Managing older team sports players to maximise their potential contribution

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Headline

Older players occupy a unique position in elite team sport. At their best, they underpin championships, lead playing squads and accelerate the development of younger teammates. At their worst, they become increasingly unavailable and physically limited, consuming disproportionate performance resources.

Whilst the exceptional longevity of certain high-profile players is well documented, older players make up a relatively small percentage of elite team sport populations. The age profile of the 2025–26 Premier League provides a useful illustration (Figure 1). Only 14.5% of players were aged 30 or older, 8.8% were 32 or older, and just 3.2% were 34 or more. Although age distributions vary between elite team sports, the relative scarcity of older players is a common feature (Baker et al., 2013).

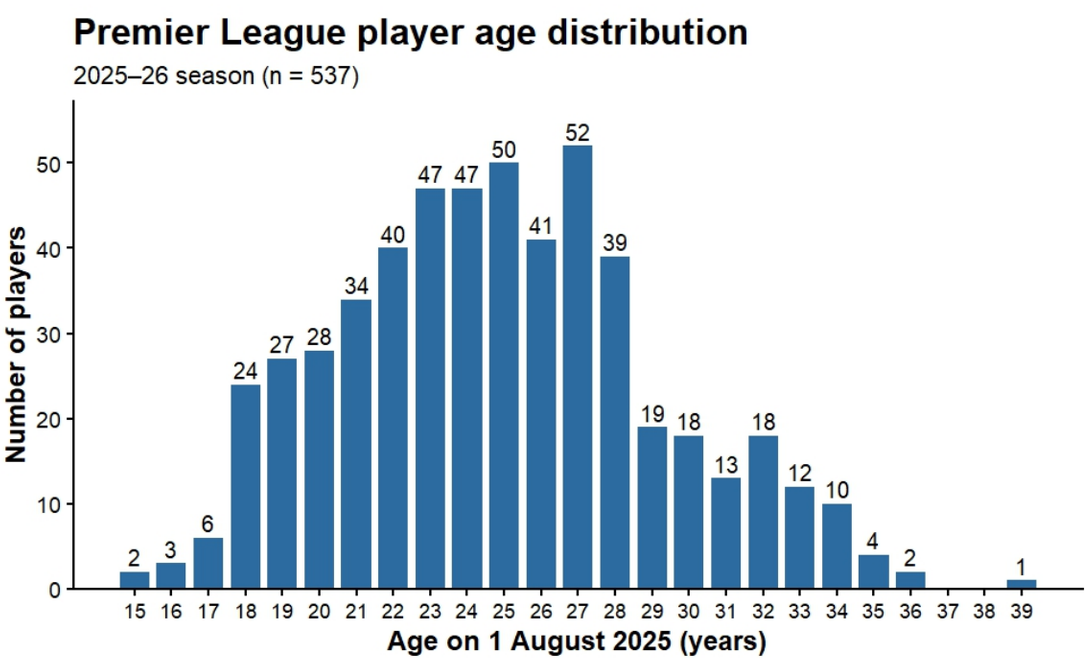


Fig. 1. Age distribution of all players recording Premier League playing time during the 2025–26 season. Age calculated on 01/08/2025. Source: FBref (https://fbref.com/).

The decline in player numbers at older ages likely reflects continuing selection pressures and the complex interaction of factors that determine career longevity (Hogben et al., 2026). Physical capabilities, injury history, performance, playing opportunities, organisational decisions and chance all contribute. While practitioners cannot control all influences on career longevity, they can influence how older players are managed. Through effective preparation and development, they can help them maintain and adapt their contribution, benefiting both players and organisations.

Aim

This article offers perspectives and practical suggestions to help practitioners maximise the contribution of older elite team sport players. Given the limited research in this area, the ideas presented draw on available evidence and practical experience and remain open to revision as understanding develops.

Three Interconnected Principles for Maximising Player Contribution

To maximise the contribution of older players, sports organisations should focus on three interconnected principles: maintaining physical performance and availability, supporting career-long development, and understanding the individual journey behind each player. The relative importance of these principles will vary between players and throughout their careers.

1. Maintaining Physical Performance and Availability

A. Preventing problematic reductions in training exposure

The influence of ageing on the physical capabilities of elite team-sport players is difficult to evaluate. Compared with their younger colleagues, professional footballers over 30 have been shown to cover less total distance and perform fewer high-intensity efforts during matches (Sal de Rellán-Guerra et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). However, these differences do not necessarily reflect reductions in physical capacity. They may also be influenced by playing role, tactical demands and adaptations in how experienced players read the game.

The extent of age-related physiological decline among elite players remains unclear. Studies comparing VO_2max in older versus younger professional players have produced equivocal findings (Signorelli et al., 2012; Botek et al., 2016), while longitudinal evidence on neuromuscular performance remains limited and shows substantial inter-individual variation (Haugen et al., 2013). More broadly, many of the pronounced physiological changes associated with human ageing occur after the ages at which elite player populations begin to decline.

Nevertheless, some older players report a diminished ability to express qualities associated with speed, acceleration and rapid force production. At the elite level, even small decreases in these capabilities can affect playing performance. During research into this area (Hogben et al., 2026), one former player who had spent 15 years at the highest level of an elite team sport shared the following account:

'In my last few years, my acceleration wasn't what it had been... I couldn't separate myself from defenders as well (as before), I couldn't create that same gap, so I had less time to think and a bit less time to get the ball away cleanly or set myself to shoot. That hurt my confidence and I rushed things'.

Although the influence of ageing on individual players is difficult to establish, training practices may also contribute to changes in physical performance and, consequently, a player's capacity to continue contributing at the highest level.

Players who struggle to tolerate matches or high-intensity training, or who report substantial soreness, may understandably have their training modified. However, when these modifications reduce exposure to activities such as sprinting, acceleration, plyometrics and heavy strength training, they may also remove important stimuli for maintaining neuromuscular performance. Explosive neuromuscular qualities appear to have relatively short residual training effects and may deteriorate more rapidly than some other physical qualities when training exposure is reduced (Mujika & Padilla, 2000; Issurin, 2008). Sustained reductions in high-intensity exposure may therefore move an older player towards a progressively detrained state.

As illustrated in Figure 2, declining physical preparedness may reduce a player's ability to tolerate high-intensity match and training activity, prompting further modification and potentially creating a self-reinforcing cycle of declining exposure and preparedness.

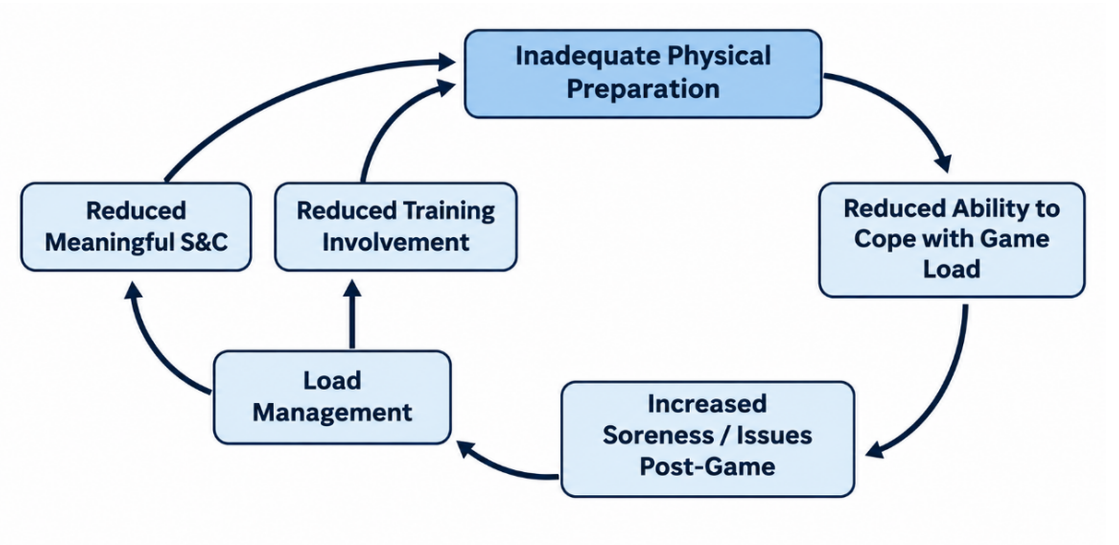


Fig. 2. Illustration of a cycle of performance decline mediated by suboptimal training modification.

Importantly, this process is not always practitioner-led. Experienced players often develop strategies for managing their bodies, symptoms and readiness across long seasons. This ability to "look after themselves" can be an important survival mechanism. However, efforts to preserve freshness, manage soreness or reduce perceived injury risk may also lead players to avoid demanding activities, inadvertently reducing exposure to important high-intensity stimuli.

The consequences of excessive modification can extend beyond physical preparedness. Removing older players from important parts of team training can reduce opportunities to rehearse specific tactical and technical demands alongside teammates. It may also limit opportunities to lead, mentor younger players and reinforce training standards. Excessive separation from the group may therefore diminish some of the contributions that make experienced players especially valuable. Repeatedly removing enjoyable or competitive aspects of training may also negatively affect player satisfaction and engagement.

B. Prioritising key physical qualities

Training for older players should prioritise the physical qualities that underpin their contribution to winning matches. As training volume or frequency becomes harder to tolerate, lower-priority work may need to be reduced to preserve sufficient capacity for the most important stimuli at the required intensity and quality. For example, an older player might com-

plete less total on-pitch volume during a team session while retaining a high-speed football drill followed by a small additional dose of targeted acceleration work.

How an older player's training volume is best allocated will depend on their training aims, pathology and tolerance, as well as the constraints of the wider team programme. Some players may benefit from additional days without on-feet loading, while others may tolerate normal training frequency but require reduced volume within sessions.

Care is also required to avoid excessive "comfort training", where important but demanding or poorly tolerated stimuli are repeatedly replaced with training the player prefers or handles better. Alternative training can be valuable, but its usefulness should be judged against the adaptation being sought. Additional submaximal conditioning, for example, cannot compensate for insufficient exposure to important speed or power stimuli.

When designing training for older players, specificity should not automatically take priority over control. Where loading capacity is limited, a simple, quantifiable activity may deliver the required physical stimulus more efficiently than a team-based drill. For example, prescribed running may achieve a targeted sprint distance with considerably less total work than accumulating the same exposure within a football drill. Embedding physical stimuli within team training is often valuable, but the method should be judged against the desired adaptation and the load cost of delivering it.

Older players remain subject to the same fundamental principles of adaptation as every athlete. Greater experience and training age do not remove the requirement for sufficient overload, specificity and intensity. Training history also matters. Players who have developed high levels of physical capacity and proficiency in effective training methods may be better positioned to maintain important qualities with relatively small, targeted doses as they age.

C. Injury, return to play and deconditioning

Injury episodes may have lasting consequences for older players, particularly when reductions in physical capacity or training exposure persist beyond their return to competition. Previous injury is a well-established risk factor for subsequent injury, both at the previously affected site and, in some circumstances, elsewhere (Green et al., 2020; Toohey et al., 2017). Injuries may leave strength or capacity deficits, altered movement strategies, or positions and tasks a player no longer tolerates. Whilst individual deficits or limitations may be manageable in isolation, their accumulation across a long career (Schulz et al., 1994) may progressively restrict the range of physical solutions available to a player. This may reduce a player's ability to accommodate fluctuations in load, fatigue and the unpredictable demands of competition. Some repeated injury problems late in players' careers may therefore reflect not simply bad luck or a body that can 'no longer cope', but the accumulated consequences of what has gone before.

At the elite level, players often return to competition at the earliest point in the return to play (RTP) process when the medical and performance team considers the associated risks acceptable. However, being ready to return does not necessarily mean that previous physical capacity and training exposure have been fully restored. The early post-return period may therefore involve simultaneously competing and continuing to recondition. Rebuilding exposure too rapidly may exceed the player's current capacity, while prolonged protection may prevent the restoration of important physical qualities. The returning player can therefore become caught between doing too much too soon and doing too little for too long.

The management priority is not simply to return the player to competition, but to minimise the risk of an injury episode initiating a longer cycle of deconditioning, incomplete restoration and further injury. The first competitive appearance should therefore be viewed as an important milestone rather than the endpoint. Successful RTP should ultimately restore the player's ability to repeatedly compete and complete the meaningful training required between matches. Return criteria and load progression should consider not only the demands of an individual match, but the accumulation of demands across subsequent training and games.

Important findings from rehabilitation should continue to inform training after return to competition. Many rehabilitation objectives, particularly those involving the restoration of physical capacities and movement options, may require longer than the RTP period allows. Training post return should continue to address residual deficiencies and limitations, alongside longer-standing physical deficits that may have contributed to previous injuries or may continue to influence injury risk.

2. Career-long development to enhance player contribution

Players who remain in elite leagues into their thirties have likely encountered far more game situations than their younger colleagues. Continued technical and tactical development can expand the range of performance solutions available to these players, allowing them to make greater use of their accumulated experience. A relatively small technical improvement, such as improved short-range passing accuracy on the non-dominant side, may have considerable impact when combined with an experienced player's ability to recognise attacking opportunities and select appropriate actions. A broader skill set may also become increasingly important where physical capabilities change with age, providing alternative ways of solving game problems and allowing players to adapt their playing style or transition into different roles.

The value of accumulated experience is not limited to the player's own performance. Having encountered a wide range of competitive situations, coaches, teammates and club environments, older players may be well positioned to influence how teams respond to difficult moments and how younger players navigate professional sport. Their experience and standing within a group can make leadership, mentoring, influencing culture and communicating coaching messages important components of their contribution. While experience may provide opportunities to lead, research suggests that leadership effectiveness is shaped by how athletes behave, rather than by experience or seniority alone (Fransen et al., 2020).

Ideally, the capabilities that allow players to make effective use of their accumulated experience should be built throughout their careers. Players should progressively develop into more effective leaders and, crucially, "CEOs of themselves", increasingly capable of understanding their own needs, taking ownership of their development and adapting to changes in their bodies, roles and environments. This requires more than formal education or prescribed development programmes. Exposure to challenge, independent decision-making and meaningful responsibility may help players develop these capabilities, providing opportunities to exercise autonomy and learn through experience (Machida-Kosuga & Kohno, 2023).

This presents a potential paradox for player-development systems: organisations want to produce independent and adaptable senior professionals, yet highly controlled environments can minimise mistakes, smooth difficulties and remove opportunities for players to make decisions. Organisations should therefore consider whether players are given sufficient scope throughout their careers to take ownership, experience difficulty and learn from their mistakes.

Career-long development can broaden the ways in which an older player contributes value. Two players producing similar levels of on-field performance may not provide equivalent overall value if one also makes a substantial contribution through leadership and their influence on others. These wider contributions may influence selection and retention decisions, expanding the playing performance bandwidth within which an older player remains valuable to an elite team.

3. Understanding the individual journey behind the player

Before deciding how an older player should be managed, we should consider how they became the player standing before us. Older players are the product of thousands of training sessions, hundreds of matches, multiple coaches, injuries, successes and setbacks. These experiences shape their physical capabilities, routines and tolerance of load, as well as their beliefs about coaching and training. Older players have accumulated considerable knowledge of themselves and their sporting environment, and may understand aspects of their own preparation better than a practitioner working with them for the first time. The self-belief and independence that may have helped them sustain a long elite career may also make them more willing to question new ideas or proposed changes. Effective management therefore requires both humility and curiosity: humility about the limits of our own understanding, and curiosity about why the player thinks, prepares and behaves as they do.

Rather than attempting to overwrite the player's views and routines, practitioners might usefully consider themselves temporary custodians within a player's much longer career journey, working with them to understand how their history, current capabilities and environment shape what may be required next. This does not mean simply accepting established approaches. Good coaching sometimes requires challenging them: what helped a player reach this stage of their career may not necessarily be what best serves the next one.

Having learned to navigate selection, contracts, rehabilitation, relationships and organisational expectations, older players often possess substantial agency within their environment. They rarely need someone to take ownership away from them; they need practitioners capable of sharing it. Shared decision-making, however, depends on good information. Practitioners may underestimate how a player's immediate objectives, organisational incentives and power dynamics influence what they choose to communicate. This can be particularly important during rehabilitation, where competitive pressures and the desire to return may shape how players describe their condition. A seemingly simple question such as "how is your shoulder?" may effectively be answered as "how is my shoulder, given that I know I need to train today if I want to be considered for selection on Saturday?" Practitioners therefore need to recognise that the information players provide can be strongly influenced by the context in which they are asked to provide it.

Trust and continuity of relationships are important for open information sharing. Players need to feel able to disclose problems without assuming that every symptom will automatically impact selection or delay their return. Respectful challenge and open discussion, appropriate confidentiality around medical information, and modelling authenticity and vulnerability may all encourage this openness (Walton et al., 2024). Establishing this trust can be particularly important when a player changes clubs. A new organisation may have access to a player's documented injury and training history, but lack the contextual knowledge of the routines and management strategies that previously helped them perform and remain available. Players may also be reluctant to arrive at a new club and immediately report problems or request training modifications.

Practical applications

- **Training modification is not free.** Whilst modifying an older player's training may be necessary, reduced exposure can lead to detraining of physical qualities important for performance. Practitioners should consider the costs as well as the benefits of modification.
- **Treat available training capacity as a budget.** For older players with limited tolerance for training load, particularly joint-compromised athletes, practitioners should prioritise training of the physical qualities most important to their contribution. This involves weighing the load cost of different training activities against their physical, technical, tactical and social benefits.
- **Manage the return to sustained competition, not simply the first match.** Plan and progress the player's exposure to the cumulative demands of successive matches and intervening training sessions, avoiding both excessive increases in loading and prolonged underexposure.
- **Continue rehabilitation-informed training after return to play.** Carry forward relevant findings from rehabilitation into ongoing training, seeking to restore physical capacities and movement options.
- **Continuously develop capabilities that maximise the value of players' accumulated experience.** Support career-long technical and tactical development, as well as growth in leadership and mentoring capabilities, to allow experienced players to make the fullest possible contribution.
- **Develop players to become the CEOs of themselves.** Help players develop autonomy and adaptability by providing them with opportunities to take ownership of their development, make independent decisions and learn through challenge.
- **Understand the individual and create conditions for open communication.** Learn about the player's history, routines and beliefs, recognising how these shape their preparation and responses to new approaches. Encourage open discussion and involve players in decision-making, while remaining mindful of how organisational pressures may influence what they communicate.

Conclusion

Older elite players are a highly selected and heterogeneous population. There is no single way to manage them well. Maximising their contribution requires resisting the temptation to equate good management with simply doing less as players age. Instead, practitioners should continue to develop and support the physical, technical, tactical and behavioural qualities that allow them to contribute to team performance, while recognising the knowledge and agency accumulated throughout their careers.

Long careers develop within a wider system in which player qualities interact with playing opportunity, injury, organisational decisions and chance. Although practitioners cannot guarantee career longevity, they can help older players maintain and adapt their contribution, potentially extending the period over which they remain valuable to elite teams.

AI use statement

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, writing code to produce figures, checking cited statements and bibliographic details against source publications,

and formatting the reference list. All suggestions and outputs were reviewed and, where appropriate, revised or rejected by the author, who retains full responsibility for the content, analyses and conclusions. No data were generated using AI.

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