerance and confidence. OFR typically commences with controlled, pre-planned drills (e.g., curved running) and advances to reactive agility exercises under simulated pressure (17). Frameworks such as the control-chaos continuum (CCC) propose a structured progression from linear running (high control) to unpredictable, game speed scenarios (high chaos). Patients frequently report OFR as the most engaging component of rehabilitation, which can significantly boost motivation. However, empirical evidence specifically validating the control chaos model within ACLR rehabilitation is presently limited, warranting further investigation.

Prioritizing Secondary Prevention: The endpoint of rehabilitation should not coincide with medical clearance for sport. Existing programs often fail to attenuate secondary ACL injury risk, and physical capacity may decline post rehabilitation if targeted training ceases. Studies indicate diminished hop performance persisting years after ACLR, suggesting a sustained elevation in re-injury susceptibility (18). Clinicians must educate patients on the necessity of continued training to maintain strength, movement quality, and neuromuscular control. Long-term adherence to injury prevention strategies is paramount for durable protection.

The Return to Sport Continuum

Returning to sport is not a discrete event but a dynamic, individualized process. The return-to-sport continuum model encompassing phases of OFR, return to training (RTT), return to competition (RTC), and finally return to performance (RTP) emphasizes progressive, phased reintegration. RTP is realized when an athlete competes at pre-injury levels with minimal re-injury liability. Within this model, successful completion of clinical return-to-sport tests should be viewed as a foundational prerequisite for entering the OFR phase, not as the ultimate gatekeeper for full competition (19). Transitions between continuum stages should be meticulously managed, utilizing tools like Global Positioning System (GPS) monitoring to regulate external load and avoid abrupt spikes that elevate injury risk. The interrelationships between physical, psychological, and contextual factors and return-to-sport outcomes are nonlinear and interconnected. A holistic, system-based perspective such as complex systems theory is advisable. This approach conceptualizes the athlete as a dynamic network of interacting variables rather than a mere aggregation of isolated metrics. This "web of determinants" acknowledges inherent uncertainty and underscores the need for individualized, flexible decision-making (20). Shared decision-making that actively involves the patient, medical team, and coaching staff is essential to equilibrate the concurrent demands of rehabilitation, training, and competition.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding considerable advancement, numerous questions concerning return-to-sport after ACLR remain unresolved. The past fifteen years have yielded invaluable insights, yet the journey is far from concluded. Sport reentry is intrinsically complex and highly individualized. However, by concentrating on foundational principles including personalized assessment, high-quality progressive rehabilitation, psychological support, neurocognitive integration, and structured on-field preparation outcomes can be improved. If these elements are implemented effectively, the outlook is optimistic, and the future of returning to sport after ACLR holds considerable promise for safer and more successful athletic comebacks.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

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