

Performance profiles of university rugby 7s players in Fiji: Findings from an exploratory study

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Abstract:

Problem Statement: This exploratory mixed-methods study explores self-assessed performance profiles of ten Fijian university Rugby 7s players, focusing on discrepancies between current performance (CP) and ideal performance (IP) across tactical, technical, physical, and psychological domains. **Materials and Methods:** Participants completed Butler and Hardy's performance profiling grids, rating their competencies on a 10-point Likert scale. This quantitative data was supplemented with qualitative reflections to comprehensively understand performance perceptions. Statistical analysis was performed using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to assess the significance of the observed discrepancies. **Results:** Significant disparities were found between CP and IP across technical (Δ up to +2.3 for offloading) and tactical skills (largest gap: +2.7 in game flow management; $p < 0.01$), while physical fitness showed negligible or negative discrepancies, reflecting perceived overperformance. Positional analysis revealed that forwards prioritized physical dominance ($CP = 8.7 \pm 1.2$) and psychological resilience ($CP = 9.3 \pm 1.1$), while backline players emphasized tactical adaptability ($CP = 6.8 \pm 1.3$). Psychological gaps were particularly evident in decision-making, resilience, and trust. These results underscore a misalignment between perceived athletic strengths and actual technical/tactical preparedness, influenced by Fiji's cultural valorization of natural athleticism. **Discussion:** Findings challenge the adequacy of current self-assessment practices and expose the risks of over-relying on innate talent. The depth and nature of gaps suggest a need for position-specific and culturally responsive interventions. While improvisational flair is a historic strength of Fijian rugby, it may hinder systematic skill acquisition and psychological development. **Conclusion:** University Rugby 7s programs should integrate structured, position-specific training and objective assessment feedback while respecting cultural identity to optimize performance and bridge the gap between current proficiency and elite standards. Investing in coach education, evidence-based practice, and targeted resource allocation will be critical for sustainable athlete development and international competitiveness. Future research should examine broader cohorts and the longitudinal impact of culturally informed interventions. **Keywords:** Tactical knowledge, Technical skills, Physical fitness, Psychological resilience, Position-specific training, Player development.

Introduction

Rugby 7s, a dynamic and high-intensity variant of rugby union, demands a unique combination of tactical knowledge, technical skills, physical fitness, and psychological resilience (Fuller et al., 2016). Its growing popularity, particularly following its inclusion in the 2016 Olympic Games, has spurred research into athlete performance profiling to optimize training programs and talent development (Ross et al., 2014). In Fiji, rugby transcends sport, embodying cultural identity and national pride, serving as a vital social unifier (Connell, 2018; Dorovolomo, 2020; Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). Fiji's Rugby 7s team has achieved remarkable success, including three Olympic medals in men's rugby 7s, one in women's rugby 7s, and multiple World Series titles. However, there is a notable lack of academic research on the developmental pathways for university-level Rugby 7s athletes in Fiji (Burger et al., 2020). This gap is concerning, as many players at this level lack the specialized training and support needed to transition effectively into elite competition. The literature on Rugby 7s performance profiling is still emerging, with most studies focusing on elite athletes or traditional 15-a-side formats. Gordon et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of positional demands on physical performance, particularly for backline players, who require specific sprint training to optimize their capabilities. Injury prevention and rehabilitation are also critical, especially for young players, as inadequate preparation can lead to lower performance levels post-injury (Robyn et al., 2022). Watkins et al. (2021) further highlight the need for tailored approaches to address performance challenges faced by returning athletes.

Performance profiling (PP) framework created by Butler (1989 as cited in Weston, 2005; Butler & Hardy, 1992) has proven to be a valuable tool for coaches, offering insights into player self-awareness (Butler et al., 1993, 1993; Doyle & Parfitt, 1997; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Weston et al., 2013; Weston et al., 2010).

This approach informs individualized training programs tailored to physical attributes, positional requirements, and tactical roles. As a player-centered tool, PP facilitates self-assessment against established performance benchmarks. It has been successfully applied in elite academies and youth development programs, demonstrating its effectiveness in enhancing athlete performance (Weston, 2005; Weston et al., 2011). However, existing research predominantly focuses on elite athletes or traditional rugby formats (Higham et al., 2013), with limited attention to university players, an essential component of Fiji's talent development system. Rugby 7s, with its seven-minute halves, demands rapid decision-making and anaerobic endurance, distinguishing it from conventional rugby union (Phibbs et al., 2018). The tactical complexity of Rugby 7s requires players to possess sharp spatial awareness, adaptable strategy execution, and effective real-time communication, particularly during transitional phases (Colomer et al., 2022). Backline players generally exhibit superior tactical performance compared to forwards, given their roles in initiating and executing offensive plays (Fuller et al., 2015b). Technical skills such as ruck management and offloading are also vital. Yet, these are often underemphasized in training frameworks in the Pacific region, where natural athletic ability is frequently prioritized over systematic skill development (Kempton & Coutts, 2016). The physical demands of Rugby 7s—including repeated sprints, rapid accelerations, and collision resilience—are well established (Armstrong et al., 2021). While Fiji players are renowned for their 'flair', unpredictability, and speed (Rika et al., 2016; Schieder, 2014), an overreliance on innate athletic talent may obscure the importance of sport-specific conditioning necessary for optimal performance (Fuller et al., 2015a). Psychological resilience, particularly under fatigue and stress, further distinguishes elite players, yet mental skills training remains inadequately integrated into rugby programs in Fiji (Finekaso & Treharne, 2019) and across the Pacific. Even though the team can be perceived as highly motivated athletes (Mumm & O'Connor, 2014), this oversight can lead to missed opportunities in athlete development, as mental preparedness significantly impacts performance outcomes in high-pressure situations typical of Rugby 7s. Despite the existence of performance profiling frameworks, their application within Fiji's unique cultural and developmental context remains underexplored. Prior research predominantly focuses on high-performing athletes, neglecting the critical role of university players in the talent pipeline. Furthermore, the emphasis on quantitative metrics often overlooks subjective self-assessments of barriers faced by these athletes (Adeyemo et al., 2024). These unique demands of elite Rugby 7s necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the performance indicators that are crucial for success at the university level, as the developmental experiences and training regimens of these athletes can significantly impact their future performance trajectories in elite competitions. The literature indicates a pressing need for focused research on the performance profiles of university Rugby 7s players in Fiji. This study addresses this gap by providing a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to success in Rugby 7s, thereby supporting the island's strong rugby tradition and enhancing the developmental pathway for future athletes.

The study's objectives are threefold: (1) to assess current performance (CP) and ideal performance (IP) across four key performance indicators (KPIs): tactical, technical, physical, and psychological skills; (2) to evaluate positional disparities in self-assessed competencies between forwards and backline players; and (3) to propose focused interventions that address the developmental needs of rugby players. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into performance enhancement strategies and the holistic development of university Rugby 7s players in Fiji.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a partially mixed sequential design, prioritizing quantitative data collected through a performance profiling grid, complemented by qualitative reflections from workshop discussions to contextualize self-assessment scores. The quantitative component utilized a validated self-assessment instrument adapted from Butler and Hardy's (1992) framework to measure players' perceived current performance and ideal performance levels across four key performance indicators (KPIs): tactical knowledge, technical skills, physical fitness, and psychological resilience. Participants rated themselves on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = low competence; 10 = expert competence) during structured workshop sessions. The qualitative component consisted of open-ended written reflections collected during workshops and player interviews. These reflections offered preliminary insights into self-perceived barriers and strengths but were not subjected to comprehensive thematic analysis due to brevity and scope limitations. Triangulation focused on aligning quantitative performance gaps with narrative data where possible, although the primary emphasis remained on statistical analysis. This pragmatic approach aligns with methodologies in sports science research, where feasibility often guides adjustments without compromising core objectives (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Participants

The study consisted of ten male university Rugby 7s players competing in the Fiji University Sports Competition (FUSA). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure positional diversity (forwards: $n = 3$; backline: $n = 7$). Although the sample size ($N=10$) is limited, it aligns with exploratory mixed-methods research prioritizing depth of insight over breadth (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 5.1$) and had between 1 and 5 years of competitive experience ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.1$). Most players (80%) competed at the club level, with one participant representing provincial

competitions and another transitioning from high school rugby (see Table 1). Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Recruitment involved collaboration with the university coordinator to identify active players meeting the inclusion criteria: (1) aged 18–35 years, (2) registered with a university team, and (3) willing to participate in workshops and interviews. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms (e.g., P01–P10). The sample's positional distribution reflects the tactical demands of Rugby 7s, where forwards (e.g., breakdown specialists) and backline players (e.g., open-play facilitators) have distinct physical and technical roles.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Overview

Characteristic	Forwards (n = 3)	Backline (n = 7)	Total (N = 10)
Age (years), M ± SD	25.3 ± 8.4	19.9 ± 2.3	21.5 ± 5.1
Experience (years), M ± SD	2.3 ± 1.2	3.1 ± 1.1	2.9 ± 1.1
Highest Playing Level, n (%)			
- High School	0 (0%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (10%)
- Club	2 (66.7%)	6 (85.7%)	8 (80%)
- Provincial	1 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)

Data Collection Tools & Procedures

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative self-assessments with qualitative reflections. The primary data collection instrument was the Performance Profile Grid, adapted from Butler and Hardy's (1992) framework. This tool evaluated four key performance indicators (KPIs)—tactical knowledge, technical skills, physical fitness, and psychological resilience—operationalized through domain-specific subcomponents referred to as skills and characteristics. During structured workshop sessions, participants rated their perceived current performance (CP) and ideal performance (IP) on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = low competence; 10 = expert competence). Aggregated scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean ± SD), and radar charts were generated to visualize individual and group performance profiles. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (one-tailed) were used to compare participants' self-rated CP and IP scores across the four KPIs. This non-parametric test was chosen due to the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data, the paired design (each participant rated both CP and IP), and the small sample size (N=10), which violates the assumptions of parametric tests (Thombre, 2023). The null hypothesis (H_0) posited no difference between CP and IP scores, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) suggested systematic deficits in CP. Differences ($D = IP - CP$) were ranked, signed, and summed to compute the test statistic (W). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d , with $d > 0.5$ indicating moderate practical significance. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Logistical constraints limited data collection to written reflections, which were thematically grouped to provide contextual understanding of quantitative findings. This triangulation aimed to align self-assessment scores with experiential narratives. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring participant confidentiality through data anonymization.

Results

The analysis of self-assessed performance profiles revealed significant disparities between current and ideal performance across all key domains, with distinct patterns emerging by skill category and positional role. Quantitative gaps, validated through statistical testing and triangulated with qualitative reflections, highlighted systemic challenges in technical, tactical, physical, and psychological skills.

Quantitative Performance Gaps

Wilcoxon signed-rank tests indicated significant discrepancies between CP and IP scores for technical skills ($W=3.5$, $p<0.01$, $d=1.52$) and tactical skills ($W=2.0$, $p<0.01$, $d=1.87$). Physical fitness showed no significant gap ($W=28.0$, $p=0.12$, $d=0.15$), aligning with players' overconfidence in their innate athleticism (see Table 2). Subgroup analysis by position revealed that backline players aspired for greater psychological resilience ($W=12.0$, $p=0.04$, $d=0.68$), indicating varied development priorities across roles.

Table 2: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for CP vs. IP Scores

KPI	Median Δ (IP - CP)	Wilcoxon W	p-value	Cohen's d
Technical Skills	+1.36	3.5	< 0.01	1.52
Tactical Skills	+2.1	2.0	< 0.01	1.87
Physical Fitness	-0.17	28.0	0.12	0.15
Psychological	+0.74 (backline)	12.0	0.04	0.68

(i) Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Tactical Skills and Characteristics

The analysis indicates systemic deficiencies in tactical performance among players, with the most notable gaps in Game Flow Management, Game Strategy, and Decision-Making. These gaps highlight challenges in tempo control, proactive planning, and adaptive execution under pressure (see Table 3). Positional disparities further contextualize these findings: forwards demonstrated relative competence in set-piece execution but struggled with transitional play, while backs excelled in spatial positioning but lacked strategic discipline.

Table 3. Key Tactical Skills & Characteristics - CP vs. IP Scores

Skill/Characteristic	Current Performance	Ideal Performance	Gap (Δ)
Communication	7.2 ± 1.1	9.1 ± 0.8	+1.9
Positioning	6.8 ± 1.3	8.9 ± 0.9	+2.1
Code (Set-Piece Execution)	6.5 ± 1.5	8.7 ± 1.0	+2.2
Game Awareness	7.0 ± 1.4	9.0 ± 0.7	+2.0
Decision-Making	6.3 ± 1.6	8.8 ± 0.6	+2.5
Game Strategy	5.9 ± 1.8	8.5 ± 1.2	+2.6
Game Plan Adherence	6.1 ± 1.7	8.6 ± 1.1	+2.5
Game Flow Management	5.7 ± 1.9	8.4 ± 1.3	+2.7

$\Delta = \text{IP} - \text{CP}$

These findings align with Fiji's cultural valorization of spontaneous, intuitive play, which often sidelines structured tactical frameworks. Position-specific interventions are essential to address these gaps: forwards require high-intensity scenario drills to enhance late-game management, while backline players benefit from structured decision-making simulations. Balancing the island's improvisational strengths with evidence-based strategic pedagogy could create a hybrid model that respects cultural identity while aligning with global competitive standards.

(ii) Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Technical Skills and Characteristics

The analysis reveals significant gaps between CP and IP in technical skills, with offloading ($\Delta = +2.3$), kicking ($\Delta = +2.1$), and continuous passing ($\Delta = +2.0$) showing the most pronounced discrepancies. These highlight systemic challenges in executing dynamic, high-pressure skills. Positional disparities are evident (see Fig. 1): forwards (e.g., P1, P3, P9) demonstrated relative proficiency in contact skills such as tackling (CP Mean= 8.2 ± 1.1) and ruck management (CP Mean= 7.8 ± 1.4), while backline (e.g., P6, P7, P10) excelled in passing accuracy (CP Mean= 8.5 ± 1.3) but lagged in combination plays ($\Delta = +2.5$). Shared weaknesses in offloading (CP Mean= 5.8 ± 1.9) and kicking under pressure (CP Mean= 6.1 ± 1.7) underscore Fiji's cultural reliance on improvisational play over systematic skill development.

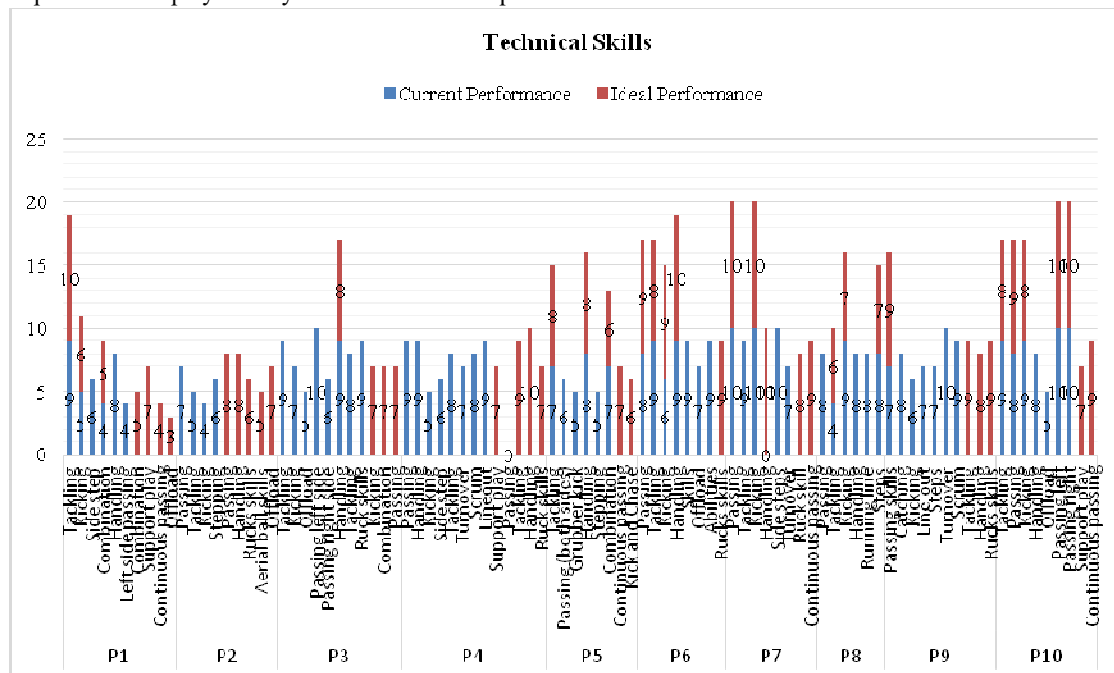


Fig. 1

Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Technical Skills and Characteristics

(iii) Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Physical Skills and Characteristics

The analysis reveals significant gaps in endurance and strength among forwards, reflecting Fiji's cultural emphasis on natural athleticism over structured conditioning. While players demonstrated proficiency in speed, backline players require agility refinement ($\Delta = +2$) to support better transistional play, which is crucial in Rugby 7's fast-paced environment. Paradoxically, some players perceived their speed (P8: $\Delta = -2$) and agility (P10: $\Delta = -1$) as overperforming, likely conflating raw athleticism with sport-specific fitness. Fiji's rugby development often prioritizes intuitive, high-energy play, which may undervalue systematic endurance training (see Fig. 2). This approach aligns with broader critiques of Pacific Island rugby systems, where "freestyle" agility tends to overshadow metabolic conditioning.

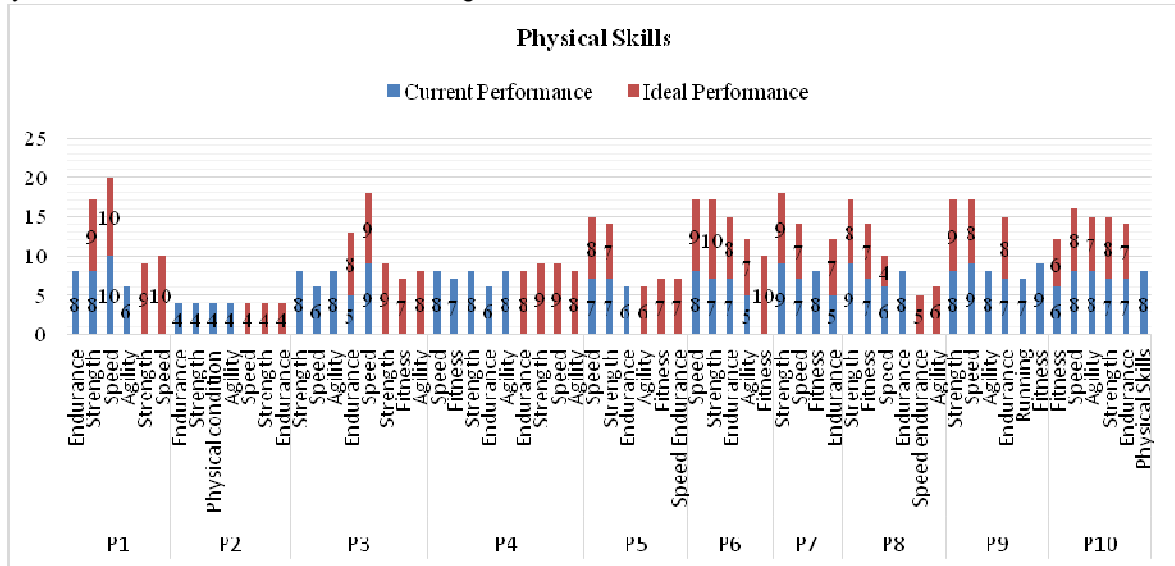


Fig. 2

Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Physical Skills and Characteristics

(iv) Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Psychological Skills and Characteristics

The analysis of psychological traits among Fijian university Rugby 7s players identifies critical gaps in self-perceived competencies, notably in decision-making (e.g., P1: $\Delta = +2$), resilience (e.g., P5: $\Delta = +2$), and trust (e.g., P10: $\Delta = +1$). These gaps highlight systemic challenges in adaptive cognition and team cohesion (see Fig. 3). Discipline exhibited paradoxical discrepancies: some players (e.g., P1, P8) rated their CP higher than their IP, suggesting potential over-regulation or misalignment with coaching strategies. Conversely, motivation gaps (e.g., P2: $\Delta = -3$) indicated perceived overperformance, possibly reflecting cultural pressures to uphold high morale despite tactical or physical stressors.

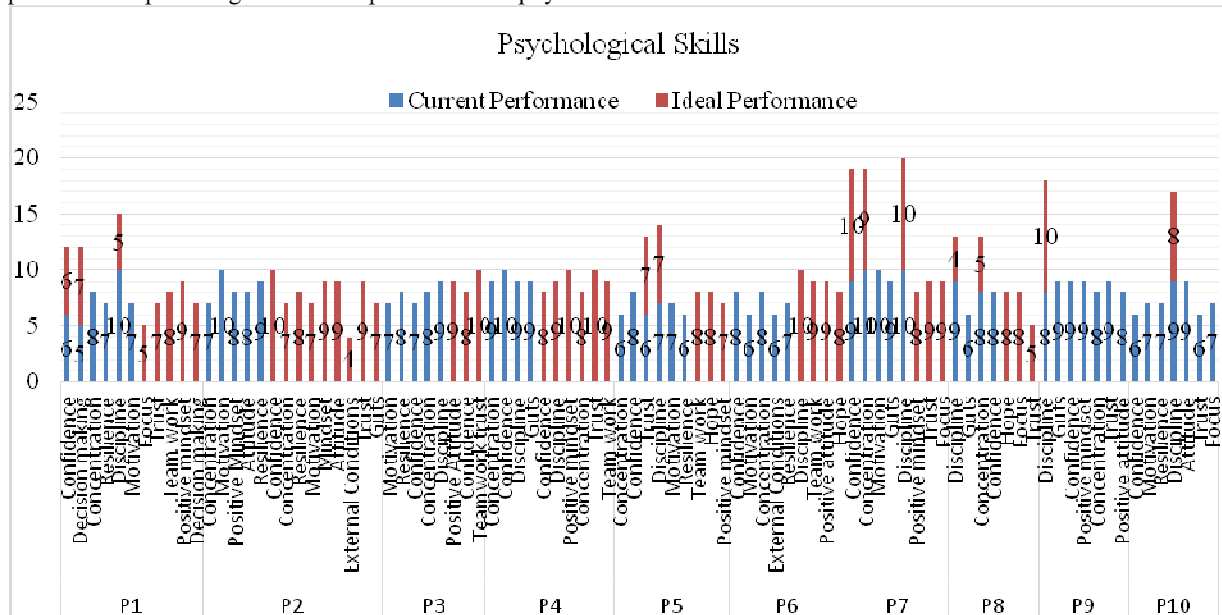


Fig. 3

Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Psychological Skills and Characteristics¹

Shared deficiencies in trust and teamwork (e.g., P3: IP = 10 vs CP = 8; P6: $\Delta = +2$) among players can be understood within the broader context of sports collaboration. Specifically, the differences in player indices, where a player may exhibit varying perceptions of individual versus team performance, suggest an inclination towards individual performance values that resonate with Fiji's rugby ethos. This phenomenon emphasizes individual flair rather than structured collaboration. However, strengths in positive mindset (e.g., P4: CP = 9; IP = 10) and guts (e.g., P9: CP = 9) highlight resilience traits ingrained through a competitive yet communal sporting culture.

(v) Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Position

The comparative analysis of CP and IP scores (see Table 3), supported by a group-level radar chart (Fig. 4), reveals distinct disparities and positional nuances among players. These findings underscore the complex interplay between self-perceived competencies, role-specific demands, and aspirational benchmarks in a high-performance context.

Performance Gaps

1. Technical Skills: Significant discrepancies exist in technical execution, particularly among forwards ($\Delta=+1.2$) and backline players ($\Delta=+1.36$). The primary deficiencies involve ruck management and the ability to offload under pressure- crucial during unstructured phases in Rugby 7s. Prior studies support this, indicating that technical proficiency is a key determinant of success in rapid gameplay (Heyward et al., 2022). The large effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 1.5$, $p < 0.01$) suggest current training methods might be insufficient for preparing athletes for match-like intensities (Higham et al., 2013).

2. Physical Fitness: Interestingly, a negative gap was identified in perceived physical fitness, with both forwards and backline players ($\Delta=-0.17$) believing their CP exceeds ideal levels. This perception likely stems from Fiji's cultural emphasis on inherent athleticism, valuing speed and endurance over technical execution (Higham et al., 2013). However, this perceived overperformance might mask deficiencies in critical areas such as repeated-sprint ability, which is vital in Rugby 7s' demanding environment (Ojio et al., 2025). Targeted, sport-specific conditioning remains essential to bridge this gap.

3. Psychological Resilience: Data on psychological resilience show divergent perceptions between positions. Forwards reported a negative gap ($\Delta=-0.77$), indicating a self-perceived strength in mental toughness, likely fostered by engagement in high-stakes contact situations like scrums and breakdowns. Conversely, backline players desired improvement ($\Delta= +0.74$), reflecting a need for enhanced psychological support and decision-making under fatigue (Palmer-Green et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2016). Tailored psychological interventions should address the specific demands of each positional role to optimize mental resilience and performance.

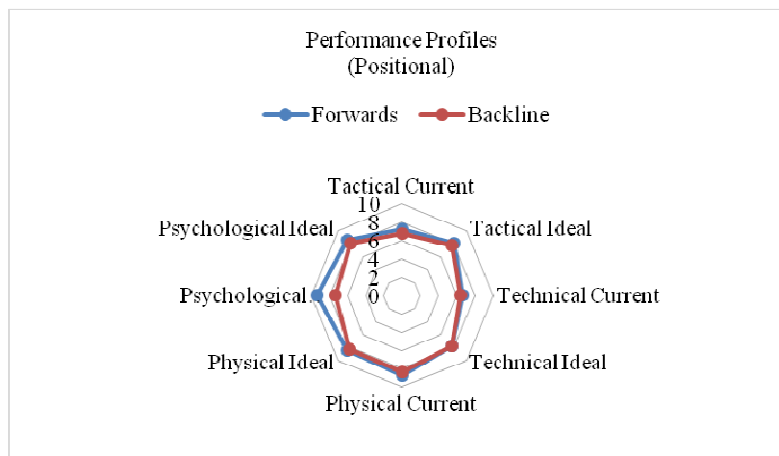
Table 3: Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Scores by Position

KPI	Metric	Forwards	Backline	Forwards (Δ)	Backline (Δ)
Tactical	CP	7.3	6.8	0.8	0.99
	IP	8.1	7.79		
Technical	CP	6.6	6.4	1.2	1.36
	IP	7.8	7.76		
Physical	CP	8.7	8.4	-0.17	-0.17
	IP	8.53	8.23		
Psychological	CP	9.3	7.3	-0.77	0.74
	IP	8.53	8.04		

(Δ) - Gap

Positional Disparities

The radar chart (Fig. 4) illustrates distinct performance profiles among players, highlighting significant differences between forwards and backline players. Forwards emphasize physical robustness (CP Mean=8.7) and psychological resilience (CP Mean=9.3), which align closely with their roles in set-piece execution and defensive fortitude. However, their comparatively lower tactical scores (CP Mean=7.3) point to potential areas for improvement in strategic coordination, particularly in aspects such as lineout signalling and maul organization (Fuller et al., 2016). On the other hand, backline players demonstrate superior tactical awareness (CP Mean=6.8), reflecting the cognitive demands of spatial organization and rapid decision-making under defensive pressures. Yet, they exhibit relatively lower psychological resilience (CP Mean=7.3), indicating a need for psychological support mechanisms that enhance their ability to cope with the stressors inherent in high-paced, contact-oriented play (Ross et al., 2014). The tactical deficits observed in forwards, particularly lineout signalling, risk compromising breakdown efficiency. In contrast, the psychological gaps within the backline may hinder effective decision-making during critical late-game scenarios.

**Fig. 4**

Radar Chart of Current Performance vs. Ideal Performance Profiles by Position

Discussion

This study highlights critical gaps and positional nuances in the self-perceived performance profiles of Fijian university Rugby 7s players, offering novel insights into the interplay between cultural context, position-specific demands, and athlete development. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the findings challenge assumptions about the validity of self-assessment in university rugby 7s players, revealing systemic challenges and opportunities for performance optimization in resource-constrained environments.

Technical Skill Deficits: A Systemic Challenge

The significant technical skill deficits identified in offloading ($\Delta = +2.3$) and kicking ($\Delta = +2.1$) present a substantial challenge for Fijian rugby, reflecting the need for improvement in these areas. Research has indicated that structured skill development is crucial for enhancing performance in rugby, particularly in high-level competition (Hendricks et al., 2019; Hendricks & Sarembock, 2013). Fijian rugby may benefit from exploring how structured practice environments can foster technical competencies and overall game execution. Qualitative reflections from players indicating discomfort executing offloads under defensive pressure suggest a disconnect between players' physical readiness and their technical capabilities when presented with high-pressure scenarios. This disparity may stem from a cultural inclination towards spontaneous, improvisational styles of play, which can hinder systematic skill acquisition. (Downey, 2012; Jones et al., 2014). Literature supports the necessity of evolving skill development strategies, advocating for integrating structured training methodologies to enhance players' technical execution during pressure situations (Gardner et al., 2015; Hendricks, 2012). Such strategies could also help mitigate risks associated with poor skill execution and injuries linked to ineffective techniques (King et al., 2022). Establishing coaching partnerships with bigger nearby New Zealand and Australian academies could introduce structured skill drills. Such collaboration could play a critical role in addressing existing skill gaps and optimizing player performance, helping to balance traditional play styles with contemporary training demands (Hendricks et al., 2014).

The Paradox of Physical Overconfidence

The reported negative physical gaps challenge traditional paradigms surrounding athletic self-assessment, which typically suggest that athletes should strive to exceed their CP capabilities. Such discrepancies underline a potential cultural misalignment where attributes like speed and strength, often honed through casual games and traditional roles, dominate the athletic self-concept. This cultural context suggests that athletes may operate under an illusion of competence that obscures critical gaps in sport-specific abilities, such as repeated-sprint ability (RSA) and anaerobic recovery, both of which are vital for success in Rugby 7s (Behardien et al., 2024a). Significantly, these essential metrics are frequently neglected within university training curricula.

Positional Disparities: Role-Specific Demands

Analysis of the radar charts and corresponding quantitative data illustrates pronounced positional disparities between forwards and backlines. Forwards emphasize physical presence and psychological resilience, aligning with their core responsibilities in set-piece execution, such as scrums and lineouts. Despite this strength, a significant deficiency in tactical knowledge is evident, underscoring essential gaps in strategic understanding that could hinder their overall effectiveness during dynamic gameplay. Gabbett (2008) emphasizes that while physical attributes are critical for forwards, a robust comprehension of the game's tactical elements is equally essential. This disparity in tactical proficiency may ultimately limit the forwards' ability to adapt during varied match situations.

Similarly, the backline exhibits superior tactical awareness, reflecting their role in executing complex plays and making rapid decisions in response to opponent actions. However, they aspire for greater

psychological resilience, which is crucial given the cognitive demands associated with decision-making under fatigue conditions. Almagro Torres et al. (2020) highlight that backline players are often required to make split-second strategic decisions that can significantly influence match outcomes, necessitating cognitive acuity and emotional robustness. This dual requirement signifies players' unique pressures in the backline, which may differ fundamentally from those experienced by their counterparts in the forward pack.

These observations are consistent with patterns identified in similar high-intensity sports, where positional roles correspond to distinct psychological and physical requirements (Aksoy et al., 2024; Trandafirescu et al., 2024). In particular, the lack of rigorous positional specialization within university rugby frameworks exacerbates these disparities. Without a focused approach to training that addresses the unique demands of forwards and backlines, student-athletes may struggle to develop the requisite skills necessary for their specific roles on the field.

Psychological Resilience: A Double-Edged Sword

Distinct psychological gaps emerge between forwards and backlines. Forwards' negative psychological gap sharply contrasts with the backline's upward IP gap. This divergence may arise from forwards' exposure to high-pressure contact situations, which cultivate resilience, while the backline may lack mental fortification, as their roles necessitate open-play creativity (Rigon et al., 2024). Notably, both cohorts rated psychological factors as priority areas, reinforcing the mental demands intrinsic to Rugby 7s. Findings mirror global research linking psychological resilience to success in Rugby 7s high-pressure environments. As noted by David Kirk, former New Zealand All Black Captain and 1987 World Cup Champion,

"Individuals with a ferocious desire to win and the capacity to think their way to victory are needed. In the final analysis, this mental athleticism requirement is the key determinant of who wins and who is second. It's hard to describe, but we all know it when we see it..." (Kirk, 1987 as cited in Hodge & McKenzie, 2005, p. 208).

This perspective underscores the importance of mental skills, contrasting with systems like New Zealand's, where structured mental skills training is systematically implemented. These findings support incorporating psychological skills training (PST) into training regimens for Pacific rugby athletes, especially for positions requiring heightened mental acuity (Gabbett, 2008; Villaseca-Vicuña et al., 2021).

Implications for Practice and Future Directions

(i) Coaching: Position-Specific Training Modules

To address the identified technical skill deficits, coaches should implement position-specific training modules that target role-dependent weaknesses while preserving the physical conditioning for which the players are known. Forwards should focus on refining rucking techniques and offloading strategies under defensive pressure through small-sided games that simulate relevant match conditions (Bennett et al., 2016). Developing drills emphasising decision-making under fatigue will benefit the backline, utilizing high-intensity interval training methods that enhance skill execution in congested environments. Such approaches align with the "train as you play" philosophy, enabling seamless skills transfer to match scenarios (Behardien et al., 2024b). Integrating technical and physiological demands through drills that elevate heart rates would reflect the rigorous nature of Rugby 7s competition without compromising skill acquisition (Griffin et al., 2017; Rovniy et al., 2017).

(ii) Policy: Resource Allocation for Skill Development

Fiji rugby stakeholders, including university sports departments and relevant national governing bodies, must advocate for targeted resource allocation to mitigate technical and tactical gaps within the sport. This could encompass funding for skill-centric coach certifications, infrastructure investments in video analysis technologies for real-time feedback, and partnerships with elite coaching academies to mentor university coaches in structured skill development frameworks (Jones et al., 2014; Morley et al., 2016).

(iii) Research: Cultural Influences on Training Prioritisation

While the sample size limits generalizability, it enabled an in-depth exploration of Fiji's unique rugby ecosystem, providing foundational insights for future research. Future studies should involve larger cohorts and longitudinal KPI development tracking. Additionally, they should explore the cultural dimensions driving the emphasis on natural athleticism over technical prowess. A mixed-methods approach can facilitate exploration of historical factors and traditional games that emphasize physicality, influencing modern rugby training paradigms. Interviews with coaches could further elucidate perceptions of innate talent versus deliberate skill development.

Conclusion

This exploratory study identifies critical systemic gaps and positional disparities in the self-perceived performance profiles of Fijian university Rugby 7s players. Significant mismatches between current and ideal competencies were identified, especially in technical execution and tactical knowledge. Cultural preferences for improvisational play and perceptions of physical overperformance, likely rooted in its rugby traditions, partially mask underlying deficiencies in structured skill development and sport-specific conditioning. Notably, while forwards demonstrate robust physical and psychological confidence, they exhibit tactical and technical limitations; backline players, conversely, show greater tactical awareness but require enhanced psychological resilience to support decision-making under fatigue. These findings collectively advocate for position-specific,

evidence-based coaching interventions and the integration of structured technical, tactical, psychological, and physical development modules that respect and harness Fiji's unique rugby heritage. Important rugby stakeholders, policymakers, and university stakeholders should prioritize resource allocation for skill-centric training and talent development, leveraging international partnerships and objective biometric feedback to recalibrate self-perception and elevate player readiness for elite competition. The study also highlights the value of mixed-method performance profiling as a practical tool for mapping athlete development in resource-constrained contexts. Future research with larger samples and longitudinal approaches is warranted to clarify cultural identity's influence on training and inform scalable models for athlete development in Pacific Island ecosystems.

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