

It's survival of fittest in sport jungle

Predictions are more accurate when injury stats are factored in

DOCTOR KNOW

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SUPER rugby campaigns are as much a test of survival and durability as of tactics and execution. One of the toughest sporting competitions in the world, Super rugby combines high-intensity contact sport with a 16-match, six-month endurance test, which also includes a travel burden that is unique in sport.

That's just the round-robin stage, followed by a knock-out phase that often rewards the best teams with two trans-Indian Ocean flights in a week. Add to this a domestic rugby season and an international campaign, and you have 10 consecutive months of high-level rugby.

This leaves little time to recover and rebuild for the following year, and is the reason so many teams, only two weeks into the new season, are already nursing injured players. The only thing that can be guaranteed this early is that coaches will have plenty of opportunities to bemoan the loss of key players to injury as the season progresses.

Fickle and unforgiving fans dismiss injury as an excuse, but there is statistical evidence suggesting that injuries trump most other factors for impact on match results.

We know this because of the work of a UK-based econometric/statistical group called the Fink Tank, which has discovered that football result predictions are much more accurate when injury statistics are factored into the equation.

It should not be too surprising, for instance, to learn that the finishing position in the league is highly associated with the number and severity of injuries, such that teams experiencing fewer injuries forcing players to miss matches are likely to finish near the top of the log.

The same will be true of rugby, and so medical staff, who are responsible for patching up and rehabilitating players from week to week, are often the unheralded, but potentially decisive role-players in a team's fortunes.

Injuries are, however, unavoidable. There are no long-term statistics from Super rugby, but my colleagues at the

University of Cape Town are currently conducting a huge study on injury and illness (because being sick is as bad as being injured, if it forces under-performances or changes in team selection) so it is a matter of time before we know exactly how bad the situation is.

We do have some statistics from northern hemisphere rugby, and the picture they paint for coaches and thus fans is worrying.

An injury, severe enough to force a player to miss a match, happens at least once every 11 hours. For a team of 15 playing 80 minutes each (giving a match total of 20 hours), that means there will be, on average, two injuries per team per match, or four in total.

Injuries are 30% more likely to happen in the second half, and when they do, they're more serious, forcing players to miss an average of 20 days, compared to 16 days for first-half injuries. That's the effect of fatigue on injuries, and this is why player

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management is key — good coaching recognises that if the match is won (or lost), pulling key players off may be best in the long run. It also emphasises how important conditioning is — poorly conditioned players are more susceptible to more serious injuries.

Finally, not all injuries happen in matches. Training is risky, though much less so, with the statistics telling us that one injury will happen every two weeks. Coaches who are unaware, and force harder in-season training, push this number up, emphasising again the importance of sensible player management.

The point is that injuries are not the result of a sporting lottery. Certainly, freak injuries happen, but many are avoidable with sensible management during matches and in training, and their impact can be minimised when medical support receives the same focus given to players and coaching.

An excuse? Partly, but good management and some luck go a long way in a competitive tournament.

May the best, or perhaps the most durable, team win.

TV HIGHLIGHTS

TODAY

Basketball: College games, Maryland vs Syracuse at 2am (tomorrow), Kansas vs Oklahoma at 4am, both on SS9

Crickets: Second Test, final day, South Africa vs Australia at 10.30am on SS2/SABC3; U19 World Cup, first semi-final at 10am on SS7

Rugby: Varsity Cup, UCT vs Tuks at 4.30pm, NMMU v Pukke at 6.45pm, both

on SS1

Soccer: English FA Cup, fifth-round replay, Hull vs Brighton at 9.45pm on SS7; Serie A, Napoli vs Genoa at 10pm on SS3; La Liga, Espanyol vs Villarreal at 11pm on SS5

Tennis: ATP Dubai Duty Free Championships at noon on SS6; Mexican Open, from Acapulco, at 2am (tomorrow) on SS6