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CLINICAL RESEARCH

Electrocardiographic patterns and long-term training-induced time changes in 2484 elite football players

Variations physiologiques et évolution de l'électrocardiogramme chez 2484 footballeurs de haut niveau

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KEYWORDS

Electrocardiogram;
Football players;
Athlete's heart

Summary

Background. — High-level physical training induces cardiac structural and functional changes, including 12-lead electrocardiogram modifications.

Objectives. — The purpose of this cross-sectional longitudinal study was to establish a quantitative electrocardiographic profile in highly trained football players. Initial and serial annual electrocardiogram monitoring over subsequent years allowed us to investigate the long-term effects of exercise on cardiac conduction and electrophysiological remodelling.

Methods. — Between 2005 and 2015, serial evaluations, including 12-lead electrocardiograms, were performed in 2484 elite male football players from the French Professional Football League. A total of 6247 electrocardiograms were performed (mean 2.5 ± 1.8 electrocardiograms/player). Heart rate (beats/min), atrioventricular delay (PR, ms), intraventricular

Abbreviations: AV, atrioventricular; CI, confidence interval; ESC, European Society of Cardiology; IVCD, intraventricular conduction delay; LBBB, left bundle branch block; LV, left ventricular; LVH, left ventricular hypertrophy; QTc, corrected QT interval; QTcB, corrected QT interval obtained by Bazett's formula; QTm, measured QT interval; RBBB, right bundle branch block.

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conduction delay (QRS, ms), corrected QT delay (QTc) and electrical left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) (Sokolow-Lyon index, mm) were measured, and the fixed effect of time was evaluated using panel data analysis (β [95% confidence interval] change between two visits).

Results. — According to European Society of Cardiology and Seattle criteria, 15% of the electrocardiogram intervals were considered abnormal. We observed 17% sinus bradycardia < 50 beats/min (mean heart rate 60 ± 11 beats/min), 8% first-degree atrioventricular block > 200 ms (mean PR 170 ± 27 ms), 1.5% QRS > 120 ms (mean QRS 87 ± 19 ms) and 3% prolonged QT interval (mean QTc using Bazett's formula [QTcB] 395 ± 42 ms). Electrical LVH (mean Sokolow-Lyon index 34 ± 10 mm) was noted in 37% of players. Over time, electrocardiogram changes were noted, with a significant remodelling trend in terms of decreased heart rate (-0.41 [-0.55 to -0.26] beats/min), QRS duration (-2.4 [-2.7 to -2.1] ms) and QTcB delay (-1.2 [-1.9 to -0.5] ms) (all $P < 0.001$).

Conclusions. — This study describes usual electrocardiographic training-induced changes in a large series of football players over the follow-up timeframe. The most frequent outliers were electrical LVH and sinus bradycardia. These results have important implications for optimizing electrocardiogram interval measurements in initial screening and during follow-up of football players, with potential cost-effective implications.

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MOTS CLÉS

ECG ;
Joueurs de foot ;
Cœur d'athlète

Résumé

Contexte. — L'activité physique de haut niveau entraîne des modifications structurelles et fonctionnelles qui vont se traduire par des modifications de l'électrocardiogramme de surface. L'objectif de notre travail est d'évaluer l'évolution au cours du temps du profil électrocardiographique de footballeurs professionnels.

Méthodes. — Nous avons analysé les aspects électrocardiographiques et leurs modifications au cours du temps sur un total de 6247 ECG collectés chez 2484 footballeurs de haut niveau ($2,5 \pm 1,8$ ECG par joueur). La fréquence cardiaque (FC, Bpm), le délai auriculo-ventriculaire (PR, ms), intra-ventriculaire (QRS, ms) et le QT corrigé (QTc) avec mesure de l'hypertrophie ventriculaire gauche électrique (HVG, Sokolow-Lyon, mm) ont été mesurées avec analyse de leurs variations au cours du temps.

Résultats. — Selon les critères de l'ESC et de Seattle, 15 % des intervalles ECGS sont considérés comme anormaux. La FC moyenne était de 60 ± 11 bpm avec 17 % de bradycardie sinusale (FC < 50 bpm). Le PR moyen était de 170 ± 27 ms avec 8 % de BAV du premier degré, le QRS moyen était de 87 ± 19 ms avec 1,5 % de QRS > 120 ms, et le QTc moyen était de 395 ± 42 ms avec 3 % de QTc > 450 ms. Le Sokolow moyen était de 33 ± 9 mm, > 45 mm chez 37 % des joueurs. Au cours du temps, des variations significatives de l'ECG sont notées en termes de diminution de la fréquence cardiaque ($-0,41$ bpm [$-0,55$; $-0,26$]), largeur de QRS ($-2,4$ ms [$-2,7$; $-2,1$]) et de QTc ($-1,2$ ms [$-1,9$; $-0,5$]) (tous les $p < 0,001$).

Conclusion. — Cette étude décrit l'aspect électrocardiographique normal et les modifications à long terme induites par l'entraînement physique chez une large population de footballeurs professionnels. Ces résultats ont des implications importantes à la fois dans la détection d'anomalies électriques de conduction et de repolarisation lors du screening initial de ces professionnels mais aussi dans la prise en charge du suivi de ces sportifs.

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Background

A 12-lead electrocardiogram is an easy and reproducible screening method that significantly improves the sensitivity of the detection of serious cardiac diseases in athletes, including athletic heart syndrome. Accurate interpretation of an athlete's electrocardiogram time intervals is crucial to minimize the risk of unnecessary investigations based

on electrical phenotype, which are mandatory to rule out primary cardiomyopathy. The prevalence of abnormal electrocardiogram findings is known to be related to age, sex, ethnicity, level of activity and sporting discipline [1]. International teams of experts have established the Seattle and European Society of Cardiology (ESC) criteria for the interpretation of electrocardiograms and the definition of outliers [2,3]. However, these recommendations arose

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