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EDITED BY

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Herli Pardilla
Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara,
Indonesia.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zulkifli, M.Pd
Universitas Islam Riau, Indonesia.

*CORRESPONDENCE

B.M. Gimhan
bmanuka32@gmail.com

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B.M. Gimhan
U.T. Mayakaduwa
A.W. S. Chandana
 Daniele Buchanan
 Takako Snook



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Long-Term Rugby Player Development: An Integrative Review of Physical, Psychological, and Injury-Prevention Pathways

B.M. Gimhan^{1*}, U.T. Mayakaduwa¹, A. W. S. Chandana¹, Daniele Buchanan², Takako Snook³

¹Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka.

²Rhinos Rugby Academy, United States.

³Faculté des sciences du sport de Nancy, France.

ABSTRACT

Background & objective: Long-term rugby player development involves interconnected physical, psychological, injury-prevention, and socio-environmental factors. This review synthesizes evidence across these domains to identify key developmental principles and research gaps.

Materials for analysis: An integrative literature review with narrative synthesis was conducted using empirical studies, reviews, conceptual frameworks, consensus statements, books, federation resources, and grey literature. The manuscript reported 180 records, of which 30 sources were included following screening. Evidence was synthesized thematically across developmental progression, physical preparation, participation pathways, injury epidemiology and prevention, psychological support, and socio-environmental influences. No meta-analysis or formal risk-of-bias assessment was reported.

Results: Five interconnected dimensions emerged: developmental readiness and progression, physical and technical preparation, injury-risk management, psychological and social development, and environmental and organizational support. Long-term athlete development frameworks emphasize developmentally appropriate training that considers individual maturation and training experience. Rugby injury-surveillance research highlights the importance of standardized monitoring of injury incidence, severity, and characteristics. Sport diversification and psychological support provide complementary perspectives on sustainable development. However, the available evidence does not establish the comparative effectiveness of a single integrated development pathway or confirm the effectiveness of specific preventive and psychological interventions across rugby settings.

Conclusions: Sustainable rugby player development requires a coordinated, developmentally informed approach integrating physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological support, and contextual considerations. This review contributes an integrative conceptual perspective for international rugby practice while highlighting the need for longitudinal research, rigorous intervention evaluation, and transparent review methods.

Keywords

Long-term athlete development; rugby union; youth athlete development; injury prevention; psychological support; sports injury surveillance.

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INTRODUCTION

Global and Theoretical Context

Long-term athlete development (LTAD) provides a framework for understanding athletic performance, physical capacities, psychological competencies, and sustained participation through progressive learning and developmentally appropriate training (Balyi, 2001; Balyi & Hamilton, 2004). Its application emphasizes individual differences in biological maturation, training experience, and developmental trajectories, while recognizing the importance of scientific evidence and effective implementation (Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Rugby union presents particular challenges because players must develop strength, power, speed, endurance, technical proficiency, tactical decision-making, and psychological resilience while managing contact-related injury risks. Injury surveillance has highlighted the importance of tackling and other contact events in rugby injury burden, reinforcing the need to integrate performance development with injury prevention

and athlete welfare (Brooks et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2016).

The developmental model of sport participation and the youth physical development model further emphasize diversified sporting experiences, appropriate learning opportunities, and the consideration of growth, maturation, and physical trainability (Côté et al., 2009; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Applied to rugby, these perspectives highlight the importance of progressive strength and conditioning, safe contact skills, psychological preparation, and effective transitions between developmental stages. These dimensions may interact with injury resilience, continued participation, and athletes' capacity to adapt to competitive demands. Their implementation also depends on contextual conditions, including access to qualified coaches and appropriate facilities (Beaudoin et al., 2015; Gabbett, 2016). Consequently, long-term rugby player development should

integrate physical, technical, psychological, and social considerations while balancing competitive objectives with injury-risk management and athlete well-being.

Critical Overview of Existing Evidence

Existing evidence on long-term rugby player development covers four interconnected domains: sport diversification and physical literacy, strength and conditioning, injury prevention, and psychological and socio-environmental influences. Diversified sporting experiences may promote fundamental movement skills and sustained participation, challenging the need for early specialization (Côté et al., 2009; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). Developmentally appropriate training is also essential but should account for maturation, training history, positional demands, and competitive level (Ford et al., 2011; Till et al., 2017). However, findings from general youth sport research cannot automatically establish the effectiveness of specific rugby development pathways.

Injury surveillance and prevention provide important insights into rugby-specific risks and preventive practices (Brooks et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2016). Programmes such as World Rugby Activate offer structured strategies for integrating injury prevention into routine training (World Rugby, 2016, 2020). Nevertheless, their effectiveness may vary according to training load, technical proficiency, programme adherence, coach education, and resource availability (Gabbett, 2016). Therefore, the availability of preventive programmes should be distinguished from demonstrated effectiveness across different age groups and competitive settings.

Psychological competencies, including goal setting, confidence, emotional regulation, and resilience, may help athletes manage competitive demands (Gould et al., 2002; Vealey, 2007). Life-skills development, career transitions, and access to qualified coaching, facilities, and support services also shape developmental opportunities (Gould & Carson, 2008; Wylleman et al., 2013; Beaudoin et al., 2015). However, the evidence varies in research design, population, and relevance to rugby. Distinguishing empirical findings from conceptual models and practical recommendations is therefore essential to identify evidence gaps and avoid overstating the effectiveness or generalizability of particular approaches.

Previous Reviews and the Unresolved Gap

Previous scholarship has established important foundations for understanding long-term athlete development (LTAD), youth physical preparation, diversified sporting participation, and rugby injury prevention. Ford et al. (2011) examined the physiological evidence underpinning LTAD, while Lloyd and Oliver (2012) proposed the youth physical development model to guide athletic development during childhood and adolescence. Research by Côté et al. (2007, 2009) and Côté and Vierimaa (2014) further explored diversified sporting participation and developmental pathways. Rugby-specific research has examined the application of LTAD principles to young players (Till et al., 2017), alongside studies of

injury epidemiology and surveillance that inform prevention priorities (Brooks et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2007, 2016). Although these contributions provide complementary insights, they differ in their conceptual focus, populations, and research objectives and do not, collectively, establish an integrated account of physical, psychological, injury-prevention, and implementation dimensions in long-term rugby player development.

The unresolved gap therefore concerns the need to synthesize these interconnected perspectives while critically considering their evidential limitations and practical applicability. Injury-surveillance findings alone cannot establish the effectiveness of an integrated developmental pathway, just as conceptual frameworks do not necessarily demonstrate how psychological support and injury-prevention strategies operate across different rugby environments. Accordingly, this review aims to integrate developmental, physical, psychological, and injury-prevention perspectives while examining contextual factors that may influence implementation. However, the precise novelty of this approach requires cautious interpretation, as the available manuscript does not establish through a comprehensive comparative assessment that previous reviews have omitted these dimensions or are outdated. A systematic comparison of relevant reviews' scopes, search periods, methods, and conclusions would strengthen the justification for the review and clarify its specific contribution to the existing literature.

Novelty and International Contribution

This integrative review examines the interrelationships among developmental progression, physical preparation, injury prevention, and psychological and socio-environmental support in long-term rugby player development. Its contribution lies in integrating these dimensions within a common conceptual perspective while considering how coaching quality, programme adherence, and resource availability influence implementation across youth, community, and high-performance settings. By distinguishing rugby-specific evidence from broader athlete-development literature, the review identifies areas of convergence, uncertainty, and evidence gaps to inform future research and context-sensitive strategies for sustainable rugby player development.

Review Objective and Review Questions

This integrative review synthesizes literature on long-term rugby player development, focusing on the relationships among developmental progression, physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological support, and contextual influences. It examines long-term athlete development, physical literacy, sport diversification, strength and conditioning, contact preparation, coaching, and resource accessibility while distinguishing rugby-specific evidence from broader sport-development literature. By identifying methodological limitations, contextual barriers, and research gaps, the review aims to inform integrated, evidence-informed, and context-sensitive approaches to sustainable rugby player development.

MATERIALS FOR ANALYSIS

Review Design

This study used an integrative literature review with narrative synthesis to examine long-term rugby player development across physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological support, and socio-cultural dimensions. Diverse sources, including empirical studies, conceptual frameworks, reviews, consensus statements, books, federation resources, and grey literature, were synthesized thematically, distinguishing rugby-specific evidence from broader

sport-development research. As the synthesis was narrative, no meta-analysis or pooled effect estimates were conducted. Interpretations considered each source's purpose, contribution, relevance to rugby, and the limitations of transferring findings across populations, sporting contexts, and publication types.

Eligibility and Scope of the Literature

The reviewed literature covered five main areas: LTAD and developmental progression; youth physical development and

conditioning; participation pathways and sport diversification; rugby injury epidemiology and prevention; and psychological development, mental health, coaching, and athletic transitions. Rugby-specific empirical studies were distinguished from conceptual frameworks, consensus statements, and practical resources, while evidence from other sports was used for context rather than direct conclusions about rugby. Although the Methods section specified 2007–2023, the references include earlier and more recent publications. Because the original search dates and formal eligibility criteria could not be independently verified, the definitive publication period must be established from the original search protocol and screening records.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

The search strategy was guided by five principal concepts: “Long-Term Athlete Development,” “rugby player pathways,” “injury prevention in rugby,” “multi-sport participation,” and “LTAD challenges in rugby.” These concepts reflected the main developmental, physical, injury-prevention, and psychosocial dimensions of long-term rugby player development. However, the available documentation did not contain a complete, reproducible search history specifying the exact search strings, search dates, individual databases or platforms consulted, or the number of records retrieved from each information source. Therefore, the specific databases and search dates could not be verified and are not reported as confirmed procedures. The manuscript reported that 180 records were identified, comprising 150 records attributed to database searches and 30 records obtained from other sources. These figures are retained as reported pending reconciliation with the original search records. The information sources, search dates, database-specific retrieval counts, and complete search strings should be finalized only after verification against the original search.

Study Selection

The manuscript reports a selection process involving record identification, duplicate removal, initial screening, full-text eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The reported figures were as follows: 180 records identified, 15 duplicates removed, 165 records screened, 100 records excluded during initial screening, 65 full-text reports assessed for eligibility, 35 full-text reports excluded, and 30

sources reported as included. These figures are arithmetically consistent. However, the original screening log was not available to independently verify the individual counts, the number of full-text reports sought but not retrieved, the reasons for full-text exclusion, or whether the 30 included sources correspond to 30 unique studies. The figures are therefore presented as the selection counts reported in the manuscript rather than as independently verified PRISMA results.

Materials for Analysis and Evidence Extraction

The review examined long-term rugby player development across seven themes: developmental progression, physical preparation, participation pathways, injury epidemiology and prevention, psychological support, and socio-cultural influences. The reported corpus comprised 30 sources, including 25 journal articles, one book, two federation modules, and two grey-literature items, although these figures remain unverified. Selected bibliographic details were checked, but comprehensive full-text examination and systematic data extraction were not confirmed for all sources. The literature was categorized into rugby-specific empirical or methodological evidence, broader sport-development and psychological research, contextual evidence from other sports, and practice-oriented or policy resources. This classification supported cautious interpretation while highlighting the need for a complete source-level evidence matrix and recognition of differences in evidential strength across publication types.

Bibliographic Verification and Methodological Appraisal

Bibliographic verification and methodological appraisal were considered separate processes. Selected sources were checked for available publication details and principal contributions, but the available documentation does not specify a standardized appraisal tool, source-level quality ratings, or a reproducible risk-of-bias procedure. Therefore, no formal quality assessment, risk-of-bias evaluation, or overall certainty-of-evidence rating is reported. This limitation does not necessarily imply that the included sources are of low quality; rather, their methodological quality has not been systematically established. Future appraisal should use source-appropriate methods and transparently document judgments and supporting rationales.

RESULTS

Search and Selection Results

The manuscript reported that 180 records were identified, comprising 150 records from database searches and 30 records from other sources. Following the removal of 15 duplicate records,

165 records remained for screening. Of these, 100 records were excluded during the initial screening stage, leaving 65 full-text reports for eligibility assessment. A further 35 full-text reports were reported as excluded, resulting in 30 sources being included in the review.

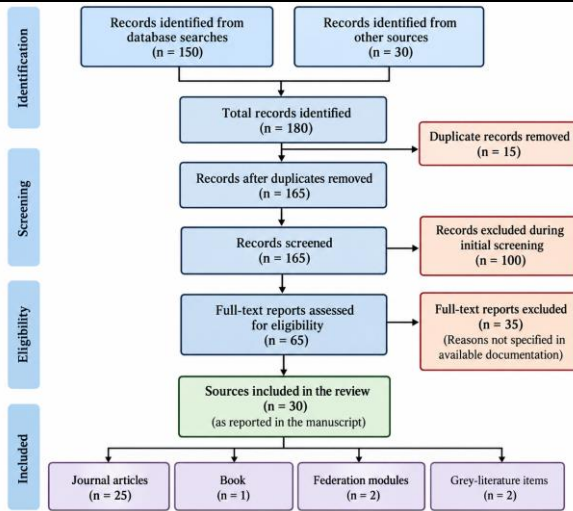


Figure 1. Literature Search, Screening, and Eligibility Assessment

Characteristics of Included Sources

The reference list covered key areas of long-term rugby player development, including athlete-development frameworks, youth physical development, participation pathways, injury epidemiology, injury surveillance, training-load management, psychological development, and sport governance. Sources varied in type and purpose, encompassing empirical studies, consensus statements, reviews, conceptual frameworks, books, and programme guidance. However, complete bibliographic and methodological verification of all 30 reported sources remains unconfirmed, and some references require further validation. Accordingly, Table 1 presents selected sources with verified publication details or principal contributions, their relevance to rugby player development, and their evidential limitations. It should be interpreted as a preliminary evidence-extraction framework rather than a comprehensive account of the entire corpus, distinguishing rugby-specific findings from broader sport-development research and indirect evidence from other sports.

Table 1. Characteristics and evidence-extraction framework for selected sources

Source	Publication type and verified contribution	Relevance to long-term rugby player development	Interpretation
Brooks et al. (2005)	Empirical epidemiological study of match injuries in English professional rugby union	Injury incidence, injury severity, and match-related injury patterns	Direct rugby-specific evidence
Fuller et al. (2007)	Consensus statement on injury definitions and data-collection procedures in rugby union	Standardized injury definitions, exposure recording, and injury classification	Direct rugby-specific methodological evidence; not an intervention trial
Fuller et al. (2016)	Prospective injury-surveillance study at the 2015 Rugby World Cup	Injury incidence, severity, characteristics, and inciting events in elite rugby	Direct rugby-specific evidence; not a test of the effectiveness of a general prevention programme
Gabbett (2016)	Review of the training-injury prevention paradox	Training-load management and the relationship between conditioning and injury risk	Relevant broader sports evidence; not exclusively rugby-specific
Bissett et al. (2020)	Narrative review and modified Delphi study on coaches' roles in athlete mental-health promotion	Coach education, psychosocial support, and athlete mental health	Relevant broader sports evidence; not a rugby-specific effectiveness study
Lubis et al. (2025)	Systematic review addressing injury prevention in gymnastics	Potential contextual insights into injury-prevention approaches	Indirect cross-sport evidence; transferability to rugby is unestablished
Swandana et al. (2025)	Reported randomized controlled trial involving adaptive swimming instruction and water-related anxiety	Potential contextual insights into psychological intervention in sport	Indirect cross-sport evidence; not direct evidence for rugby players

Note. This table presents selected sources whose publication details or principal publication characteristics were confirmed.

Methodological Quality and Risk-of-Bias Findings

The manuscript identified validity, reliability, specificity, and contribution to knowledge as qualitative selection criteria; however, no standardized appraisal tool, source-level quality ratings, or reproducible risk-of-bias procedure was documented. Consequently, the methodological quality of the 30 reported sources could not be systematically established. The sources served different purposes, including describing injury patterns, standardizing surveillance methods, synthesizing concepts, and providing practical guidance, and should not be treated as equivalent evidence of intervention effectiveness. Therefore, no overall risk-of-bias classification or certainty-of-evidence rating is reported. Until source-appropriate appraisal is completed and transparently documented, the findings should be interpreted as a narrative synthesis of selected literature rather than a quality-weighted assessment of long-term rugby player development strategies.

Thematic Synthesis of the Available Evidence

Stage-sensitive athlete development and physical preparation

Long-term athlete development frameworks emphasize aligning training demands with athletes' developmental needs (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Although Till et al. (2017) is cited as a rugby-oriented application of these principles, its bibliographic details and specific findings require verification. Collectively, these frameworks support

progressive, developmentally appropriate physical preparation, but the available evidence does not establish a universally optimal developmental sequence or quantify the comparative effectiveness of different LTAD models. Biological maturation, training history, playing position, and competitive level should therefore inform programme design without implying that their effects were quantified in this review.

Sport participation pathways and early specialization

Sport-sampling and specialization are important considerations in long-term athlete development. Developmental models highlight the relationships between sporting experiences, continued participation, and expertise development (Côté et al., 2009; Côté & Verimaa, 2014). Jayanthi et al. (2015) is also cited regarding intensive sport specialization and injury risk among young athletes, although its bibliographic details require verification. Overall, the literature provides a conceptual basis for examining diversified participation and early specialization; however, the available extraction does not support quantitative conclusions about their effects on rugby-specific performance, injury incidence, burnout, or player retention.

Rugby injury epidemiology and surveillance

Rugby injury epidemiology was the most clearly supported rugby-specific domain in the available audit. Brooks et al. (2005) examined match injuries in English professional rugby union, while Fuller et al. (2016) investigated injuries during the 2015 Rugby

World Cup. Fuller et al. (2007) contributed consensus definitions and data-collection procedures to improve consistency in rugby injury surveillance. Collectively, these sources highlight the importance of systematic monitoring of injury incidence, severity, and characteristics. However, differences in injury definitions, exposure measures, populations, and competition levels limit direct comparisons and caution against generalizing findings from professional or international rugby to youth, school, amateur, and community settings.

Injury prevention, training load, and programme implementation

Injury prevention, tackling technique, physical conditioning, and training-load management were identified as key practical themes. Gabbett (2016) discusses the relationship between training exposure, physical conditioning, and injury risk, while World Rugby's Activate materials outline a rugby-specific prevention approach. However, programme guidance alone does not establish intervention effectiveness. Although the available epidemiological and consensus sources support systematic injury monitoring and standardized definitions, they do not independently demonstrate that Activate reduces injury incidence or that a particular training-load strategy is superior. Because the required intervention evaluations and effect estimates were not verified, the effectiveness of specific prevention programmes remains unresolved in the evidence summarized here.

Psychological development and athlete support

Psychological development represents a complementary dimension of long-term athlete development. The cited literature addresses life skills, psychological characteristics, and mental-skills training (Gould & Carson, 2008; Gould et al., 2002; Vealey, 2007), while Bissett et al. (2020) provides a broader framework for coaches' roles in promoting athlete mental health. These sources support considering psychological skills and the sporting environment in developmental planning. However, the available audit does not establish the effects of specific psychological interventions on rugby-specific performance, resilience, retention, or injury outcomes, nor the prevalence of psychological difficulties among developing rugby players. Psychological development should therefore be recognized as a relevant domain, while the strength and transferability of rugby-specific evidence remain uncertain.

Socio-cultural context and developmental transitions

Access to coaching, facilities, medical support, and structured development opportunities was identified as a potential influence on LTAD implementation. Beaudoin et al. (2015) was cited regarding coaches' adoption of LTAD frameworks, while Wylleman et al. (2013) addressed athlete career transitions; however, the precise contributions and bibliographic details of these sources

require further verification. Although contextual conditions and developmental transitions are relevant to long-term player development, the available evidence does not establish comparative barriers across countries, socioeconomic groups, or rugby competition levels. Accordingly, the prevalence and magnitude of socioeconomic inequalities cannot be quantified without further systematic evidence extraction.

Quantitative Synthesis

A meta-analysis was not conducted. The available material did not provide a complete, verified dataset of comparable outcome estimates, participant characteristics, exposure denominators, or uncertainty measures across the included sources. In addition, the reported corpus combined empirical studies with consensus statements, conceptual publications, books, and programme resources, which address different questions and cannot be pooled meaningfully without a more specific outcome-based eligibility and extraction process. No pooled effect size, confidence interval, heterogeneity statistic, or quantitative certainty estimate is therefore reported. This absence should not be interpreted as evidence that interventions are ineffective; it reflects the lack of a verified and sufficiently comparable dataset for quantitative synthesis.

Evidence Gaps and Research Priorities

Several evidence gaps limit the conclusions of this review. First, the 30 reported sources require complete bibliographic verification and systematic extraction of study characteristics, populations, outcomes, and methodological limitations. Second, while the available rugby-specific evidence primarily addresses injury epidemiology and surveillance, direct empirical evidence on developmental pathways, early specialization, psychological interventions, and transitions to senior rugby remains uncertain. Third, injury-prevention programmes require rigorous evaluation that distinguishes practical recommendations from demonstrated intervention effectiveness, while findings from other sports should be treated as contextual rather than directly transferable evidence. In addition, incomplete search documentation, exclusion records, and source-level appraisal procedures limit reproducibility. Future research should prioritize transparent review methods, longitudinal studies of rugby development, and robust evaluations of injury-prevention and psychosocial interventions across youth, community, and elite settings. Overall, the available evidence supports an integrated perspective on physical preparation, injury surveillance, developmental progression, and psychosocial support, but does not establish the comparative effectiveness of a single LTAD pathway or quantify the effects of specific interventions across developmental stages.

DISCUSSION

Principal Findings

This review highlights the interrelationships among developmental progression, physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological skills, and socio-environmental conditions in long-term rugby player development. Consistent with LTAD and youth physical development frameworks, sustainable development requires developmentally appropriate training that considers individual growth, maturation, and readiness (Balyi, 2001; Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Four key principles emerge: developmental pathways should account for individual differences and training experience; strength and

conditioning should complement technical preparation and progressive exposure to rugby-specific demands; injury prevention should support sustainable participation; and psychological preparation, coaching quality, and support resources may facilitate adaptation to competitive demands and developmental transitions (Gabbett, 2016; Fuller et al., 2016; Till et al., 2017; Wylleman et al., 2013).

However, these findings do not establish that a single integrated LTAD programme is superior to alternative approaches. The reviewed literature encompasses diverse research designs, populations, and publication types, providing different levels of

support for developmental principles, rugby-specific observations, and intervention effectiveness. Although integrating physical preparation, psychological support, and injury prevention is conceptually justified by complementary evidence, the combined effects have not been quantitatively established. Further empirical research is therefore needed to evaluate the comparative effectiveness, feasibility, and implementation of integrated development approaches across youth, community, and high-performance rugby settings.

Comparison with Previous Reviews and International Evidence

The findings align with LTAD and youth physical development frameworks emphasizing progressive, developmentally appropriate training that accounts for individual growth and maturation (Balyi, 2001; Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012), while their application to rugby requires consideration of sport-specific demands (Till et al., 2017). Research on sport diversification also challenges the assumption that early specialization is always necessary for long-term performance (Côté et al., 2009; Richard et al., 2023). Furthermore, rugby injury surveillance and prevention research provides a foundation for risk management (Brooks et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2007, 2016), while World Rugby's Activate programme illustrates a practical prevention approach (World Rugby, 2016, 2020); however, programme guidance should be distinguished from demonstrated effectiveness. Psychological skills, life skills, and support during athletic transitions are also relevant to athlete development (Gould et al., 2002; Gould & Carson, 2008; Vealey, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2013). Given differences in research designs, populations, and outcomes, these evidence domains should be interpreted complementarily rather than treated as directly comparable. Accordingly, this review does not claim to supersede previous reviews but integrates these perspectives into a shared developmental framework while acknowledging limitations in evidence transferability and the need for further rugby-specific research.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

This synthesis proposes an integrative framework for long-term rugby player development comprising five interconnected domains: developmental readiness and progression, physical and technical preparation, injury-risk management, psychological and social development, and environmental and organizational support. Extending LTAD principles, the framework emphasizes individual maturation, technical competence, psychological resources, and access to appropriate support alongside progressive training demands (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). These relationships are informed by research on physical preparation, contact exposure, and injury prevention (McBurnie & Dos'Santos, 2021; McQuilliam et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020; Talpey & Siesmaa, 2017; Cross et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2015). However, the framework remains a conceptual proposition rather than a validated causal model, and further rugby-specific research is needed to test its applicability across developmental stages and competitive contexts.

Methodological Implications

The reviewed literature employs diverse methods, including conceptual frameworks, physical preparation studies, injury surveillance, psychological research, and practical guidance, complicating comparisons and evidence assessment. Standardized injury definitions and reporting procedures are essential for comparability (Fuller et al., 2007), while longitudinal

designs should account for maturation, training history, playing position, competitive level, and previous injuries. Intervention and psychological studies should clearly report programme characteristics, validated measures, adherence, comparison conditions, and relevant contextual factors. Future reviews should also improve transparency through reproducible search strategies, explicit eligibility criteria, documented exclusion reasons, structured evidence extraction, and appropriate critical-appraisal procedures. All methodological processes should be reported as actually performed to strengthen reproducibility and reduce potential selection bias.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings suggest that rugby development programmes should account for individual maturation, movement competence, training history, playing position, and physical capacity rather than relying solely on chronological age or short-term performance (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004; Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd & Oliver, 2012). Injury prevention can be integrated into routine training through approaches such as World Rugby Activate, alongside contact-technique instruction, training-load management, and appropriate medical support (World Rugby, 2016, 2020). Psychological skills, including goal setting, confidence, emotional regulation, and stress management, should also be supported through constructive coaching and appropriate professional referral when needed (McAuliffe et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2023; Sellars et al., 2017). Governing bodies and clubs should address resource disparities and monitor programme adherence, injury outcomes, athlete well-being, and implementation costs. These recommendations require adaptation to local contexts and should not be treated as a universally validated intervention package without further evaluation.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this review is its integrative perspective, connecting developmental theory, physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological skills, and implementation conditions (Collins & MacNamara, 2017; Dohme et al., 2019; Vacher et al., 2022). However, incomplete search documentation, uncertainty regarding the 2007–2023 publication period, heterogeneous sources, and the absence of formal critical appraisal limit reproducibility and assessment of evidence quality. Unclear reporting of screening, reviewer independence, data extraction, and protocol registration also means potential selection and interpretive biases cannot be excluded. Furthermore, the lack of quantitative synthesis, formal publication-bias assessment, and certainty-of-evidence rating limits conclusions about intervention effectiveness, while insufficient geographical and population mapping constrains generalizability. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as a narrative synthesis of potential relationships among developmental progression, physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological support, and implementation conditions rather than definitive evidence of the effectiveness of an integrated development programme.

Future Research Agenda

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies examining how maturation, training history, sport diversification, physical and technical capacities, psychological characteristics, and injury experiences influence long-term rugby participation and performance. Standardized injury surveillance and rigorous intervention evaluations are also needed to improve comparability and establish programme effectiveness. Further research should investigate the integration of physical and psychological

development, include diverse socio-cultural and resource settings, and assess implementation feasibility, scalability, and cost-effectiveness. Transparent methods, systematic evidence extraction, appropriate critical appraisal, and preregistration where applicable should strengthen research quality. These priorities can

help distinguish broadly applicable developmental principles from context-dependent approaches and establish a stronger evidence base for safe, equitable, and sustainable rugby development pathways.

CONCLUSION

This integrative review highlights five interconnected dimensions of long-term rugby player development: developmental progression, physical and technical preparation, injury prevention, psychological and social development, and environmental support. The findings support a coordinated, developmentally informed approach that considers individual readiness, progressive training, injury-risk management, psychological support, and access to appropriate coaching. However, the available evidence does not establish the comparative effectiveness of a single integrated model or confirm that interventions produce equivalent outcomes across different populations and settings. Key uncertainties remain

regarding long-term developmental outcomes, evidence transferability, and the relationships among physical preparation, injury prevention, psychological adaptation, and sustained participation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies, rigorous intervention evaluations, cross-cultural comparisons, and implementation research using transparent methods and clearly defined outcomes. Ultimately, sustainable rugby player development requires integrating physical, technical, psychological, preventive, and socio-environmental considerations while ensuring that recommendations remain proportionate to the quality and consistency of available evidence.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Approval

This study is an integrative literature review based on previously published literature and documentary sources. No new human participants were recruited, and no primary human-participant data were collected for this review.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. This review does not report identifiable individual participant information or identifiable personal data collected specifically for this study.

Author Contributions (CRediT)

B. M. Gimhan: [Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; data curation; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

U. T. Mayakaduwa: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; data curation; formal analysis; writing – review and editing.

A. W. S. Chandana: Methodology; investigation; data curation; validation; writing – review and editing.

Daniele Buchanan: Conceptualization; validation; interpretation; writing – review and editing.

Takako Snook: Conceptualization; validation; supervision; writing –

review and editing.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

Data Availability

The materials supporting this review, including the source inventory and data-extraction documentation, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the availability of the underlying records.

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Generative AI Disclosure

The authors did not use generative artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

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