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1     **EFFECTS OF INTER-LIMB ASYMMETRIES ON PHYSICAL AND**  
2             **SPORTS PERFORMANCE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

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1 **Abstract**

2 The prevalence of inter-limb asymmetries has been reported in numerous studies across a  
3 wide range of sports and physical qualities; however, few have analysed their effects on  
4 physical and sports performance. A systematic review of the literature was undertaken using  
5 the Medline and SPORT Discus databases, with all articles required to meet a specified  
6 criteria based on a quality review. Eighteen articles met the inclusion criteria, relating  
7 participant asymmetry scores to physical and sports performance measures. The findings of  
8 this systematic review indicate that inter-limb differences in strength may be detrimental to  
9 jumping, kicking and cycling performance. When inter-limb asymmetries are quantified  
10 during jumping based exercises, they have been primarily used to examine their association  
11 with change of direction speed with mixed findings. Inter-limb asymmetries have also been  
12 quantified in anthropometry, sprinting, dynamic balance and sport-specific actions, again  
13 with inconsistent findings. However, all results have been reported using associative analysis  
14 with physical or sport performance metrics with no randomised controlled trials included.  
15 Further research is warranted to understand the mechanisms that underpin inter-limb  
16 differences and the magnitude of performance changes that can be accounted for by these  
17 asymmetries.

18

19 **Key Words:** Between-limb differences, imbalances, strength, jumping

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## 1 **1.0 Introduction**

2 The concept of inter-limb asymmetries compares the performance of one limb in respect to  
3 the other and has been widely investigated in the available literature (Keeley et al., 2011).  
4 Numerous classifications of quantifying these inter-limb differences have been established  
5 including dominant vs. non-dominant (Rouissi et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2007; Newton et  
6 al., 2006), stronger vs. weaker (Sato and Heise, 2012; Impellizzeri et al., 2007), right vs. left  
7 (Atkins et al., 2016; Zifchock et al., 2008) and injured vs. non-injured (Rohman et al., 2015;  
8 Ardern et al., 2011; Grindem et al., 2011; Greenberger and Paterno, 1995; Barber et al., 1990)  
9 limbs. The wide range of classifications has meant that no uniform method of quantifying  
10 inter-limb differences exists to date, with the exception of reporting these asymmetries as a  
11 percentage difference from one limb in respect to the other; thus, this review will discuss  
12 asymmetries in this context also.

13 Within the literature, a stronger focus surrounding injury risk and occurrence appears to have  
14 been investigated when compared to physical or sports performance. Previous research has  
15 highlighted that both athlete and non-athlete populations who exhibit inter-limb asymmetries >  
16 15% have been associated with increased injury incidence when compared to groups who  
17 score below this threshold (Grindem et al., 2011; Impellizzeri et al., 2007; Barber et al.,  
18 1990). Athletes who have suffered anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries have been a  
19 popular stream of investigation (Jordan et al., 2014; Logerstedt et al., 2012; Grindem et al.,  
20 2011; Reid et al., 2007; Noyes et al., 1991; Barber et al., 1990), and a variety of hop tests  
21 have proven valid and reliable measures of quantifying inter-limb differences between the  
22 injured and non-injured limb (Ross et al., 2002; Reid et al., 2007; Rohman et al., 2015).  
23 Consequently, asymmetries of < 10% has been proposed as the target for patient discharge  
24 when athletes are returning to sport (Kyritsis et al., 2016; Rohman et al., 2015), although it  
25 should be noted that this is an arbitrary threshold. That said, increased symmetry could be

1 considered as a marker of successful rehabilitation, and increase confidence in the athlete and  
2 clinician that a safe and effective return to sport is possible.

3         However, the role of inter-limb asymmetries and their effects on physical or sports  
4 performance is less well known. Previous studies have identified the presence of inter-limb  
5 differences in a range of populations (Atkins et al., 2016; Ceroni et al., 2012; Impellizzeri et  
6 al. 2007; Maloney et al., 2016; Rohman et al., 2015), and a variety of sports such as sprinting  
7 (Meyers et al., 2017; Exell et al., 2016; Rumpf et al., 2014), kickboxing (Stanton et al., 2015),  
8 swimming (Evershed et al., 2014), basketball (Schiltz et al., 2009), and rowing (Buckeridge  
9 et al., 2012). In addition, some research has examined inter-limb asymmetries across a range  
10 of physical competencies including strength (Bailey et al., 2015; Bazyler et al., 2014; Sato  
11 and Heise, 2012), power (Bell et al., 2014; Benjanuvatra et al., 2013; Hoffman et al., 2007),  
12 and leg stiffness (Hobara et al., 2013; Maloney et al., 2015; Maloney et al., 2016). Whilst it is  
13 logical to assume that minimising these differences is desirable, determining whether this has  
14 an actual measurable effect on physical or sport performance still remains unclear.

15         Available literature has shown that inter-limb asymmetries ~10% result in reductions  
16 in jump height (Bell et al., 2014), and slower change of direction speed times (Hoffman et al.,  
17 2007), indicating that the reduction of these differences may be favourable. However, other  
18 studies have shown conflicting results (Bini and Hume, 2015; Lockie et al., 2014). The  
19 presence of heightened inter-limb asymmetries would be expected in sporting actions where  
20 preferred limb dominance is evident (Schiltz et al., 2009); although limited data are available  
21 to support this notion (Hart et al., 2016). Furthermore, inter-limb asymmetries for kinetic and  
22 kinematic variables may show different values; thus, not all observed side to side differences  
23 may be relevant to the performance outcome (Exell et al., 2016; Rannama et al., 2015). By  
24 more clearly understanding the effects of inter-limb asymmetries on physical and sports

1 performance, it will provide practitioners with important information for the design of  
2 targeted testing and training strategies.

3 Therefore, the primary aim of this systematic review was to examine the available  
4 literature relating to inter-limb asymmetries and to critically evaluate their effects on physical  
5 and sport-specific performance. In addition, a 'Directions for Future Research' section has  
6 been provided offering guidelines on how to further progress and understand the topic of  
7 inter-limb asymmetries.

8

## 9 **2.0 Methods**

### 10 **2.1 Literature Search Methodology**

11 Original and review journal articles were retrieved from electronic searches of Medline and  
12 SPORT Discus databases. Figure 1 provides a schematic of the search methodology. The  
13 search strategy combined specific terms with the word 'asymmetries' so as to avoid excessive  
14 quantities of unrelated articles. These included: 'asymmetries and performance',  
15 'asymmetries and strength', 'asymmetries and jumping', 'asymmetries and speed',  
16 'asymmetries and changing direction', 'asymmetries and balance', 'asymmetries and  
17 running', and 'asymmetries and sport'. Additional searches were subsequently conducted in  
18 Google Scholar if full-text articles were not fully available; these allowed for articles to be  
19 found on ResearchGate™ if they were unavailable through the aforementioned search  
20 engines. Finally, using the full-text articles, reference lists were checked for additional  
21 research studies that were deemed suitable and had not been identified using the  
22 aforementioned methods. Inclusion criteria required studies to have related their asymmetry

1 findings to a separate physical or sport performance metric and not just report the prevalence  
2 of asymmetries in the population sample tested. The final search date was 9 November, 2016.

3

4 \*\*\* INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE \*\*\*

5

## 6 **2.2 Grading Article Quality**

7 A quality review was conducted in line with previous suggestions (Black et al., 2016). Each  
8 study was appraised using nine criteria (Table 1) and a scale of 0-2 (where zero equates to  
9 ‘no’, one equates to ‘maybe’ and two equates to ‘yes’). The third criteria pertaining to the  
10 intervention being described was modified to ‘procedures described’ because none of the  
11 asymmetry studies identified in the final analysis included training interventions. Therefore,  
12 due to the nature of associated studies with the topic of inter-limb asymmetries and effects on  
13 physical or sports performance, only correlational studies were deemed relevant and specific  
14 to the title and thus, included in the subsequent analysis. Total scores for each study were  
15 then converted to a percentage ranging from 0-100% (Tables 2-5). To be sure of an  
16 appropriate level of quality, only articles that scored > 75% were considered for the final  
17 analysis.

18

19 \*\*\* INSERT TABLES 1-5 ABOUT HERE \*\*\*

20

## 21 **3.0 Results**

22 A total of 16,274 articles were initially returned, with each search’s results further  
23 streamlined by way of journal relevance (a function that can be processed in Medline and  
24 SPORT Discus). Articles from any sport related journal were included in the initial filtering  
25 process and resulted in a total of 2,621 articles. The number of articles initially returned (and

1 then filtered by journal relevance) is described for each search term below where the reported  
2 numbers represent the following: (Database =  $n$  [ $n$  by sport related journals]). ‘Asymmetries  
3 and performance’ (Medline = 6485 [264]; SPORT Discus = 652 [299]), ‘asymmetries and  
4 strength’ (Medline = 2586 [208]; SPORT Discus = 421 [289]), ‘asymmetries and jumping’  
5 (Medline = 75 [29]; SPORT Discus = 78 [65]), ‘asymmetries and speed’ (Medline = 1573  
6 [181]; SPORT Discus = 320 [210]), ‘asymmetries and changing direction’ (Medline = 24 [4];  
7 SPORT Discus = 2 [2]), ‘asymmetries and balance’ (Medline = 1686 [170]; SPORT Discus =  
8 197 [124]), ‘asymmetries and running’ (Medline = 585 [61]; SPORT Discus = 131 [87]),  
9 ‘asymmetries and sport’ (Medline = 433 [200]; SPORT Discus = 1018 [428]). The title and  
10 abstracts from these results subsequently identified 93 full text articles for consideration. Of  
11 the 18 articles included in the final analysis (see Tables 2-5 for details on study  
12 methodologies), 3 of these studies focused on asymmetries in strength, 3 examine  
13 asymmetries during jumping-based tasks, 7 during sporting actions, and 5 related  
14 asymmetries in dynamic balance, anthropometry, and sprinting to physical performance.

15 Furthermore, a wide range of performance outcome measures were employed to  
16 demonstrate the effects of inter-limb asymmetries on physical or sports performance (see  
17 Tables 2-5). It should be noted that multiple outcome measures are often tested in any one  
18 study; thus, some studies are counted more than once in the proceeding statistics. Categories  
19 of tests and the number of studies relating to each included: sprinting (5), jumping (4),  
20 change of direction speed (4), cycling (3), kicking based tasks (3), swimming (2), and 1 each  
21 specific to different track and field events and goalkeepers in soccer.

22

## 23 **4.0 Discussion**



1 The aim of this systematic review was to critically evaluate the available literature pertaining  
2 to inter-limb asymmetries and critically evaluate their effects on physical and sport  
3 performance. Inter-limb differences in strength, dynamic balance, and anthropometry appear  
4 to have a detrimental effect on physical performance, whilst the evidence pertaining to  
5 jumping-based tasks is less conclusive. Mixed findings were also noted during sport-specific  
6 actions indicating that the effects of inter-limb asymmetry on sports performance may be task  
7 specific.

8

#### 9 **4.1 Asymmetries in Strength**

10 Bailey et al., (2013) reported mean asymmetries during the isometric mid-thigh pull (IMTP)  
11 of  $6.6 \pm 5.1\%$ , and moderate negative correlations between the peak force (PF) symmetry  
12 index and jump height ( $r = -0.39$  to  $-0.52$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and peak power ( $r = -0.28$  to  $-0.43$ ;  $p <$   
13  $0.05$ ) during loaded and unloaded jumps. While a large amount of variance remains  
14 unexplained, these data provide an indication that asymmetries of a greater magnitude may  
15 contribute to reduced jump performance.

16 Asymmetries in strength have also been shown to have a detrimental effect on the  
17 performance of sport-specific skills including kicking and cycling. Hart et al., (2014) reported  
18 that higher asymmetries had a negative effect on kicking accuracy in Australian Rules  
19 football players. Athletes were required to kick a ball to an opposing player stood 20m away  
20 with accuracy defined as the receiving player remaining stationary, or within an arm's reach  
21 with only one step permitted during the catch. Any deviation from these criteria resulted in  
22 the kicker being categorised as 'inaccurate'. Strength imbalance was measured via bilateral  
23 and unilateral isometric squats with the more accurate group of kickers demonstrating -1%  
24 difference between limbs (the minus sign indicating the support limb was stronger); whereas,  
25 the less accurate group showed inter-limb differences of 8%. The stronger limb in the

1 accurate group was the stance limb, which may indicate that a more stable athlete is able to  
2 perform unilateral, technical tasks to a higher standard, although further research is warranted  
3 to fully corroborate this theory. Furthermore, in a group of competitive cyclists, peak torque  
4 asymmetries of the knee extensors (at  $180^{\circ}\cdot\text{sec}^{-1}$ ) were negatively correlated ( $r = -0.50$ ;  $p <$   
5  $0.05$ ) with power output during a 5-second maximal effort cycling test (Rannama et al., 2015).  
6 Trunk and pelvis kinematic asymmetries were also negatively correlated ( $r = -0.65$  and  $-0.63$   
7 respectively;  $p < 0.01$ ) with power, indicating that imbalances in quadriceps strength and  
8 trunk/pelvis joint angles may have a detrimental effect on power during maximal effort  
9 cycling. Cumulatively, based on the available data, it would appear that there is a negative  
10 relationship between inter-limb asymmetries in strength and jumping, kicking and sprint  
11 cycling performance. However, when interpreting these findings, caution should be applied  
12 as the study designs utilised correlational analysis. Further research should aim to quantify  
13 how much variance in ‘loss of performance’ can be attributed to inter-limb asymmetries in  
14 strength.

15

#### 16 **4.2 Asymmetries during Jumping Tasks**

17 Conflicting findings were shown in studies measuring the performance effects of inter-limb  
18 asymmetries during jumping-based tasks. Lockie et al., (2014) reported varying asymmetry  
19 scores for three different jump tests, highlighting the task-specific nature of physical  
20 performance tests. All jumps were performed unilaterally with inter-limb differences reported  
21 for CMJ height (10.4%), broad jump (3.3%), and lateral jump distances (5.1%). No  
22 significant correlations were found between asymmetry scores on any of the jumping tasks  
23 and sprint ( $r$  range =  $-0.004$  to  $-0.176$ ) or change of direction speed (CODS) tests ( $r$  range =  $<$   
24  $0.001$  to  $0.189$ ), indicating that inter-limb differences of such low magnitudes in these jump  
25 tests do not negatively impact sprint or COD performance.

1           Research from Hoffman et al., (2007) also showed no significant differences in the  
2 time to perform an L-run to the dominant or non-dominant side, in spite of a 9.7% peak  
3 power asymmetry between limbs during a single leg countermovement jump (SLCMJ). This  
4 was combined with weak correlations between the SLCMJ non-dominant limb and the L-run  
5 for both dominant ( $r = -0.36$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and non-dominant ( $r = -0.37$ ;  $p < .05$ ) directions; and  
6 no significant relationships when compared with the dominant limb of the SLCMJ. This may  
7 be due to the complexity of CODS tasks that require high levels of skill and are underpinned  
8 by multiple physical qualities (Sheppard and Young, 2006).

9           Maloney et al., (2016) examined the relationship between asymmetries measured  
10 during single leg drop jumps and a 90° cutting task. The sample was subsequently divided  
11 into fast and slow groups, with mean vertical stiffness and jump height asymmetry explaining  
12 63% of the variance in performance during the cutting task ( $r^2 = 0.63$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ).  
13 Additionally, faster athletes portrayed significantly lower asymmetries for jump height ( $p =$   
14  $0.026$ ), but no other drop jump asymmetry variables were statistically significant. Inter-limb  
15 asymmetries were also calculated for left and right total time during the CODS test, although  
16 no significant differences were noted. Considering the sample in this study were not an  
17 athletic population and with asymmetries being previously suggested to be a product of  
18 playing sport over time (Hart et al., 2016), results may be different if an athlete sample was  
19 tested. These results indicate that minimising differences between limbs during unilateral  
20 drop jumping could be advantageous to enhance cutting performance. It is worth noting that  
21 Maloney et al., (2016) used the ‘median split’ technique when reporting results, whereas  
22 Hoffman et al., (2007) and Lockie et al., (2014) did not utilise the same process which may  
23 account for some of the variation seen in the results.

### 24 25 **4.3 Sport-Specific Asymmetries**

1 Bini and Hume, (2015) reported large inter-limb asymmetries for the resultant force (11-21%;  
2  $p < 0.01$ ) and effective force (36-54%;  $p < 0.01$ ) in 10 competitive cyclists, with the latter  
3 being described as the angular impulse of the tangential force on the crank. A strong  
4 correlation ( $r = -0.72$ ) was reported between asymmetries and effective force, whilst no  
5 association was observed for resultant force. These findings indicate that cyclists who  
6 displayed larger asymmetries in effective force may actually perform faster during a 4-km  
7 time trial. Individual asymmetries for pedal force varied across the sample, although no  
8 reason was identified as to why larger asymmetries corresponded to enhanced cycling  
9 performance (Bini and Hume, 2015). These results are unexpected as intuitively, larger  
10 asymmetries should be associated with reductions in performance; however, this may not be  
11 as important in a sport such as cycling where total power output is likely to result in superior  
12 performance.

13 Liu and Jensen, (2012) calculated cycling asymmetries by comparing the average  
14 angular velocity of a cycle ergometer's crank at  $90^\circ$  and  $270^\circ$  for the right and left limb's  
15 respectively. Asymmetries were significantly lower for adults compared to older children ( $p$   
16  $< 0.01$ ), with younger children showing significantly greater between-limb differences than  
17 both groups ( $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, there were significant positive correlations between  
18 asymmetries and the root mean square error (ability to match speed to a specified cadence),  
19 indicating that as inter-limb differences increased, cycling performance decreased at every  
20 cadence (40:  $r = 0.53$ ; 60:  $r = 0.56$ ; 80:  $r = 0.56$ ; 100:  $r = 0.40$  and 120:  $r = 0.72$ ). In addition,  
21 asymmetries decreased as cadence increased, suggesting that slower speeds may require  
22 greater control with a more natural, cyclical motion favouring a faster cadence (Liu and  
23 Jensen, 2012).

24 Conflicting findings regarding the effects of asymmetry on swimming performance  
25 have also been reported. Dos Santos et al., (2013) analysed asymmetries during front crawl

1 tethered (stationary) swimming reporting inter-limb differences for peak and mean force at  
2 different time points (beginning: 5-15s; middle: 55-65s; end: 110-120s) during a 2-minute  
3 swim. Furthermore, subjects were sub-divided into the fast and slow groups ( $n = 9$  per group)  
4 based on their respective best 200m times, with the faster group demonstrating significantly  
5 lower peak force (13.32 vs. 18.28%;  $p = 0.017$ ) and mean force (7.01 vs. 10.08%;  $p = 0.04$ )  
6 asymmetries (Dos Santos et al., 2013). This perhaps indicates that heightened inter-limb  
7 differences in force production may be detrimental to swimming performance, with a median  
8 split technique again used to report the results. In contrast, Morouco et al., (2015) analysed  
9 elite level swimmers using a maximum effort 30-second tethered swim, also dividing the  
10 sample into fast and slow groups based on their best 50m front crawl time. A mean  
11 asymmetry index of 19% (range = 3.3-48.5%) was reported and two-thirds of the sample  
12 showed asymmetries  $> 10\%$ . When performance times were compared between groups, no  
13 difference in asymmetry was reported, with the authors concluding that inter-limb  
14 asymmetries do not negatively affect short-performance sprint swimming (Morouco et al.,  
15 2015). Interestingly, the conflicting findings between the two studies could be explained by  
16 the fact that regardless of swim time, the majority of swimmers in Dos Santos et al's., (2013)  
17 study exhibited inter-limb differences  $> 10\%$ . Thus, asymmetry may not have been a decisive  
18 factor in deciding the performance outcome for this sample. Despite these results, it is  
19 suggested that coaches aim to minimise notable differences between limbs, especially those  $>$   
20 10%.

21 More definitive results have been reported for the sport of futsal in professional and  
22 amateur populations. Barbieri et al., (2015) analysed asymmetries during different kicking  
23 actions using both the dominant and non-dominant limbs. Significant differences in ball  
24 velocity ( $p = 0.001$ ) and kicking accuracy ( $p = 0.003$ ) were shown between limbs for both  
25 stationary and 'rolling ball' kicks, with larger asymmetries present in kicking accuracy (28-

1 40%) than ball velocity (10-11%). Unsurprisingly, the rolling condition increased task  
2 complexity, highlighting substantially higher asymmetries for the non-dominant limb. Vieira  
3 et al., (2016) also analysed kicking accuracy and ball velocity in addition to velocity for the  
4 ankle, knee, and hip joints in professional players. Supplementary isokinetic testing also  
5 identified significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in mean power at  $180^\circ \cdot \text{sec}^{-1}$ , resulting in  
6 significantly higher ankle and ball velocities for the dominant limb. It is not surprising that  
7 the non-dominant limb demonstrates reduced kicking performance; however, it provides an  
8 impression that minimising asymmetries may be beneficial for equalising ball speed on both  
9 limbs. What is perhaps more applicable in this instance, is to suggest that players practice  
10 shooting using both limbs so that kicking accuracy can be enhanced on the non-dominant side.  
11 Kicking is most likely more reliant on skill execution than physical measures of performance  
12 such as strength and power; thus, there is no guarantee that reduced inter-limb asymmetries  
13 will automatically transfer to improved ball accuracy or velocity.

14 The effects of asymmetry on measures of goalkeeping performance have also been  
15 examined (Spratford et al., 2009). Test set up involved the placement of different footballs at  
16 0.3, 0.9, and 1.5m in height on both the preferred and non-preferred diving side for six elite  
17 goalkeepers. Subsequent analysis split the dive into three phases: initiation, take-off and ball  
18 contact which saw significant differences in various kinematic variables such as pelvis and  
19 thorax rotation between sides. The most notable outcome was that the non-preferred side  
20 experienced less hip extension at take-off and thus, the centre of mass travelled slower and  
21 less directly to the ball. It is unclear whether this reduced hip extension on the non-preferred  
22 side is a product of lower force or power production capabilities. However, it is in the interest  
23 of coaches to understand that a goalkeeper likely requires greater practice diving to their non-  
24 preferred side, which may be aided by the reduction of kinetic and kinematic asymmetries.

25

## 4.4 Asymmetries during Dynamic Balance, Anthropometry, and Sprinting Tasks

### 4.4.1 Dynamic Balance

Dynamic balance refers to “the ability to move and change directions under various conditions without falling” (Clark et al., 2012). Gonzalo-Skok et al., (2015) used the Y-Balance test to assess dynamic balance in young elite basketball players from a Spanish Division 1 academy. Composite score asymmetries in addition to those observed in the anterior and postero-medial directions were negatively correlated ( $r = -0.520$  to  $-0.773$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) with CMJ height; a key measure of basketball performance (Fort Vanmeerhaeghe et al., 2016; Read et al., 2014). In addition, dorsiflexion asymmetries (measured during a weight bearing lunge test) were negatively correlated ( $r = -0.523$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) with a CODS test involving a 180° turn. Thus, there may be some association between asymmetries in dynamic balance and jump performance with further evidence suggesting that imbalances in ankle range of motion may also negatively affect CODS. It is plausible that more stable athletes (by virtue of better balance ability) should be able to exert a more even distribution of force during a jumping action. This is somewhat supported by Jordan et al., (2014) who highlighted the complexity of how inter-limb asymmetries changed from one side to the other during different loading phases of a CMJ, in athletes with prior ACL injuries. Similarly, the importance of optimal ankle dorsi-flexion should not be understated during CODS tasks. The action of changing direction requires some element of braking force prior to reapplying force in the desired directional change. Such kinetic forces are suggested to be accompanied by loading through the lower limb joints (flexion of the ankle, knee and hip) in order to successfully ‘brake’. Reduced ankle dorsi-flexion is almost certain to have a detrimental knock-on effect further up the kinetic chain; namely, unwanted movement patterns such as knee valgus become a much bigger risk which has been previously reported (Malliaras et al.,

1 2006). Therefore, it would appear prudent to both minimise inter-limb differences in dynamic  
2 balance and optimise ankle range of motion for superior jumping and CODS performance.

3

#### 4 4.4.2 Anthropometry

5 Further research has also linked asymmetries in lean mass to jumping performance. Bell et al.,  
6 (2014) reported that thigh and shank lean mass asymmetry accounted for 20% of the variance  
7 in propulsive force asymmetry and lean mass asymmetry of the pelvis, thigh, and shank  
8 accounted for 25% of power asymmetries, during a CMJ. Whilst a large amount of variance  
9 remains unexplained by these data, it was also reported that asymmetries in power > 10%  
10 during the CMJ resulted in decreased jump height of 9cm (effect size =  $d > 0.8$ ). Thus, inter-  
11 limb differences in lean mass may be partially responsible for force and power asymmetries  
12 and when the effects on jump height are considered, may act as a potential limitation to  
13 optimising jump performance.

14 Trivers et al., (2014) assessed anthropometric symmetry in elite Jamaican track and  
15 field athletes. Knee and ankle width asymmetries were reported to be 10.37 and 4.55%  
16 respectively ( $p < 0.05$ ); with regression analysis showing that asymmetries explained 5% of  
17 the variation in performance. These data indicate that lower limb symmetry in the ankle and  
18 knee joints has a limited effect on the performance of elite track and field athletes. However,  
19 the authors reported that a trend was evident for more symmetrical athletes to run faster  
20 during the 100m. Whilst joint symmetry is likely to be somewhat dictated by athlete genetics,  
21 it is feasible that this may offer coaches some useful information pertaining to ‘talent  
22 identification’ of track and field athletes, although more studies would be required to  
23 corroborate this suggestion, and greater emphasis should be placed on modifiable outcomes.

24

#### 25 4.4.3 Sprinting



1 Recent data have examined asymmetries during maximal sprinting tasks in youth athletes  
2 (Meyers et al., 2017). In a sample of 344 school aged boys (age: 11-16), multiple asymmetry  
3 metrics were reported inclusive of step length, step frequency, contact time, flight time,  
4 relative maximum force, and relative vertical/leg stiffness. Mean asymmetries across all age  
5 groups and metrics were 2.3-12.6% and weak relationships were shown between the variety  
6 of asymmetry metrics (step frequency, step length, flight time, and vertical stiffness) and  
7 sprint velocity ( $r = -0.24$  to  $0.39$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). These weak relationships may indicate that sprint  
8 speed is unlikely to be detrimentally affected, even when inter-limb differences are as high as  
9 ~12% in a healthy, youth population. However, it should be considered that no specific  
10 details were provided on the sporting backgrounds of the participants; only that they took part  
11 in 2 x 60-minute physical education classes as part of a school curriculum (Meyers et al.,  
12 2017). Consequently, any conclusions drawn from this study cannot be inferred to a  
13 homogenous, sporting sample of an equivalent or older age.

14         Similar results have been noted in adult sprint-trained athletes (Exell et al., 2016);  
15 where subjects were required to maximally sprint five trials of 60m. Multiple kinetic and  
16 kinematic variables were reported (see Table 5) in respect to inter-limb asymmetries with  
17 results correlated to mean sprint velocity. Surprisingly, mean group data reported no  
18 significant relationships between kinetic asymmetry, kinematic asymmetry and mean sprint  
19 velocity. However, when each individual athlete's asymmetry profile was calculated,  
20 significant inter-limb differences were noted across a range of kinetic and kinematics  
21 variables. All kinematic asymmetry values were  $< 10\%$ , step characteristics (step velocity,  
22 length and frequency) were all  $< 2\%$ , whilst kinetic asymmetries were substantially larger,  
23 ranging from 0.1-93.2% (Exell et al., 2016). Despite these results further highlighting how  
24 task-specific inter-limb asymmetries can be, it is interesting to note that large kinetic  
25 asymmetries do not appear to be detrimental to mean sprint velocity in sprint-trained athletes.

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## **5.0 Directions for Future Research**

Due to the paucity of appropriate data, further research is required in a wide range of populations to more clearly determine if detrimental effects are shown in a variety of physical and sporting tasks to examine if thresholds exist that are related to performance decrements. Also, the majority of existing research has focused on the measurement of asymmetry at a singular time point; thus, limited data are available pertaining to longitudinal changes in asymmetry and their impact on performance. So far, studies have focused on how inter-limb asymmetries change after a 6 to 8 week training intervention (Brown et al., 2017; Gonzalo-Skok et al., 2017; Bazyler et al., 2014; Sannicandro et al., 2014). Training methods have taken an integrated approach to correcting inter-limb differences with bilateral and unilateral strength, balance and core training all being used to effectively reduce asymmetries. However, to the authors' knowledge, no study to date has reported how asymmetries change over a longer time period, such as an entire season for team-sport athletes. Fitness testing often occurs at multiple time points throughout a year for team sport athletes (pre, mid, and post-season is common) and it should not be assumed that asymmetries reported during pre-season would be the same during mid or post-season. Thus, information relating to potential changes over the course of a season may subsequently impact programming for athletes. Therefore, when assessing the effects of asymmetry on performance, measured changes over a longitudinal period should be included. In addition, where statistical analysis is concerned, authors should consider regression analysis as a tool to determine how much of a change in performance is accounted for by inter-limb asymmetries. This would provide an indication as to whether or not asymmetries are a concept that requires attention from a 'performance reduction' perspective or simply a by-product of playing sport over time (Hart et al., 2016).

1           A further consideration for study designs would be the implementation of randomised  
2 controlled trials. Minimal literature has focused on training interventions to reduce  
3 asymmetries, especially with the use of a control group (Iacono et al., 2016; Sannicandro et  
4 al., 2014). For example, a targeted training intervention that utilised three groups: one that  
5 reduced inter-limb asymmetries, a second that exacerbated them and a third acting as a  
6 control may provide a clearer picture as to whether reducing between-limb differences are  
7 required for optimal physical performance.

8           The mechanisms or underlying causes of how inter-limb differences occur is another  
9 area that has not been widely investigated in the current body of literature. For example,  
10 while inter-limb asymmetries in power may be related to a reduction in jump height (Bell et  
11 al., 2014), a deeper understanding of why these differences exist will allow for targeted  
12 training interventions to be developed to minimise asymmetry. To support this further, Young  
13 et al., (2011) showed that the strategies used in executing a jump were equally as important to  
14 monitor as the movement outcome, i.e., the height of the jump itself. Thus, future research  
15 should investigate the mechanisms that are associated with greater asymmetries during  
16 various physical performance tests or sports skills.

17           A higher frequency of injuries is also commonly reported during the latter stages of  
18 matches for team sport athletes (Ekstrand et al., 2011; Price et al., 2004). Thus, quantifying  
19 the effects of fatigue on asymmetries may assist in further understanding mechanisms of  
20 injury and performance loss during these crucial periods. To the authors' knowledge, only  
21 two studies have examined the effects of fatigue on inter-limb asymmetries. Radzak et al.,  
22 (2017) measured kinetic and kinematic asymmetries during gait in both rested and fatigued  
23 states. Fatigue was determined when rate of perceived exertion (RPE) was reported  $\geq 17$ .  
24 Subjects were then provided with a 3-minute active recovery before treadmill speed was  
25 increased to a velocity that was predicted to elicit 80%  $\text{VO}_2$  max. Small (1-6%) reductions in

1 vertical stiffness and loading rate were reported whilst increases in knee internal rotation  
2 (14%) and knee stiffness (5.3%) were also noted in the fatigued state, with the authors noting  
3 that knee joint asymmetries in particular appeared to increase in a fatigued state (Radzak et  
4 al., 2017).

5 Hodges et al., (2011) used 17 healthy recreational adults to perform 5 sets of 8  
6 repetitions during a back squat exercise at 90% of their previously determined 8RM. Bilateral  
7 vertical ground reaction force asymmetries were calculated from twin force plates with inter-  
8 limb differences quantified for repetitions 1-2 and 7-8 within each set. Interestingly, average  
9 inter-limb asymmetries across all 5 sets was reported to be  $4.3 \pm 2.5\%$  for repetitions 1-2 and  
10  $3.6 \pm 2.3\%$  for repetitions 7-8, representing no significant differences although it is  
11 interesting to note that asymmetries actually reduced as more repetitions were performed.  
12 However, it should be acknowledged that fatigue was not actually measured in the study,  
13 merely inferred from the chosen protocol; thus, future research should aim to quantify fatigue  
14 as well where possible. At present, there is a distinct lack of data pertaining to the presence of  
15 asymmetries under conditions of fatigue and their impact on sports performance; thus,  
16 warranting further investigation.

17 A final point to consider relates to the quantification of between-limb differences in  
18 asymmetric sports. As an example, the sport of Fencing is characterised by repeated bouts of  
19 attack by virtue of the 'Fencing lunge'. Athletes often experience large eccentric forces from  
20 the front limb (as it absorbs force from the lunging action) and higher propulsive forces from  
21 the rear limb during the 'push-off' action of the lunge (Turner et al., 2013). The nature of the  
22 sport dictates that Fencers will always compete with the same lead limb; thus, inter-limb  
23 asymmetries are likely to be present. However, to the authors' knowledge, no studies have  
24 aimed to quantify inter-limb asymmetries in such athletes and future research should look to  
25 report this information and assess its impact on sporting performance. In addition, a

1 comparison between team sport athletes (where unilateral movement patterns occur, but may  
2 not necessarily be considered as ‘asymmetric sports’) would also further our understanding  
3 on this topic.

4

## 5 **6.0 Conclusion**

6 The cumulative body of literature indicates there is a high prevalence of asymmetry across a  
7 range of physical qualities and that inter-limb differences measured across a range of tasks  
8 have a detrimental effect on physical and sport performance; however, findings are not  
9 always consistent. Asymmetries in strength would seem to negatively affect performance  
10 tasks including CODS, jumping, and sport-specific skills such as kicking accuracy;  
11 minimising these differences would appear favourable. For jumping-based asymmetries, the  
12 evidence is less conclusive. Single leg vertical and horizontal jumps have shown suitable  
13 sensitivity in detecting asymmetries; however, associations with CODS performance are  
14 varied. In contrast, asymmetries during single leg tests of reactive strength have shown  
15 stronger relationships with reductions in CODS performance, whereby faster performers  
16 displayed smaller inter-limb asymmetries. Inconsistencies are also apparent during sport-  
17 specific actions, most notably in cycling and swimming. Additional asymmetry studies  
18 pertaining to dynamic balance, anthropometry, and sprinting have also shown mixed results,  
19 although there is currently a paucity of data using these measures. The findings of this  
20 systematic review emphasises the complexity of asymmetries and their relationships with  
21 measures of physical and sports performance; highlighting the need for further research.

22

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1 **Conflicts of interest** – the authors declare they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the  
2 context of this review.

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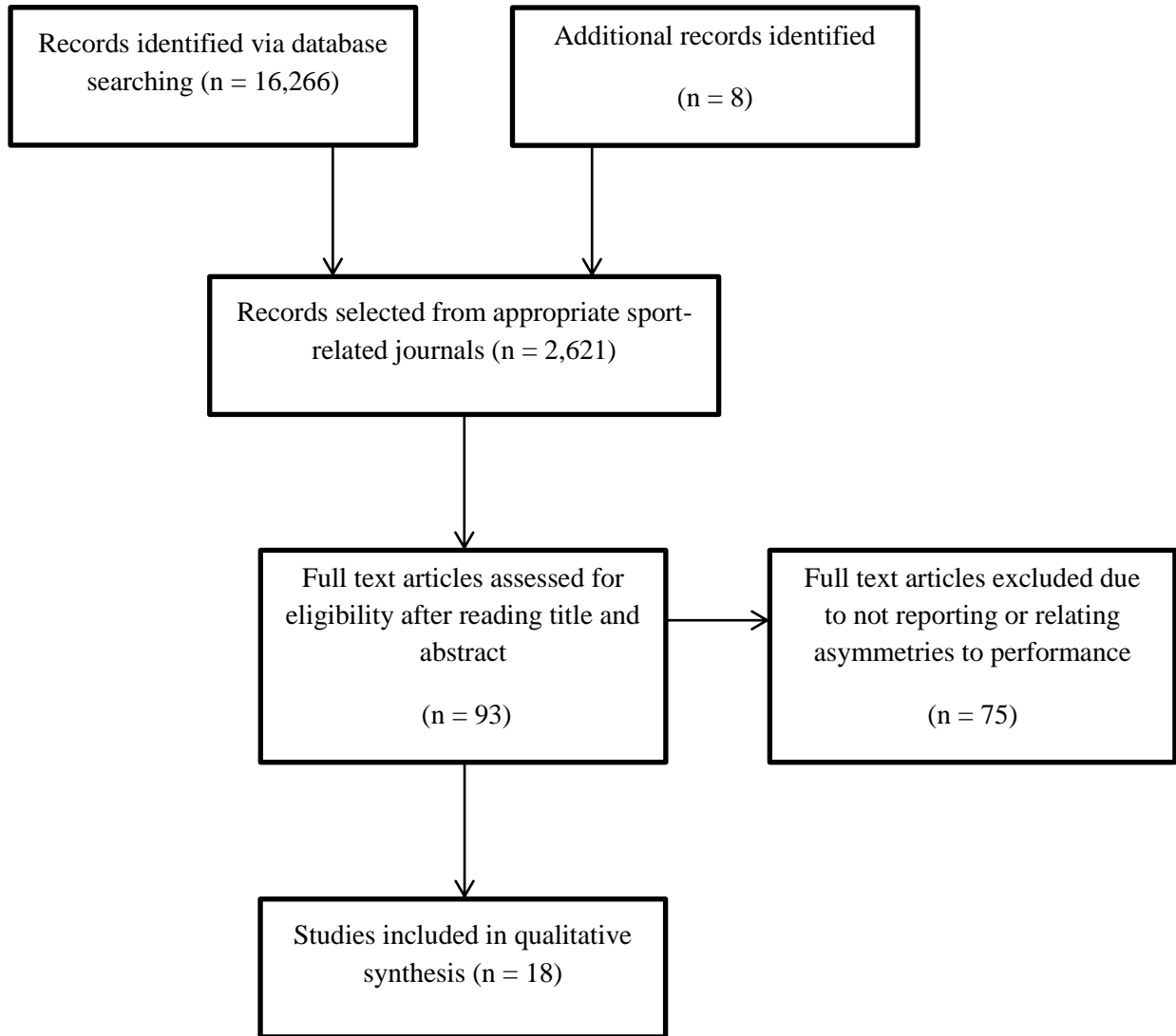
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1 Figure 1: Flow diagram showing the identification and selection of studies in the available  
2 body of literature for the current review





1 Table 1: Study quality scoring system (adapted from Black et al. [24])

<b>Criteria No.</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Score</b>
1	Inclusion criteria stated	0-2
2	Subjects assigned appropriately	0-2
3	Procedures described	0-2
4	Dependent variables defined	0-2
5	Assessments practical	0-2
6	Training duration practical (acute vs. long term)	0-2
7	Statistics appropriate	0-2
8	Results detailed (mean, standard deviation, percent change, effect size)	0-2
9	Conclusions insightful (clear, practical application, future directions)	0-2
<b>Total</b>		<b>0-18</b>

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1 Table 2: Summary of study methods that have highlighted an asymmetry in strength and the effects on physical performance

Reference	Subjects	Asymmetry Tests / Metrics Measured	Performance Outcome Measures	Quality Score
Bailey et al., (2013)	College athletes ( <i>n</i> = 36)	IMTP (PF symmetry index calculated on twin force plates)	SJ, SJ20, CMJ, CMJ20 (jump height and peak power)	83%
Hart et al., (2014)	Australian footballers ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Isometric Squat (bilateral and unilateral)	10 drop punk kicks to a 20m target	100%
Rannama et al., (2015)	Competitive road cyclists ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Isokinetic peak torque at 60, 180 and 240°·sec <sup>-1</sup> Kinematic asymmetries also measured whilst pedalling (ankle, knee, hip, trunk, pelvis)	10-second isokinetic maximum power test (average power taken from 1-6 seconds for data analysis)	94%

IMTP = Isometric mid-thigh pull, PF = Peak force, SJ = Squat jump, SJ20 = Squat jump with 20Kg load, CMJ = Countermovement jump, CMJ20 = Countermovement jump with 20Kg load

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1 Table 3: Summary of study methods that have highlighted an asymmetry in jumping and the effects on physical performance

Reference	Subjects	Asymmetry Tests / Metrics Measured	Performance Outcome Measures	Quality Score
Lockie et al., (2014)	Team sport athletes ( <i>n</i> = 30)	SLCMJ, SL Broad Jump, SL Lateral Jump (jump height or distance)	20m (including 5 and 10m splits), left and right-turn 505, modified t-test	94%
Hoffman et al., (2007)	NCAA D3 football players ( <i>n</i> = 62)	SLCMJ (power derived from force plate)	L-Run (performed in both directions to facilitate D and ND change of directions)	83%
Maloney et al., (2016)	Healthy adults ( <i>n</i> = 18)	SLDJ (stiffness and jump height)	90° cutting task (on force plate)	100%

SL = Single leg, SLCMJ = Single leg countermovement jump, H = Horizontal, DJ = Drop jump, 3J = 3 jump test, NCAA = National Collegiate Athletic Association, D = Dominant, ND = Non-dominant

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1 Table 4: Summary of study methods that have highlighted an asymmetry in sport-specific actions and the effects on sporting performance

Reference	Subjects	Asymmetry Tests / Metrics Measured	Performance Outcome Measures	Quality Score
Bini and Hume, (2015)	Cyclists and/or triathletes ( $n = 10$ )	Bilateral pedal forces measured via ‘strain gauge’ instrumented pedals	4km cycling time trial	83%
Liu and Jensen, (2012)	12 young children (age: 5-7) 12 older children (age: 8-10) 12 adults (age: 24-30)	5 x 15s cycling trials at 40, 60, 80, 100 and 120rpm (average angular velocity of crank) Metronome provided rhythmic feedback on cadence	Root mean square error (indication of how closely each subject matched a specified cycling cadence)	100%
Dos Santos et al., (2013)	Trained male swimmers ( $n = 18$ ), split into fast ( $n = 9$ ) and slow ( $n = 9$ ) groups	2-minute tethered swim with 6 strokes (3 each side) analysed at 5-15, 55-65 and 110-120s (PF, MF, Impulse and RFD)	Best 200m front crawl time	100%
Morouco et al., (2015)	‘High level’ male swimmers ( $n = 18$ )	30s maximum effort tethered swim (PF, MF)	Best 50m front crawl time	94%
Barbieri et al.,	Brazilian amateur	Metrics: kicking accuracy, foot and	5 kicks of a rolling and stationary ball	89%

(2015)	futsal players ( <i>n</i> = 10)	ball velocity		
Vieira et al., (2016)	Professional futsal players ( <i>n</i> = 17)	Asymmetry test: Isokinetic dynamometry for knee extensors and flexors (60, 180, 300°·sec <sup>-1</sup> ) Metrics: accuracy, foot and ball velocity, linear velocity of ankle, knee and hip joints	Penalty kicks taken from the 2 <sup>nd</sup> penalty mark	89%
Spratford et al., (2009)	Elite male goalkeepers ( <i>n</i> = 6)	CoM velocity, ankle flexion, knee flexion, hip flexion, pelvis rotation, thorax rotation	3 dives per side at heights of 0.3, 0.9 and 1.5m high to a hanging ball	83%

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PF = Peak force, MF = Mean force, RFD = Rate of force development, CoM = Centre of mass

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- 1 Table 5: Summary of study methods that have highlighted an asymmetry in dynamic balance, anthropometry, and sprinting and the effects on
- 2 physical performance

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Asymmetry Tests / Metrics Measured</b>	<b>Performance Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Quality Score</b>
Gonzalo-Skok et al., (2015)	Elite youth basketball players ( $n = 15$ )	WBL (dorsiflexion) SBET	CMJ, SLCMJ, SL Hop, 25m, V-Cut and 180° CODS tests	94%
Bell et al., (2014)	NCAA athletes ( $n = 167$ )	DEXA, CMJ (peak force, peak power)	CMJ (jump height)	100%
Trivers et al., (2014)	Elite Jamaican track and field athletes ( $n = 73$ )	Knee and ankle joint width + foot length	Best performance times for each athlete's respective events (specified by 100m, > 100m events, hurdles/jumps)	100%
Meyers et al., (2016)	Male school children (aged 11-16)	Step length, step frequency, contact time, flight time, relative maximal force, relative vertical stiffness, relative leg stiffness	35m sprint time	100%
Exell et al., (2016)	Sprint trained athletes ( $n = 8$ )	Step velocity, step length, step frequency, minimum hip height, maximum knee lift, minimum knee angle, maximum hip extension,	Mean velocity (m/s)	100%

touchdown distance, net horizontal  
and vertical impulse, maximum  
vertical force, mean support moment,  
net ankle/knee/hip work

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CMJ = Countermovement jump, vGRF = Vertical ground reaction force, WBL = Weight bearing lunge test, SBET = Star balance excursion test,  
SL = Single leg, DEXA = Dual energy x-ray absorptiometry

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