



The declining incidence of facial fractures in the AFL

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An article published in the latest issue of the *ANZ Journal of Surgery* has charted the incidence of facial fractures among Australian Football League (AFL) players and identified possible reasons for a relative decline in their frequency.

Maxillofacial surgical trainee Dr Jason Savage, and his supervisor Mr Michael Schenberg, said the study aimed to detail injury trends and possible factors that correlate to a player's risk of sustaining a facial fracture.

"Facial injuries at any level of the game raise concerns because they can cause temporary or permanent loss of function. And at the elite level, of course, they can threaten the length of a playing career and a player's earning potential," Dr Savage said.

He said perhaps the most interesting finding was the decreased incidence of facial fractures after 2006 and suggested that this trend might be attributable to rule changes dating from that period. "In 2005, the AFL moved from a tribunal system to a match review panel which observes incidents and determines if infringements have occurred. In the 13 seasons prior to this change, a mean of 11.2 fractures per season were recorded, while in the four seasons from 2005 to 2008 this fell to a mean of 7.5. The introduction in 2007 of a free kick for any front on contact to a player with his head over the ball or for high contact to a player may also have been a factor," Dr Savage said.

The authors considered data from a 17 season period (1992 to 2008) and analysed various parameters including frequency, distribution, player location, time of season, player recovery, fracture incidence per season and geographical location of fractures. The AFL has kept continuous player injury records since 1992, the year it became a national competition.

In the recorded period, 175 total facial fractures were sustained. A majority of fractures, 108 (62%), were sustained during season matches, 48 (27%) were sustained while playing in local competitions, 9 (5%) while training, and the remainder either during the pre-season, during a finals match or outside of football.

Cheekbone fractures (41%) and fractured lower jaws (37%) were the most commonly recorded injuries. Players missed 517 matches because of injury, with an average of three matches per injury. Carrara Stadium on the Gold Coast had the highest incidence of facial fractures, the Sydney Cricket Ground the lowest.

The highest number of injuries sustained in a season occurred during the 1994 and 1997 seasons. Injuries were more commonly sustained in the first half of the season. The authors speculate that this might be due to a lower level of player intensity as the finals approach, with some clubs being unable to make the finals and those sure to make the finals competing more cautiously.

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