

Comparison of the Landing Error Scoring System Between Individuals with Concurrent Flexible Flatfoot and Genu Varum and Healthy Controls

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The Landing Error Scoring System (LESS) is a valuable tool for quantifying jump-landing biomechanics and identifying injury risk. While Flexible Flat Foot (FFF) and Genu Varum (GV) are prevalent postural deformities known to influence lower-limb alignment, their combined impact on LESS performance has remained unexplored. This study aimed to compare LESS scores in athletes with concurrent FFF and GV deformities with those of healthy controls.

Method and Materials: This clinical trial study recruited 52 male athletes from Tehran sports clubs and allocated them to either a control group (n=26) or a concurrent FFF and GV group (n=26). The deformities were clinically diagnosed by using the navicular drop test (>9mm) and intercondylar distance measurement (>3cm). Participants performed a double-leg jump-landing from a 30-cm box, which was analyzed via video assessment in the frontal and sagittal planes, and their LESS scores were meticulously recorded. Individual LESS items and demographic data were compared using independent t-tests, Chi-square, and Mann-Whitney U tests. The statistical significance level is set at 0.05.

Findings: The groups were demographically similar ($p>0.05$). The statistical analysis of the total LESS Score (sum of all 17 items) did not reveal a significant difference between the concurrent FFF/GV and Control groups ($p>0.05$). However, the "joint displacement" did show a significant between-group difference, with the concurrent deformities group having a higher mean rank ($U = 237$, $p = 0.024$).

Conclusion: The finding that the total LESS score was preserved suggests that the overall landing strategy may be maintained through compensatory mechanisms. Nevertheless, the significantly greater joint displacement in the deformity group indicates localized biomechanical alteration and a potential compensatory strategy. This highlights that the composite LESS score may mask clinically meaningful impairments. For athletes with FFF and GV, a component-level analysis of the LESS is recommended to identify these subtle deficits and guide targeted neuromuscular and corrective training programs to mitigate injury risk.

Keywords: Anterior cruciate ligament; Biomechanics; Flatfeet; Injury; Jump-Landing; Knock-knee; Prevention

Introduction

Musculoskeletal disorders and structural deformities of the lower limbs significantly impact movement patterns, balance, and functional capacity during both daily activities and sports. Identifying these alterations is of great clinical and injury-preventive importance, as abnormal movement patterns are recognized risk factors for pathologies such as Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) tears⁽¹⁾. Among the most common lower limb postural abnormalities in the athletic population are flatfoot and Genu Varum (GV)⁽²⁾. Flatfoot is characterized by a reduction in the medial longitudinal

arch height⁽³⁾ and is often associated with pain during gait, foot deformities, and lower back pain^(4, 5). Biomechanically, flatfoot promotes excessive foot pronation, which subsequently alters knee alignment^(6, 7). Similarly, GV (bowleg) involves a frontal-plane⁽⁸⁾ knee impairment that increases medial knee loading and joint mechanics, increasing the risk of patellofemoral pain syndrome and ACL injuries⁽⁹⁻¹¹⁾. Increased medial knee loading and altered joint mechanics secondary to GV both augment the risk of knee injuries. Several studies identified GV as a potential risk factor in the development of

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patellofemoral pain syndrome, as well as a predictor of ACL injury (12). Flexible Flatfoot (FFF) and GV are two highly prevalent limb deformities that can independently alter limb alignment, joint loading mechanics, and the quality of motion. The literature substantiates that lower landing quality is related to larger faults, greater knee valgus or knee varus angulations, and diminished neuromuscular control (1, 12). Jump-landing movements are a high-risk activity in athletics due to the high forces—often up to 12 times body weight—transmitted through lower-limb joints (13). Approximately 80% of ACL injuries occur during non-contact activities, typically during deceleration or jump-landing phases (14, 15), lateral turns, or sudden changes in direction that exert considerable stress on the knee joint (15). Poor trunk control and force distribution can lead to exaggerated frontal plane motion and high knee valgus, resulting in excessive rotatory forces across the knee joint (16). While FFF and GV independently alter joint loading, their combined impact on landing quality, as measured by the LESS, has not been established (17). Optimal landing with correct knee alignment will allow for the best possible distribution of forces during load absorption (18). Knee valgus (medial collapse), along with foot abduction, was found to be the most common position during non-contact ACL injuries (19). According to modified biomechanical models, significant risk factors for non-contact ACL injury include decreased knee flexion angles, high posterior ground reaction forces, and high knee valgus moments (20). Various jump-landing tests, including the Landing Error Scoring System (LESS), jump-landing video screening, and the tuck jump assessment, are widely used in clinical practice. Based on our current literature review, a variety of studies have investigated the usefulness of such tests for assessing ACL injury risk (16, 21). The LESS is a valid and widely utilized instrument to qualitatively and semi-quantitatively evaluate

landing quality, with respect to movement errors during the landing phase (22). Several investigations have recognized LESS as a valid and reliable screening indicator of injury risk among athletes (3). The Landing Error Scoring System (LESS) is a movement analysis tool developed by Padua (Padua et al., 2009) in 2009 to identify the risk of sustaining non-contact anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries and biomechanical movement patterns involved [23,24]

Inadequate neuromuscular control of the lower limbs and trunk can increase the risk of non-contact injuries, particularly ACL tears. Such injuries often result from dynamic knee valgus, poor trunk control, and improper force distribution during landing. Given the high prevalence of non-contact ACL injuries and the critical role of neuromuscular (25) deficits in altering landing mechanics, it is essential to examine interventions that improve trunk and lower-limb control (26, 27). This issue is significant for athletes with structural or functional lower limb abnormalities, such as FFF or GV, as these conditions may further increase the likelihood of dynamic knee valgus during landing. No research study has, to date, specifically explored the combined impact of FFF and GV on the outcomes of the LESS. Given that each deformity can independently affect lower limb alignment, joint range of motion, and loading mechanics, the combination of both deformities may cumulatively have additive or exacerbating effects on landing quality and movement patterns. This study aims to compare LESS scores and their sub-components to identify subtle deficits that could inform specific preventive measures

Method and Materials

This clinical trial study recruited male athletes (aged 18–32). It divided them into a control group ($n = 25$) and a concurrent FFF/GV group ($n = 27$), based on a G*Power sample size calculation ($\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80).

Participants were required to have at least 3 years of athletic experience and to attend three weekly practice sessions. The deformity group was explicitly defined by a navicular drop >9 mm (Brody test) and a standing intercondylar distance >3 cm. Excluded were those with a history of ankle sprains, recent lower-limb surgeries or fractures within the past year, incomplete data, or injury during the study.

Assessment tools and procedures were as follows.

FFF diagnosis: Brody procedure (navicular drop >9 mm) was used. It was evaluated using the Tip-Toe test differentiated FFF from structural flatfeet⁽²⁸⁾.

GV diagnosis: It was measured as a medial distance between the knees (intercondylar distance) greater than 3 cm while the medial malleoli were touching^(29, 30).

Landing quality was evaluated using the Landing Error Scoring System (LESS), where participants performed a double-leg jump from a 30-cm platform to a distance of 50% body height (Figure 1), immediately followed by a maximal vertical jump. Following 2–3 practice attempts, trials were recorded without technique feedback, and incorrect trials were repeated. Two cameras (frontal/sagittal planes; 3m distance, 1.5m height) captured the motion for analysis via Kinovea software. The standard 17-item LESS scores faults as one and correct performance as 0, with higher cumulative scores indicating

poorer technique and elevated injury risk. Previous research confirms the LESS as a valid and reliable tool with good-to-excellent agreement for identifying neuromuscular deficits and ACL injury risk^(23, 31-34).



Figure 1- LESS test procedure

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 with significance set at $P < 0.05$. Independent t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests were applied to continuous variables based on normality, while the Chi-square test was used for categorical data.

Findings

The groups showed no significant differences in demographic variables, ensuring baseline homogeneity (Table 1).

Table 1) Summary of Group CBT Intervention Sessions

Group	With deformities	Controls	Independent T-test
Variable	Mean \pm SD	Mean \pm SD	P-value
age	22.51 \pm 2.94	23.28 \pm 2.5	.322
Height	177.09 \pm 4.82	178.16 \pm 5.03	.430
weight	74.45 \pm 8.82	75 \pm 7.14	.809
BMI	23.72 \pm 2.49	23.62 \pm 1.96	.871

Chi-square analysis of the 15 LESS items revealed no significant between-group differences for the majority of variables ($P > 0.05$; Table 2), although knee-flexion displacement approached significance ($P = 0.064$).

Mann-Whitney U analysis revealed that the concurrent deformity group had significantly higher mean ranks for joint displacement (Median = 1, Mean Rank = 30.22) compared to controls (Median = 0, Mean Rank = 22.48) ($U = 237$, $z = -2.255$, $p = 0.024$, $r = 0.31$). In contrast, no significant differences emerged for overall

impression (Concurrent Median = 1, Mean Rank= 25.76, Control Median= 1, Mean Rank=27.30, $p=0.618$) or total LESS score(Concurrent Median = 1, Mean Rank= 29.78, Control Median= 1, Mean Rank=22.96, $p=0.094$) (Table 3).

Table 2) Chi-Square Test Results for Landing Error Scoring System (LESS) Variables

Variable	Pearson Chi-Square	df	p-value
Knee flexion: initial contact	.428	1	.513
Hip flexion: initial contact	1.926	1	.165
Trunk flexion: initial contact	.145	1	.704
Ankle plantar flexion: initial contact	1.258	1	.262
Medial knee position: initial contact	.006	1	.936
Lateral trunk flexion: initial contact	.001	1	.991
Stance width: wide	.944	1	.331
Stance width: narrow	.424	1	.515
Foot position: external rotation	2.914	1	.088
Foot position: internal rotation	1.926	1	.165
Symmetric initial foot contact: initial contact	.349	1	.554
Knee-flexion displacement	3.438	1	.064
Hip-flexion displacement	1.926	1	.165
Trunk-flexion displacement	.146	1	.703
Medial-knee displacement	2.016	1	.156

Table 1) Mann-Whitney U Test Results

Variable	Group	n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	P	Effect Size	Median
Joint displacement	Concurrent deformities	27	30.22	816	-2.255	.024	.31	1
	Control	25	22.48	562				1
Overall impression	Concurrent deformities	27	25.76	695.50	-.498	.618	.06	1
	Control	25	27.30	682.50				1
Overall score	Concurrent deformities	27	29.78	804	-1.673	.094	.23	1
	Control	25	22.96	574				1

Discussion

The primary finding of this study is that, although the total LESS score was statistically similar between groups, athletes with concurrent FFF and GV exhibited significantly higher error scores in the joint displacement category. This suggests that localized biomechanical alterations occur even when overall landing quality appears maintained. These results align with previous research indicating that specific biomechanical faults may be present despite a stable composite score. These findings align with the study by Hébert-Losier et al. (2023), who found that slight structural variations can influence specific biomechanical faults under external conditions. Still, the overall LESS score will not be substantially affected (35). Similarly, Padua et al. (2011) validated that LESS is an effective indicator for evaluating

biomechanical faults during landing, though its sensitivity to general or moderate alterations might be limited (36).

The observed differences in the joint displacement item of the LESS may be explained by the biomechanical alterations associated with FFF and GV. FFF promotes excessive foot pronation and internal tibial rotation (6), whereas GV shifts the mechanical load axis medially (12). These structural deviations can lead to reduced sagittal-plane knee motion, which is often captured as a higher joint displacement score on the LESS. Mechanistically, joint displacement can be exacerbated by impairments in neuromuscular control and biomechanical alterations. Past studies have determined that FF results in overpronation of the foot, leading to internal tibial and femoral rotation and knee valgus angles (37, 38). These ordinal changes, along

with delayed activation and proprioceptive deficits of joint-stabilizing muscles (39), can affect knee and ankle joint displacement and reduce landing control. This study is consistent with the findings of Abolfathi et al. (2021) that FF athletes exhibit poorer landing quality and achieve higher LESS scores, thereby increasing the risk of ACL and other non-contact lower-limb injuries (38).

Although the overall LESS score did not vary significantly, this finding should not be overlooked. It has been demonstrated by Hébert-Losier et al. (2023, 2021) that specific dimensions of the LESS, particularly joint displacement, are more sensitive to structural or environmental variations and can identify local biomechanical deficits and increase the risk of injury. This means that while overall LESS analysis would likely fail to detect nuanced differences in joint-specific motor control, a component-level analysis, specifically of joint displacement, can prove advantageous for injury prevention and movement correction program design (40). These findings point to the fact that even if the overall LESS score is unchanged, a single focus on improving motor control and stability of key joints, such as the knee and ankle, can reduce the risk of injury from non-contact conditions (41, 42). Moreover, studies such as Wesley et al. (2015) have found that sex differences in landing mechanics can affect the risk of ACL injury, which highlights the importance of developing preventive and corrective training programs with specifications for each sex (43).

Previous research has shown that targeted neuromuscular and plyometric training can improve landing mechanics, decrease dynamic knee valgus, and enhance athletic performance, emphasizing the potential of specific interventions to modify movement patterns (31, 32). Previous research has shown conflicting results. For example, Padua et al. (2011) showed no difference in total LESS score between non-injured and injured athletes (36). These results highlight that in trained populations with reasonable movement control, the overall LESS score can have low sensitivity, thus lending additional

importance to the component analysis of the landing elements, such as joint displacement. The structural deviations of FFF (excessive pronation and internal tibial rotation) and GV (medial load axis shift) likely contribute to reduced sagittal-plane motion, as evidenced by higher joint displacement scores. This study corroborates the findings of Abolfathi et al. (2021) that foot postural deformities can enhance landing errors even in otherwise healthy athletes (38). Previous reviews have highlighted sex-related differences in jump-landing mechanics and emphasized the need for establishing normative and clinically applicable LESS values across athletic populations. Therefore, the present findings provide clinically relevant joint-level displacement information that may assist practitioners in refining injury-risk screening and targeted corrective exercise programs (23). In a field-based setting, coaches and therapists must understand that the "joint displacement" item in the LESS evaluates explicitly the amount of sagittal plane motion (flexion) at the knee, hip, and trunk from the moment of initial foot contact to the point of maximum joint flexion.

Regarding observable measures, a "fault" is recorded if the athlete demonstrates a "stiff" landing, characterized by minimal observable increases in knee or hip flexion during the loading phase

Regarding field assessment, practitioners can assess this using standard smartphone video recording from a sagittal (side) view. A lack of visible "give" or joint displacement suggests poor impact absorption, increasing the risk of non-contact injuries.

This study is cross-sectional, so we cannot confirm cause-and-effect between lower-limb deformities and landing mechanics. A significant limitation of this study is the exclusive inclusion of male athletes, which substantially restricts the generalizability of these findings. Given the well-established sex differences in jump-landing biomechanics—including the higher incidence of dynamic knee valgus and non-contact ACL injuries in females—these results may not apply to female athletic populations. We used 2D video analysis, a single jump-landing task, and

simple yes/no classification of deformities, which may overlook subtle biomechanical changes. Neuromuscular and proprioceptive factors were not directly measured.

Future research must adopt longitudinal designs and include diverse, multi-sex populations. Furthermore, utilizing 3D motion capture and electromyography would provide a more granular understanding of the muscle activity and joint mechanics involved in these compensatory.

Conclusion

Athletes with concurrent FFF and GV demonstrate significant deficits in joint displacement during jump-landing, despite having total LESS scores comparable to healthy controls. Clinicians should prioritize component-level analysis over global scores to identify these subtle biomechanical faults. Targeted neuromuscular training focusing on knee and ankle stability is essential to mitigate injury risks, particularly ACL tears, in athletes with these postural deformities.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors were involved in designing and performing the study. The manuscript was written by the first author and confirmed by all authors.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest for this study.

Ethical Permission

Ethical approval was obtained from the Motor Sciences Research Institute (IR-KHU.KRC.1000.284), and all participants provided written informed consent.

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