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## Author

Bellinger, Phillip, Bourne, Matthew, Duhig, Steven, Lievens, Eline, Kennedy, Ben, Martin, Andrew, Cooper, Christopher, Tredrea, Matthew, Rice, Hal, Derave, Wim, Minahan, Clare



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# Relationships between lower limb muscle characteristics and force-velocity profiles derived during sprinting and jumping

PHILLIP BELLINGER[1,2], MATTHEW BOURNE[1,3], STEVEN DUHIG[1,3], ELINE LIEVENS[4], BEN KENNEDY[6], ANDREW MARTIN[1], CHRISTOPHER COOPER[1], MATTHEW TREDREA[5], HAL RICE[6], WIM DERAVE[4] and CLARE MINAHAN[1]

[1]Griffith Sports Science, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia

[2]Queensland Academy of Sport, Queensland, Australia

[3]Gold Coast Centre for Orthopaedics Research, Engineering and Education (GCORE), Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Australia

[4]Department of Movement and Sports Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

[5]Department of Rehabilitation, Nutrition and Sport, La Trobe University College of Science Health and Engineering, Nutrition and Sport, Bundoora, Australia

[6]Qscan Radiology, Australia.

**Correspondence:**

Phillip Bellinger

School of Allied Health Sciences, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, 4222.

Phone: (617) 5552 9219 Fax: (617) 5552 8674 Email: p.bellinger@griffith.edu.au

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To identify the relationships between lower limb muscle characteristics and the mechanical variables derived from the vertical (jumping) and horizontal (sprinting) force-velocity-power (FVP) profiles. **Methods:** Nineteen sub-elite male rugby league players performed a series of squat jumps and linear 30 m sprints to derive the vertical and horizontal FVP profiles, respectively. The theoretical maximal force (*F0*), velocity (*V0*) and power (*Pmax*) were derived from both the vertical (i.e., *vF0, vV0 and vPmax*) and horizontal (i.e., *hF0, hV0 and hPmax*) FVP profiles. Vastus lateralis (VL), biceps femoris (BF) long head and gastrocnemius medialis (GM) and lateralis muscle fascicle length, pennation angle and thickness were measured using B-mode ultrasonography. Magnetic resonance (MR) imaging was used to calculate volumes of major lower limb muscles, while proton MR spectroscopy was used to quantify the carnosine content of the GM to estimate muscle fiber typology. **Results:** Variation in *vPmax* was best explained by GM muscle fiber typology (i.e., greater estimated proportion of type II fibers) and VL volume (adjusted $r^2$=0.440; P=0.006), while adductor and vastus medialis volume and GM muscle fiber typology explained the most variation in *hPmax* (adjusted $r^2$=0.634, P=0.032). Rectus femoris and VL volume explained variation in *vF0* ($r^2$=0.430; P=0.008), while adductor and vastus medialis volume explained variation in *hF0* ($r^2$=0.432; P=0.007). Variation in *vV0* and *hV0* were best explained by GM muscle fiber typology (adjusted $r^2$=0.580, P<0.001) and GM muscle fiber typology and BF short head volume (adjusted $r^2$ = 0.590, P<0.001), respectively. **Conclusion:** Muscle fiber typology and muscle volume are strong determinants of maximal muscle power in jumping and sprinting by influencing the velocity- and force-orientated mechanical variables.



**Keywords:** MUSCLE FIBER TYPE COMPOSITION; MUSCLE FASCICLE LENGTH; MUSCLE VOLUME; CARNOSINE; JUMP PERFORMANCE; SPRINT PERFORMANCE

## INTRODUCTION

Generating a large amount of force at a high contraction (or movement) velocity is critical for many 'explosive' movements and is a key performance variable in many sports (1). Indeed, for the sport of rugby league, lower limb maximal muscle power is one of the strongest discriminatory performance variables that differentiates between elite National Rugby League (NRL) players and their second-division counterparts (2). Given that maximal muscle power is directly influenced by the underlying force and velocity mechanical outputs, the force–velocity (FV) and power–velocity (PV) relationships have been used to profile the theoretical maximal mechanical output during sprinting and jumping activities (3, 4). The assessment of the FV and PV relationships during these movements characterizes the external force production capabilities of the lower limbs by identifying the theoretical maximum force (*F0*), velocity (*V0*) and power (*Pmax*) produced during sprinting (i.e., horizontal; *hF0, hV0 and hPmax*) or jumping (i.e., vertical; *vF0, vV0 and vPmax*) (3, 5). While these mechanical capabilities are clearly important for sprinting and jumping performance, the lower limb muscle characteristics underpinning these mechanical capabilities are yet to be fully elucidated.

The external force production capabilities of the lower limbs are likely to be influenced by several muscle characteristics, including muscle architecture (i.e., fascicle length, pennation angle and thickness), morphology (i.e., muscle volume) and the distribution of type I and II muscle fibers (i.e., fiber typology). Muscle fiber typology is largely dependent on genetic predisposition and transition between type I and II fibers is not thought to occur very readily in response to training (6). In contrast, muscle volume and architecture are more malleable to training and changes in these characteristics can occur quite rapidly (7). While inter-individual differences in the FV profile have previously been utilized to individualize training prescription (8), a better understanding of the muscle characteristics that modulate this profile may improve our ability to prescribe performance enhancing exercise interventions. For example, identifying

the extent to which muscle architecture and volume contribute to the external force production capabilities may inform the design of training interventions that preferentially target adaptations in these characteristics, thus maximising the training response. Furthermore, greater insight into how muscle fiber typology contributes to the external force production capabilities of the lower limbs may influence the interpretation of the FV profile for the purpose of individualizing training programs (8). Interestingly, in high level athletes there are trivial to small correlations between the maximal mechanical variables derived from vertical and horizontal FV and PV profiles (9). That is, an athlete who can produce a large *vF0* does not necessarily have the capacity to produce an equally high *hF0*. Although this divergence might be partly explained by differences in force orientation ability between sprinting and jumping, it also suggests that the muscular characteristics underpinning the mechanical variables derived from horizontal and vertical FV and PV profiles are likely to differ significantly.

While few studies have determined the muscular characteristics that underpin the maximal mechanical parameters of the vertical and horizontal FV and PV profiles, the associations between muscle characteristics and performance metrics (i.e., sprint times or jump height) and/or levels of performance (i.e., trained and untrained) have been reported (10-18). For example, previous research has reported a significant correlation ($r = -0.69$) between the proportion of type II muscle fibers and 100-m sprint time (15) and squat jump mean mechanical power (19), suggesting that muscle fiber typology may influence the external force production capabilities of the lower limbs. Muscle architecture may also influence the FV and PV mechanical parameters given that muscles with longer fascicles possess a greater shortening velocity (20). Furthermore, elite 100 m sprinters (10.0 – 10.9 s) display longer fascicles in the vastus lateralis (VL), and the gastrocnemius medial (GM) and gastrocnemius lateralis (GL) compared to their sub-elite counterparts (11.0 – 11.7 s) (14) and distance runners (10). Recent work (21) reported that GM muscle fascicle length accounted for almost half of the difference

in plantarflexion *V0* between young and old men, while quadriceps thickness and VL pennation angle explained ~62% of the variation in countermovement jump *vF0* (22). Given that an increase in fiber pennation angle would result in an increase in the number of sarcomeres in parallel, and presumably a larger physiological cross-sectional area, it could also be expected that this would result in a larger force generating capacity (23).

Most hip- and knee-crossing muscles are significantly larger in sprinters and long jumpers compared to recreationally active individuals (11, 18, 24) and endurance runners (12) and total thigh muscle volume is associated with faster 5-m sprint times and greater squat jump power output (13). It could be postulated that the longer ground contact times during the early phase of sprint running, allows the time for higher levels of muscle force to be produced. Thus, muscle characteristics, such as volume, that directly influence maximal muscle force are likely to affect *F0*. Specifically, the adductors (ADD) provide a major contribution to hip extension torque during the late-swing to early-contact phase of sprint acceleration (25), while knee flexor and extensor torque is thought to contribute to the swing and stance phases during sprinting (26). Despite these observations, the associations between lower limb muscle characteristics and the maximal mechanical parameters that underpin sprint running and jumping performance have not been studied.

The primary aim of the present study was to determine the influence that lower limb muscle architecture, morphology, and fiber typology have on the maximal mechanical parameters of the FV and PV profiles derived during sprinting and jumping in sub-elite rugby league players. We hypothesized that; i) muscle fiber typology (greater estimated proportion of type II fibers) would be positively associated with *vV0*, *hV0*, *vPmax* and *hPmax*, ii) the fascicle length of lower limb muscles would be associated with *hV0* and *hPmax* while the fascicle length of the VL would be associated with *vV0* and *vPmax*, iii) the volume of most hip and knee-crossing muscles, but not ankle-crossing muscles, would be positively associated with hF0 and hPmax,

and; iv) the volume of knee extensor muscles, as well as the angle of pennation and muscle thickness of the VL would be positively associated with *vF0* and *vPmax*.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

Nineteen male rugby-league players (sex: age: 19.2 ± 0.7 years; height 180.7 ± 5.6 cm; body mass 89.9 ± 10.0 kg) participated in the current study. The players were from the same elite youth development system within an Australian NRL club. All players were involved in full training and competition and had no history of lower-limb injury within twelve months of testing and had at least four years of experience in resistance training. All players provided written informed consent prior to participating in this study, which was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### *Study design*

Data collection was conducted during a 4-day testing period following the 2019 NRL preseason. Participants had a week of reduced training load following the completion of the preseason preparation period as the team had a bye in the first round of competition and the testing was completed at the end of this week. Participants underwent magnetic resonance (MR) imaging of their entire lower limb to determine volumes of the major hip, knee and ankle-spanning muscles, and proton MR spectroscopy ($^{1}$H-MRS) of the GM to estimate muscle fiber typology (27). In addition, muscle architecture of the biceps femoris long head (BFLH), VL, and GM and GL were assessed via two-dimensional (2D) ultrasound. Figure 1 displays an overview of these measurements. Subsequently, each participant performed one session of maximal squat jumps with additional loads of 10-100% of their body mass to determine the mechanical parameters associated with the vertical FV profile. In a separate session 48 hrs

later, each participant performed maximal 30-m sprints to determine the mechanical parameters associated with the horizontal FV profile using a validated biomechanical model (3).

*FV relationship during the squat jump*

Each participant completed a 20 min general warm-up consisting of jogging and joint mobility exercises, which was followed by a specific warm-up comprising several trials of both unloaded and loaded squat jumps. Participants performed maximal unloaded (without external load) and loaded (external loads ranging from 10-100% body mass) squat jumps to determine the individual FV and PV relationships (4). For each squat jump, participants were instructed to stand up straight and still on the centre of a bilateral force plate (ForceDecks, Vald Performance, Australia) with a dowel rod (unloaded trials) or barbell (loaded trial) placed upon their upper trapezius. External loads were added in sequential order until jump height fell below 15 cm. All subjects performed squat jumps with at least a load of 60% body mass until jump height fell below 15 cm. For each squat jump, participants were asked to flex their hips and knees while keeping their spine neutral, reach the starting squat height (~90° knee angle) and pause for a count of 2 s, before applying as much voluntary force into the ground as possible and jumping for maximum height. Countermovement was forbidden, carefully checked and confirmed by the force plate technology. Two valid trials were performed with each load with a 4 min recovery between different loads and trials. The force plates had a sampling rate of 1000 Hz and commercially available ForceDecks software (Vald Performance, Australia) was used to analyse all squat jumps. The mean force, power and velocity was extracted from each loading condition during the concentric phase which was defined as the sample immediately prior to a 20 N change above the measured mass until the timepoint at which total vertical force fell under the threshold of 20 N below mass. The FV and PV relationships were constructed by plotting mean force and mean velocity using linear regression, while mean power and mean velocity were plotted using second-degree polynomial functions. *vF0* and *vV0* were then

identified from the FV relationship as the x- and y-intercepts, respectively, while *vPmax* was determined as the apex of the PV relationship (28). In our laboratory, *vF0*, *vV0* and *vPmax* have coefficient of variation (CV) values of 3.8%, 5.4% and 6.8%.

*FV relationship during sprinting*

All sprint testing was completed on the same well-maintained natural grass surface, and all participants wore studded training shoes and training attire. Each participant performed a 15-min on-field dynamic warm-up protocol which closely reflected the warm-up used before field-based training sessions. Participants performed two linear 30-m sprints and sprint times were recorded by infrared timing gates (Smartspeed, Fusion Sport, Australia) with split times every 5 m. All starts commenced from a static position and the upper body of each participant was positioned as close as possible to the inter-gate beam of the first timing gate which was placed on the starting line. The timing gates at the start line and 5 m line were mounted on separate tripods 1.00/1.20 m above the ground level, while the remaining gates were mounted 1.30/1.50 m above the ground level. Based on available correction factors (29), we added 0.5 s to all sprint times to ensure that the start time initiation was likely to coincide with the first rise of the force production onto the ground. We computed individual PV and FV profiles using the validated biomechanical model proposed by Samozino et al. (3) which have been shown to have high reliability (CV and standard errors of measurement <5%). In brief, we used the changes in running velocity over time to compute the acceleration of each participant's centre of mass in the antero-posterior direction and then used the aerodynamic friction of force and each athlete's body mass and height to estimate the net horizontal ground reaction force. *hF0* and *hV0* were then identified from the FV relationship as the x- and y-intercepts, respectively, and *hPmax* was determined as the apex of the PV relationship. We used the mean of the mechanical variables calculated from each of the two sprints in order to reduce the typical error associated with using a single sprint (29).

195 *Carnosine quantification via $^{1}$H-MRS*

196 Muscle carnosine content was measured by $^{1}$H-MRS in the GM of each participant's right limb
197 in order to estimate muscle fiber typology. We chose to estimate the muscle fiber typology of
198 the GM because; i) we can measure carnosine reliably in this muscle, ii) carnosine content in
199 the GM muscle has been positively correlated with the percentage area occupied by type II
200 muscle fibers (27), and; iii) the GM makes a substantial contribution to force and power
201 production during running and jumping (30, 31). This suggests that the fiber composition of
202 the GM may be meaningful in the context of sprinting and jumping. $^{1}$H-MRS measurements
203 were performed on a 3-T whole body magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner (Philips
204 Medical Systems Best, The Netherlands). Participants were lying in a supine position, while
205 their lower leg was fixed in a spherical knee-coil. All the spectra were acquired using single
206 voxel point-resolved spectroscopy with the following parameters; repetition time of 2000 ms,
207 echo time of ~40 ms, number of excitations was 128 (carnosine) and 16 (water), spectral
208 bandwidth was 2048 Hz, and an acquisition time of 4 min 16 s (carnosine) and 32 s
209 (water). The voxel size was 40 mm x 15 mm x 20 mm. Spectral data analysis was carried out
210 using jMRUI (version 6.0) with carnosine peaks fitted and expressed relative to the internal
211 water signal.

212 Carnosine content (mM) was calculated using following formula:

213
$$\mathrm{Cm} = \frac{(\mathrm{CS})}{(\mathrm{H_2O_S})} \cdot \frac{(\mathrm{H_2O_{T1r}})}{(\mathrm{CT_{1r}})} \cdot \frac{(\mathrm{H_2O_{T2r}})}{(\mathrm{CT_{2r}})} \cdot \mathrm{H_2O_{muscle}} \cdot \mathrm{H_2O_{protons}} \qquad [1]$$

214 where Cm is the carnosine concentration, $C_S$ is the carnosine signal, $H_2O_S$ is the water signal,
215 $C_{T1r}$, $C_{T2r}$, $H_2O_{T1r}$, $H_2O_{T2r}$ are the relaxation correction factors for carnosine (earlier described
216 by Baguet et al. (27)) and water (earlier described by MacMillan et al. (32)), $H_2O_{muscle}$ is the
217 concentration of water in muscle, which was deducted from the molar concentration of water

(55,000 mM) and the approximate water content of skeletal muscle tissue (0.7 L/kg wet weight of tissue) and $H_2O_{proton}$ is the number of protons in water. The CV for test-retest inter-day carnosine measurements in our laboratory was 4.3% (n = 15 participants). In the present study, the carnosine concentration was converted to a Z-score based on the normal distribution of our reference population. The absolute value of Z-score represents the distance between the individual value of a participant and the reference population mean value in units of the standard deviation. The reference sample population consisted of 40 recreationally active male subjects (age: 22.4 ± 2.1 years, height: 176.1 ± 17.2 cm, body mass: 81.2 ± 11.9 kg) who were scanned in our laboratory in the past 12 months.

*2D ultrasound imaging*

Muscle architecture was measured *in vivo* using 2D B-mode ultrasonography (frequency, 7MHz; depth, 50 mm; field of view, 10 x 39 mm) (Echo Blaster 128 CEXT, Telemed Medical Systems, Milan, Italy). Bilateral muscle assessments included the VL (50% distance between greater trochanter and lateral femoral condyle) (14), BFLH (50% distance between ischial tuberosity and popliteal fold in the line of action of the BF) (33), GL (30% proximal distance between the lateral tibial condyle and the lateral malleolus in the midline of the muscle) and GM (at the same distance as GL, transferred medially, from the midline of the muscle) (14). All images were taken in the longitudinal axis with the participant laying prone for GM, GL and BF measures, and supine for VL. Images were acquired after a period of at least 5 min of inactivity. In order to capture images, the ultrasound transducer was placed perpendicular to the surface of the skin, parallel with the presumed fascicle angle at the aforementioned sites. The transducer was then moved accordingly so that both superficial and deep aponeuroses were aligned in parallel on the viewing screen. Water soluble conductive gel was placed on the transducer surface to enhance image quality while minimal pressure was placed on the skin surface to ensure no muscle distortion and maintain image quality. Two images were captured

at each site bilaterally with the highest quality image of the two used for analyses. Image analysis was completed offline using publicly available software (ImageJ 1.52n, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA). Muscle thickness was determined as the average distance between superficial and intermediate aponeuroses at the left and right extremity of each image. Subsequently, two fascicles of interest were outlined in each image and the mean angle between each fascicle and the deep aponeurosis was determined as the pennation angle. Given that the entire fascicle was not always visible in the field of view, fascicle length was estimated using a previously validated equation (34) (fascicle length = muscle thickness x [sin (pennation angle)]$^{-1}$). Intraclass correlation (ICC) and CV were 0.99-1.00 and 2.5-3.0% for muscle thickness, 0.96-0.97 and 4.4-5.5% for pennation angle, and 0.96-0.98 and 4.4-5.4% for fascicle length. For each muscle architecture measure, we used the mean of the right and left leg for all analyses given that there were no significant differences in individual muscles from either limb.

*Muscle volume*

Axial T1-weighted 3-dimensional (3D) fast field echo (FFE) sequences were acquired using a 3-T MRI scanner (Philips Medical Systems) from the level of the iliac crest to the ankle spanning both legs while the participant lay supine in the scanner. The images were acquired in 5 stations with ~210 slices per station and 10 mm overlap between stations. Slice thickness was 2.0 mm, inter-slice gap was 0.0 mm, repetition time was 4.1 ms, echo time 1 was 1.44 milliseconds, and echo time 2 was 2.6 ms. The cross-sectional area (CSA) of lower limb muscles or muscle groups of both legs were determined at predefined lengths of 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 and 80% of the total muscle length by manually tracing the margin of the respective muscle in the relevant axial slices using image analysis software (Mimics, version 17; Materialise). The analysed muscles were the gluteus maximus (GMAX), medius (GMED) and minimus (GMIN), tensor fascia latae (TFL), sartorius, iliacus, gracilis, adductor magnus,

longus and brevis, rectus femoris (RF), VL, vastus intermedius (VI), vastus medialis (VM), semimembranosus, semitendinosus, BFLH, BF short head (BFSH), soleus, GM and GL. The identification of the borders between adductor magnus, longus and brevis was difficult; therefore, these muscles were analysed as a muscle group and referred to as ADD. All segmentations were performed by two members of the research team. Muscle volume was calculated under the assumption that the muscle is an ideal cylinder whereby the known distance between slices was multiplied by the sum of the CSA of the total number of traced slices. This methodology (i.e., using 8 slices) has been shown to have high levels of agreement (i.e., differences of <0.005%) with muscle volume calculations using 50 slices (35). In order to reduce the effects of body size on muscle size differences, we normalized muscle volume by height and the product of height and body mass (11). For each muscle volume, we used the mean of the right and left leg for all analyses given that there were no significant differences in the muscle volume of individual muscles from either limb. The inter-rater reliability of the normalized muscle volume of the semitendinosus, semimembranosus, BFLH, BFSH, gracilis, ADD, GMAX, GMED and GMIN was extremely good (mean ICC = 0.973, CV = 2.0%). We expressed the sum of all individual muscle volumes as total muscle volume.

*Statistical analysis*

Values are expressed as mean ± SD. We first performed univariable linear regression analyses to identify the muscle characteristics that were significantly associated with the mechanical variables of the vertical and horizontal FV and PV relationships which allowed us to test our different hypotheses. Following this, we performed stepwise linear regression to identify the best combination of muscle characteristics that explained the most variation in the mechanical variables. In order to reduce the number of comparisons in the stepwise regression models, we only included muscle characteristics in the analysis if a significant r value ($p < 0.05$) was

identified with the given mechanical variable from the univariable analyses. Statistical software was used for analysis (SPSS 26.0 for Windows; SPSS; Chicago, IL).

## RESULTS

### *Horizontal FV and PV profile*

Table 1 shows the mean mechanical variables from the horizontal FV and PV profile, as well as the 5 and 30-m sprint times, while table 2 shows the lower limb muscle architecture, morphology, and fiber typology values. Univariable analyses indicated that muscle volumes of the GMAX, ADD, RF, VM, VI, sartorius, and iliacus, thickness of GL and GM, and GM pennation angle were all positively associated with *hF0* ($N \cdot kg^{-1}$; $r = 0.431 – 0.579$; $p < 0.05$; table 3). Muscle volumes of the BFSH, ADD and VM, in addition to BFLH fascicle length, and GM carnosine Z-score were all significantly positively associated with *hV0* ($m \cdot s^{-1}$; $r = 0.513 – 0.678$; $p < 0.05$). *hPmax* ($W \cdot kg^{-1}$) was significantly positively associated with the muscle volumes of BFLH, ADD, RF, VM, VI, TFL, sartorius and iliacus, as well as GM carnosine Z-score and BFLH fascicle length ($r = 0.485 – 0.669$; $p < 0.05$).

Figure 2 and table 4 shows the results of the multiple linear regression models demonstrating the combination of muscle characteristics that explained the greatest variation in horizontal FV and PV mechanical variables. Variation in *hF0* ($N \cdot kg^{-1}$) was best explained by the combination of ADD and VM muscle volume (adjusted $r^2 = 0.432$, $p = 0.007$), while variation in *hV0* ($m \cdot s^{-1}$) was best explained by the combination of GM carnosine Z-score and BFSH muscle volume (adjusted $r^2 = 0.590$, $p < 0.001$). Variation in *hPmax* ($W \cdot kg^{-1}$) was best explained by a three-parameter model including the combination of GM carnosine Z-score and ADD and VI muscle volume (adjusted $r^2 = 0.634$, $p = 0.032$). The standardized beta coefficients for each regression model suggested that each muscle characteristic included in each model exerted a similar influence on the given mechanical parameter. Figure 3 shows typical traces of horizontal FV

and PV relationships for subjects with similar lower limb muscle volume but divergent in muscle fiber typology (panel A; subject A and B) and for subjects with similar muscle fiber typology but divergent in lower limb muscle volume (panel B; subject C and D).

*Vertical FV and PV profile*

Table 1 shows the mean mechanical variables from the vertical FV and PV profile, as well as jump height. Univariable analyses indicated that the muscle volume of the ADD, RF, VL, VI and GM thickness were all significantly positively associated with *vF0* ($r = 0.479 – 0.548$; $p < 0.05$; table 3). GL pennation angle and GM carnosine Z-score were significantly positively associated with *vV0* ($r = 0.493 – 0.762$; $p < 0.05$). *vPmax* was significantly positively associated with the muscle volume of the VL as well as the GM carnosine Z-score ($r = 0.581 – 0.647$; $p < 0.01$; table 3).

Figure 2 and table 4 shows the results of the multiple linear regression models demonstrating the combination of muscle characteristics that explained the greatest variation in vertical FV and PV mechanical variables. Variation in *vF0* was best explained by RF and VL muscle volume ($r^2 = 0.430$; $P = 0.008$), while variation in *vV0* was best explained by variation in GM carnosine Z-score ($r^2 = 0.580$, $p < 0.001$). Variation in *vPmax* was most associated with the variation in GM Z-score and VL muscle volume ($r^2 = 0.440$; $P = 0.006$). The standardized beta coefficients for each regression model suggested that each muscle characteristic included in each model exerted a similar influence on the mechanical parameter.

## DISCUSSION

As far as the authors' are aware, this is the first study to employ non-invasive techniques to explore the underpining muscle characteristics of the horizontal and vertical FV and PV relationships during sprinting and jumping. The key findings are: i) a higher GM carnosine Z-score (i.e., greater estimated proportion of type II fibers) was associated with greater *vV0*, *hV0*,

*vPmax* and *hPmax* values, and; ii) greater knee extensor muscle volume was associated with a higher *vF0* and *vPmax*, and ADD and knee extensor volume contributed to the explained variation in *hF0 and hPmax*. These findings suggest that muscle fiber typology is a key determinant of *vPmax* and *hPmax* by influencing *V0*, while the volume of specific lower limb muscles are key determinants of *Pmax* by influencing *F0*.

**Muscle fiber typology**

In support of our hypotheses, univariable and multiple linear regression models showed that muscle fiber typology of the GM explained a substantial magnitude of the variation of *V0* and *Pmax* during both sprinting and jumping. There are several lines of evidence that support these findings derived directly from experiments on single muscle fibers and from studies employing multi-joint dynamic exercise. At a single fiber level, Bottinelli et al. (36) found that the maximum shortening velocity (i.e., *V0*) and *Pmax* of type II fibers was consistently higher than type I fibers from rat soleus, extensor digitorum longus and plantaris muscles, as well as fibers from the human VL (37). Tihanyi et al. (38) demonstrated that well-trained jump athletes who possessed more than 50% type II fibers in the VL were able to generate a higher velocity, and more power, during knee extension exercise compared to athletes who possessed less than 50% type II fibers. Furthermore, there were significant correlations between the percentage of type II fibers and power, as well as velocity, at the four highest loads. In the present study, muscle fiber typology did not contribute to the multiple linear regression models explaining the variation in *vF0* and *hF0* values. This finding is also supported by single fiber studies that indicate *F0* is not consistently different between fiber types (39, 40). Based on previous research (15), and the findings from the present study, it is reasonable to suggest that possessing a higher proportion of type II fibers would be beneficial for sprints of longer duration. This hypothesis could be supported by the relationship between muscle fiber typology and the mechanical variables underpinning sprint performance (i.e., *hPmax* and *hV0*), given that these

variables are strongly associated with sprints of longer duration (i.e., mean 100-m speed and 4-s sprinting distance), whereas *hF0* is not (41, 42). During the latter stages of a sprint when maximal velocity is being approached, the short ground contact time and resultant contraction time does not allow for maximal muscle force to be reached (43), and the rate of force development is more important. During this stage of sprinting, possessing a higher estimated proportion of type II fibers would promote the ability to continue to produce force at high velocities and achieve a greater *hV0*. Akin to single muscle fiber experiments, both type IIa and IIx fibers can produce more force at higher shortening velocities than type I fibers (37, 39), which may underpin the association found in the present study between muscle fiber typology and *hV0*. It should be noted that our estimation of muscle fiber typology in the GM, likely reflects the typology of other prominent lower limb muscles. There appears to be an across-muscle phenotype, whereby individuals who express a high proportion of a given fiber type proportion in one muscle also express a comparably high proportion of the same fibre type in other muscles (44). Nonetheless, the measurement of muscle fiber typology in other lower limb muscles may have added value in the present study. Our findings demonstrate a clear advantage for athletes competing in explosive sports who possess fast muscle fiber typology.

**Muscle volume**

Given that muscle volume is a well-recognised determinant of its force generating capacity (20), it was not surprising that we observed a number of lower limb muscles displaying a positive association with both *hF0* and *vF0*. In further support of our hypotheses, the multiple linear regression models revealed that the volume of the ADD and knee extensor muscles were key determinants of *F0* during both sprinting and jumping, thus influencing *vPmax* and *hPmax*. While few studies have associated lower limb muscle volumes with mechanical variables from the horizontal FV and PV profiles directly, our findings agree with cross-sectional studies that have reported most hip and knee-crossing muscles to be significantly larger in sprinters

compared to recreationally active individuals (11) and endurance runners (12). In particular, sprinters possess significantly larger vastus medialis (30%) and adductor magnus, longus and brevis (22 – 26%) muscles than non-sprinters when normalised to height and mass. More recent work (18) reported that hip extensor muscles were substantially larger (+32%) in elite (10.10 ± 0.07 s 100 m sprinters) compared to sub-elite sprinters (10.80 ± 0.30 s). Interestingly, this study (18) reported that GMAX alone explained 34-44% of the variation in season best 100 m sprint performance. In agreement with this study and our hypothesis, we found that GMAX volume was significantly associated with *hF0*, but it did not contribute to the multivariable regression model, whereby ADD and VM volume explained the most variation in *hF0*. In support, Sugisaki et al. (25) reported that variation in 30-m sprint running time was best explained by the anatomical CSA of the ADD. Given that we found the ADD to be a significant determinant of *hF0*, it is probable that the ADD are important muscles for sprint acceleration. This importance may arise from the contribution of the ADD to hip extension torque during the late-swing to early-contact phase of sprint acceleration (25). Adductor magnus acts as a hip extensor through the entire hip joint range of motion, while the adductor brevis and longus also act as hip extensors when the hip is flexed more than 25° and 50°, respectively (25, 45). Furthermore, the high degrees of hip flexion experienced during acceleration may increase the mechanical effectiveness of adductor magnus and reduce the effectiveness of GMAX via alterations to moment arms (45). In addition to the ADD, the volume of the VM contributed to the regression model explaining variation in *hF0*. Previous research has reported that maximal isokinetic knee extensor torque is negatively correlated with 15 m sprint time (46), whereby knee extensor torque is thought to contribute to the swing and stance phases during sprinting (26). These findings, along with those of the present study, highlight the important role of the knee extensors during the acceleration phase of sprinting. We found that the volume of the BFSH significantly contributed to the regression model explaining the variation in *hV0* in

sprinting. Previous research (47) has shown that a greater amount of horizontal force (averaged over an entire sprint acceleration) was found in subjects who had greater BF activation just before ground contact and superior eccentric hamstring torque. These findings show the important role that the BF has during sprint running. Future work should seek to determine whether interventions targeted at promoting hypertrophy in the muscles associated with the mechanical parameters underpinning the horizontal FV and PV profiles leads to an improvement in sprint acceleration. Lastly, in agreement with our hypotheses, we found that the volume of plantar flexor muscles were not associated with variation in the mechanical parameters of the FV and PV profiles.

**Muscle architecture**

In the present study, muscle architecture only explained a small amount of variation in the maximal mechanical parameters of the horizontal or vertical FV or PV profiles. Specifically, univariable analyses revealed that BFLH fascicle length was associated with a greater *hV0* and *hPmax*, while the thickness of the GL and GM were associated with *hF0* (GM and GL) and *vF0* (GM). These findings only partly agreed with out hypotheses, as we surmised that the fascicle length of all lower limb muscles that we measured would be associated with *hV0* and *hPmax*. Theoretically, muscles with longer fascicles, and presumably more sarcomeres in series, exhibit higher shortening velocities (when completely unloaded) and greater contractility than muscles with shorter fascicles (20). Consequently, longer fascicles within the BFLH may improve the rate at which the forward swinging lower limb is decelerated during the late swing phase of sprinting, which may contribute to greater velocities via increasing stride frequency. Greater rates of BFLH shortening may also contribute to an enhanced hip extensor moment during sprinting and jumping. While these hypotheses require further investigation, it is important to consider that fascicle lengths of the VL, GM and GL were not associated with the mechanical variables of the vertical or horizontal FV and PV profile in the

current study. Recent work (21) reported that GM muscle fascicle length accounted for almost half of the difference in *V0* between young and old men derived from the plantarflexion torque-velocity relationship. However, in the current study, FV and PV profiles were determined during the multi-joint, dynamic movements of sprinting and jumping, compared to the torque-velocity relationships derived from single joint movements of the ankle dorsiflexors. Interestingly, studies from the same research group (10, 14) reported longer GM, GL and VL muscle fascicles in male sprinters (10) compared to distance runners and non-athletes, and in fast (10.0 – 10.9 s 100-m sprinters) compared to slow sprinters (11.0 – 11.7 s) (14). Furthermore, pennation angle ($r = 0.34$ to $0.46$, $p < 0.05$) and muscle fascicle length ($r = -0.40$ to $-0.54$, $p < 0.05$) were associated with personal best 100-m times (14). These findings would suggest that these muscle architectural characteristics may underpin the mechanical variables from the horizontal FV and PV prolife given their relationship to sprint performance (41, 42). Despite this premise, we had a smaller sample size compared to these studies (10, 14), other studies did not employ measures of actual performance or mechanical variables (10) and it may not be appropriate to compare elite 100 m sprinters (10, 14) with sub-elite rugby league athletes. Interestingly, we observed that greater thickness but not volume of the GM and GL muscles was associated with *hF0*. While this observation may be difficult to reconcile, it is consistent with previous work. For example, Abe et al. (10) and Kumagai et al. (14) both reported that sprint trained athletes had thicker GL muscles than sedentary controls. However, Handsfield et al. (11) found no significant difference in GL (7%) or GM (4%) muscle volumes (normalised to body size) when comparing sprinters to non-sprinters. These data suggest the possibility that the muscle bellies of these muscles may be relatively short despite still having a large physiological cross-sectional area, but this notion requires further investigation. One previous study (22) has shown that quadriceps thickness and VL pennation angle explained ~62% of the variation in *vF0* estimated from loaded and unloaded countermovement jumps.

Fiber pennation increases a muscle's physiological cross-sectional area (via increasing the number of sarcomeres in parallel), which is proportional to its force generating capacity (23). As such, a greater pennation angle is likely to be associated with a greater volume of muscle. While we did not observe any association between VL pennation angle or thickness and *vF0* which disagreed with our hypotheses, we did find that VL volume (along with RF) contributed to the regression model explaining ~43% of the variation in *vF0*. Differences in the type of jump that was employed (squat or countermovement jump), or the way in which muscle architecture was quantified may have contributed to the lack of association that we found with the architecture of the VL in the present study compared to that of Morales-Artacho et al. (22). The latter study measured muscle thickness at the middle and proximal regions of the VM, VL, RF and VI to provide a measure of mean quadriceps muscle thickness and pennation angle of the VL was taken as the average value from 3 sites (e.g. at 20, 50 and 60% of thigh length), while we relied on a single measurement site of the VL. Given that muscle thickness and pennation angle measurements vary along the length of the muscle, muscle architecture measurements at multiple sites within a muscle may be necessary to reduce some of the within-muscle variability. Nonetheless, given that the overall volume of a muscle is directly related to its force generating capacity (20), our hypothesis was confirmed whereby the volume of the knee extensor muscles to explain a substantial amount of the variability in *vF0* and *vPmax*.

**Limitations**

There are some limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. First, the ultrasound field of view could not capture the entire length of fascicles, and as a consequence, fascicle length was estimated using extrapolation methods (34). While this estimation technique has been validated against cadaveric measurements (48), it was recently shown that this approach overestimated BFLH fascicle length when compared with extended field of view scans (49). At present, extended field of view imaging has not been validated against cadaveric data, so

the current methodology should not be considered inferior. The extrapolation methods employed in the present study have high levels of inter-day reliability in our lab (ICC >0.95 and CV <6%) for muscle fascicle length measurements of the GM, GL, VL and BFLH. Nonetheless, muscle architecture measures were only performed at a single location in four lower limb muscles, which may have limited the strength of the associations with horizontal and vertical FV and PV mechanical parameters compared to a previous study (22). Our estimation of muscle fiber typology is based on the $^{1}$H-MRS measurement of muscle carnosine which is a stable dipeptide that is present in two-fold higher concentrations in type II fibers and is positively correlated ($P = 0.009$ and $r = 0.714$) with the muscle biopsy determined proportion of type II fibers (27). When this association is translated to explained variance (i.e., $r^2$), ~50% of the variability in muscle fiber typology (i.e., myosin heavy chain composition) is not explained by variation in muscle carnosine content. It should be noted that a large portion of this unexplained variation may be due to the lower levels of reliability of the methods used to determine myosin heavy chain composition given that we showed extremely high levels of reliability between inter-day $^{1}$H-MRS measurements of muscle carnosine (CV = 4.3%). Indeed, a recent study (50) demonstrated that the inter-biopsy variation (CV) in MHC type I, IIa and IIx fibers was 21.5%, 15.4% and 42.0%, respectively. In addition, $^{1}$H-MRS samples both superficial and deep parts of the muscle as well as a substantially larger volume of muscle compared to a muscle biopsy which may also contribute to the unexplained variation between measurements. Lastly, we report a large number of correlation analyses, some of which fall outside of the scope of our hypotheses which may result in a type I error inflation, and so their interpretation should be done with caution.

## Conclusions

This study demonstrates that lower limb muscle characteristics are associated with the mechanical parameters of the FV and PV profiles in sub elite rugby league players. Muscle

fiber typology and specific lower limb muscle volumes are major determinants of *vPmax* and *hPmax*, by influencing *V0* and *F0*, respectively. While muscle architectural characteristics did not seem to be as deterministic as other muscle characteristics, BFLH fascicle length was associated with a greater *hV0* and *hPmax* and the thickness of the GL and GM were associated with *hF0* and *vF0*. These findings may inform the design of targeted training programs to maximise sprint and jump performance in athletes.

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**FIGURES:**

**Figure 1 -** Participants underwent magnetic resonance (MR) imaging of their entire lower limb to determine muscle volumes of the major hip, knee and ankle-spanning muscles. Muscles were segmented in axial MR images from the hip (panel A and B), the thigh (panel C) and the shank (panel D). Muscle volume was calculated by multiplying the inter-slice distance by the sum of the cross-sectional area of the total number of traced slices (panel E; semitendinosus). Muscle thickness, fascicle pennation angle and fascicle length were measured by B-mode ultrasonography of the vastus lateralis, biceps femoris long head and gastrocnemius lateralis and medialis (panel F). We also used proton MR spectroscopy ($^{1}$H-MRS) to quantify the carnosine content in the gastrocnemius medialis in order to estimate muscle fiber typology. We also used proton MR spectroscopy ($^{1}$H-MRS) to quantify the carnosine content in the gastrocnemius medialis in order to estimate muscle fiber typology. Panel G and H show a coronal and transverse MR image to demonstrate the localization of the voxel, while panel I shows a detailed spectra of the downfield carnosine region.

**Figure 2 -** Determinants of the mechanical variables derived from the horizontal (panel A) and vertical force-velocity and power-velocity profiles (panel B). Bars indicate the magnitude of explained variance (% $r^2$) obtained from multivariable linear regression analyses with the combination of predictors presented at the top of each bar.

**Figure 3 -** Typical traces of linear force–velocity and 2nd degree polynomial power–velocity relationships obtained from overground sprinting for subjects with similar lower limb muscle volume but divergent in muscle fiber typology (panel A; subject A and B) and for subjects with similar muscle fiber typology but divergent in lower limb muscle volume (panel B; subject C and D). Typically, subjects with a higher estimated proportion of type II fibers (i.e., higher carnosine Z-score) possessed a greater horizontal *V0* and *Pmax* (i.e., subject A) compared to those with a lower estimated proportion of type II fibers. Subjects with greater lower limb muscle volume possessed a greater horizontal *F0* and *Pmax* compared to those with a smaller lower limb muscle volume. In particular, the volume of the adductors and vastus intermedius (*Pmax*) and vastus medialis (*F0*) seemed to be most influential on the maximal mechanical parameters.

**TABLES:**

**Table 1 -** Mechanical variables derived from the vertical (i.e., v) and horizontal (i.e., h) force-velocity and power-velocity relationship as well as 5 m and 30 m sprint times and jump height.

**Table 2** – Lower limb muscle architecture, morphology, and fiber typology values.

**Table 3 –** Pearson correlation values between the lower limb muscle characteristics and the mechanical variables derived from the horizontal and vertical force-velocity and power-velocity relationships.

[a]Indicates $P < 0.05$, [b]Indicates $P < 0.01$, [c]Indicates $P < 0.001$

**Table 4 -** Stepwise linear regression model parameter estimates for the relationship between the vertical and horizontal FV and PV mechanical variables (dependent variables) and muscle architecture (i.e., fascicle length, pennation angle and thickness), morphology (i.e., muscle volume) and fiber typology (gastrocnemius carnosine Z-score).