

Article

Physical Match Performance of Professional Men's Football Players from Different Competitive Levels During Direct Competition

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Abstract

The influence of competitive standards on physical performance in professional football remains controversial, particularly when teams from different divisions compete against each other. This study aimed to analyze position-specific differences in physical performance, both in possession and out of possession, between Spanish First and Second Division teams during direct competition. Match data from 25 Copa del Rey fixtures across three seasons were analyzed using a validated multi-camera tracking system. Physical performance variables were examined according to playing position. First Division players accumulated greater total distance during in-possession phases, particularly central defenders (CDs), wide defenders (WDs), central midfielders (CMs), and wide midfielders (WMs), whereas Second Division players covered greater distances during out-of-possession phases, mainly CDs, WDs, and CMs. In addition, First Division CMs exhibited higher high-speed running in possession, while Second Division forwards (FWs) demonstrated greater high-speed running and defensive high-speed running. Differences in maximum velocity were also observed in CDs, with higher values recorded in the First Division. Overall, these findings indicate that physical performance is modulated by the competitive standard and playing position. However, the interpretation of these differences should not be dissociated from the tactical nature of football, as players' specific positions and the tactical roles derived from them may condition the physical demands imposed during different phases of play, rather than reflecting isolated physical capacity.

Keywords: competitive standard; soccer; high-speed running; playing position; ball possession



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1. Introduction

Technological developments in football over the past two decades have led to a growing interest in the analysis of match running performance [1,2]. This research line has provided valuable insights for practitioners regarding the physical demands experienced by players during competition [3,4] with direct applications for optimizing training processes, monitoring players' fitness status, and supporting match preparation strategies [5,6]. In this context, Global Positioning System (GPS) technology and multi-camera video tracking systems have become the most widely used electronic tracking and performance monitoring systems for collecting external load data in professional football [7].

Competitive performance in football is characterized by a high degree of variability, largely due to the complex, dynamic, and interactive nature of the game [8,9]. During professional matches, players typically cover distances ranging from 9 to 12 km, with approximately 8–10% of this distance corresponding to high-intensity actions [1,2,10]. These efforts are distributed across the match and interspersed with brief recovery periods, reflecting the intermittent physiological demands of football [9,11]. Importantly, these physical demands are closely linked to the tactical structure of the game, as playing positions and the associated tactical roles directly influence the locomotor requirements imposed on players [12–17].

Previous research has consistently shown that match running performance differs according to playing position. Wide defenders and wide midfielders generally perform the highest volumes of high-intensity running, exceeding those observed in central defenders and forwards. In contrast, central midfielders typically accumulate the greatest total distance covered during matches, reflecting their continuous involvement in both offensive and defensive phases and their responsibility for occupying large areas of the field [1,2,15,16].

In addition to positional roles, a comprehensive understanding of match running performance requires consideration of contextual factors that may influence players' physical outputs [18]. Among these factors, competitive standard—defined as the quality and intensity associated with the competition level—has been proposed as a key determinant of match demands [19]. However, the influence of competitive standards on physical performance remains unclear, with heterogeneous findings reported across different leagues and competitive contexts.

Early studies suggested that players competing at higher competitive standards exhibited superior physical performance. For instance, Mohr et al. [20] reported that elite players performed substantially more high-intensity running and sprinting than sub-elite players. Similarly, greater sprint distances have been observed in higher-ranked teams compared with lower-ranked teams within the same league structure [21]. These findings support the notion that competitive level is positively associated with greater physical demands.

Conversely, studies conducted in English professional football have reported contrasting results. Bradley et al. [19] showed that players competing in lower-tier leagues covered greater total and high-intensity distances than those in the top division. In line with these findings, Di Salvo et al. [22] observed higher high-intensity running distances in Championship players compared with Premier League players. These results challenge the assumption that a higher competitive level necessarily entails greater physical demands.

Within Spanish professional football, evidence regarding the influence of competitive standards remains similarly inconclusive. Although some studies have reported greater high-intensity and sprinting distances in First Division players compared with those in the Second Division [23]. Longitudinal research has shown that players promoted to the First Division experience changes in both total distance and high-intensity running, suggesting that physical demands may adapt to the competitive context [24]. More recently, one study demonstrated that when effective playing time is considered, differences in sprinting distances between divisions may disappear [25], highlighting the importance of contextualizing physical performance data.

Despite the growing body of literature, most studies have adopted a general approach that does not sufficiently account for positional differences across distinct phases of play. In particular, few investigations have examined physical demands separately during in-possession and out-of-possession phases, even though these phases impose different tactical and physical requirements. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has analyzed position-specific physical performance across these phases in matches where

teams from the two main tiers of Spanish professional football directly compete against each other.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to analyze differences in physical performance during both in-possession and out-of-possession phases for each playing position between teams from the Spanish First and Second Divisions when they compete against each other. It was hypothesized that no substantial differences would exist in overall physical demands between divisions during direct competition; however, it was expected that First Division teams would demonstrate greater demands during in-possession phases, whereas Second Division teams would exhibit higher physical demands during out-of-possession phases.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Experimental Design

A descriptive observational study design was adopted using data obtained from electronic tracking and performance monitoring systems. The analysis focused on the physical demands experienced by professional football players competing in Spain's First and Second Divisions during official Copa del Rey matches. A total of 25 matches played across three consecutive seasons (2019/20–2021/22) were included.

Players' tactical roles were classified according to their playing position at match kick-off. To ensure consistency and accuracy in positional classification, two UEFA-qualified coaches independently verified players' positions throughout each match, following previously established procedures [26].

2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 324 individual match observations corresponding to 246 male professional football players from 42 teams competing in the Copa del Rey and belonging to Spain's First ($n = 118$) and Second Divisions ($n = 128$). Players typically completed approximately 10 h of training per week and participated in one official match per week, with occasional additional midweek fixtures related to national or European competitions.

Based on their tactical role at the start of each match, players were grouped into five playing positions: central defenders (CDs, $n = 91$), wide defenders (WDs, $n = 80$), central midfielders (CMs, $n = 78$), wide midfielders (WMs, $n = 43$), and forwards (FWs, $n = 32$). Goalkeepers were excluded from the analysis. This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and adhered to the ethical standards of research in sport and exercise science [27]. The investigation followed a descriptive, observational, and retrospective design based exclusively on secondary data derived from routine performance monitoring in professional football. The data were originally collected for sporting and performance-analysis purposes and not specifically for research. The use of the dataset for scientific research was formally authorized by LaLiga prior to the present analyses. All data were provided in a fully anonymized format, in accordance with LaLiga's internal regulations and data governance framework, ensuring that no individual player could be identified at any stage of the study. No experimental intervention, manipulation, or direct contact with participants was undertaken, and the study involved no additional risk or burden beyond standard professional practice. In line with established ethical guidelines in sport and exercise science [28,29], formal approval from an institutional ethics committee was not required due to the secondary and anonymized nature of the data.

2.3. Physical Demands

Physical performance data were collected during each match using a validated multi-camera optical tracking system (TRACAB, ChyronHego VID, New York, NY, USA), operat-

ing at a sampling frequency of 25 Hz, and processed through the Mediacoach[®] software platform (LaLiga, Madrid, Spain). Data were accessed through the Mediacoach[®] online platform (<https://id.mediacoach.es>), accessed on 13 November 2025.

Data obtained through the Mediacoach[®] software have been shown to be comparable in accuracy to GPS for monitoring physical variables [30]. The reliability and validity of the TRACAB tracking system have been confirmed in earlier studies [31,32], reporting very strong correlations ($r > 0.95$) for total distance and running distances within moderate-to-high speed zones when compared with GPS-derived data [30]. However, the system tends to slightly overestimate certain metrics, including distance covered at 21–24 km/h and >24 km/h, and the number of sprints [30]. Moreover, accelerations and decelerations greater than 3 m/s^2 should be interpreted with caution [30]; therefore, such data were excluded from the present analysis.

The physical variables selected have been previously used in the literature [14,25,33]. Physical performance was quantified using total distance covered (TD, m), defined as the overall distance accumulated during the match. To account for contextual differences related to ball possession, distances were further classified as total distance covered with possession (TD-A, m) and without possession (TD-D, m). High-speed running (HSR, m) was defined as the distance covered at speeds above $21.0 \text{ km}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$ and was similarly differentiated according to possession status, resulting in high-speed running with possession (HSR-A, m) and without possession (HSR-D, m). Sprint performance was assessed through sprint distance (SPR, m), corresponding to distances covered at velocities exceeding $24.0 \text{ km}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$, and the total number of sprint actions performed above this threshold ($N^{\circ}\text{SPR}$, n). Finally, the highest running speed attained during the match was recorded as maximum velocity (V_{Max} , $\text{km}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$). Data from players who did not complete the full match were excluded from the analysis.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows, version 25.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Prior to analysis, data were examined to verify compliance with the assumptions required for parametric testing. Normality of distribution was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, while homogeneity of variances was evaluated through Levene’s test.

When variables met the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity, parametric statistical procedures were applied. In cases where these assumptions were violated, equivalent non-parametric tests were used. Comparisons of physical performance variables between First and Second Division players were performed according to playing position and ball possession status using independent samples *t*-tests for parametric data or Mann–Whitney U tests for non-parametric data. For non-parametric comparisons, sample sizes for each group (First vs. Second Division) were sufficient across all playing positions ($n \geq 25$ per group), with no extreme imbalance between groups, supporting the appropriate use of the Mann–Whitney U test.

Descriptive statistics are presented as mean $\pm$ standard deviation (SD). Statistical significance was set a priori at $p < 0.05$. In addition to *p*-values, the magnitude of between-group differences was quantified using standardized mean differences, calculated as Cohen’s effect sizes (ESs), accompanied by 90% confidence intervals (CIs). Effect sizes were interpreted using the following thresholds: <0.2 trivial, 0.2–0.6 small, 0.6–1.2 moderate, and >1.2 large [34].

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the match-related physical performance variables recorded for players from the Spanish First and Second Divisions according to playing position and phase of play.

Table 1. Match-related physical performance metrics (mean $\pm$ SD) across playing positions in First and Second Division football.

	CDs		WDs		CMs		WMs		FWs	
	1st Division	2nd Division	1st Division	2nd Division	1st Division	2nd Division	1st Division	2nd Division	1st Division	2nd Division
TD	9517.6 $\pm$ 647.29	9667.3 $\pm$ 549.3	10,261.6 $\pm$ 474.6	10,404.1 $\pm$ 772.06	11,104.9 $\pm$ 576.3	11,067.7 $\pm$ 664.7	10,648.3 $\pm$ 926.8	10,628.2 $\pm$ 667.1	10,192.2 $\pm$ 930.6	10,552.2 $\pm$ 703.88
TD-A	3693.7 $\pm$ 662.04	3275.8 $\pm$ 625.25	4003.2 $\pm$ 593.5	3645.9 $\pm$ 686.5	4480.7 $\pm$ 785.0	3700.4 $\pm$ 770.4	4234.7 $\pm$ 871.4	3694.4 $\pm$ 685.1	4236.8 $\pm$ 558.6	3829.0 $\pm$ 600.7
TD-D	3659.47 $\pm$ 570.9	4120.8 $\pm$ 741.2	3794.3 $\pm$ 485.9	4373.23 $\pm$ 847.9	4184.4 $\pm$ 745.0	4992.5 $\pm$ 1057.9	3939.1 $\pm$ 738.4	4359.0 $\pm$ 697.4	3504.9 $\pm$ 837.0	4083.1 $\pm$ 926.2
HSR (m)	392.5 $\pm$ 114.9	375.07 $\pm$ 108.22	711.0 $\pm$ 150.1	688.13 $\pm$ 189.2	465.3 $\pm$ 132.6	445.7 $\pm$ 187.3	737.8 $\pm$ 182.8	803.4 $\pm$ 208.2	641.1 $\pm$ 128.2	809.1 $\pm$ 217.3
HSR-A (m)	76.14 $\pm$ 60.77	64.08 $\pm$ 39.8	316.9 $\pm$ 112.2	298.6 $\pm$ 111.7	171.5 $\pm$ 117.2	124.2 $\pm$ 104.9	404.7 $\pm$ 121.6	447.9 $\pm$ 121.2	404.6 $\pm$ 123.7	409.9 $\pm$ 196.3
HSR-D (m)	294.97 $\pm$ 102.0	297.61 $\pm$ 95.4	376.45 $\pm$ 94.1	381.3 $\pm$ 126.8	257.4 $\pm$ 99.4	313.8 $\pm$ 118.3	301.5 $\pm$ 118.7	334.3 $\pm$ 133.2	194.1 $\pm$ 83.0	386.8 $\pm$ 152.5
SPR (m)	191.2 $\pm$ 68.50	172.4 $\pm$ 73.2	377.0 $\pm$ 105.0	368.75 $\pm$ 133.1	187.6 $\pm$ 81.9	168.6 $\pm$ 117.1	360.9 $\pm$ 108.2	429.7 $\pm$ 141.9	319.2 $\pm$ 103.9	398.2 $\pm$ 165.7
N°SPR (n)	11.2 $\pm$ 3.7	10.6 $\pm$ 4.2	20.3 $\pm$ 4.8	19.5 $\pm$ 6.1	10.7 $\pm$ 4.8	9.9 $\pm$ 5.4	19.6 $\pm$ 5.8	23.1 $\pm$ 7.7	17.9 $\pm$ 6.1	22.3 $\pm$ 7.8
VMax (km·h)	30.7 $\pm$ 1.56	30.04 $\pm$ 1.4	31.8 $\pm$ 1.8	31.6 $\pm$ 1.7	29.8 $\pm$ 1.7	29.4 $\pm$ 1.8	31.2 $\pm$ 1.2	31.9 $\pm$ 1.2	31.7 $\pm$ 1.2	30.9 $\pm$ 1.7

CDs: central defenders; WDs: wide defenders; CMs: central midfielders; WMs: wide midfielders; FWs: forwards; TD: total distance accumulated during match play; TD-A: distance covered while the team was in possession of the ball; TD-D: distance covered during phases without ball possession; HSR: distance performed at running speeds above 21.0 km·h⁻¹; HSR-A: high-speed running distance during in-possession phases; HSR-D: high-speed running distance during out-of-possession phases; SPR: distance covered at sprinting velocities (>24.0 km·h⁻¹); N°SPR: count of sprint actions performed above 24.0 km·h⁻¹; VMax: highest running speed reached during the match.

Mean between-division differences and associated effect sizes across all variables and playing positions are reported in Table 2. For CDs, players from the First Division showed higher values for TD-A and VMax compared with those from the Second Division ($p = 0.003$ – 0.026 ; small-to-moderate ES). In contrast, Second Division CDs accumulated greater TD-D ($p = 0.001$; moderate ES). In WDs, First Division players recorded higher TD-A values ($p = 0.016$ – 0.037 ; small-to-moderate ES), whereas Second Division players demonstrated greater TD-D ($p = 0.010$; moderate ES). No relevant between-division differences were observed for HSR-, SPR-, or sprint-count-related variables in this position. Regarding CMs, First Division players exhibited higher TD-A and HSR-A values than their Second Division counterparts ($p = 0.001$ – 0.040 ; small-to-moderate ES). Conversely, Second Division CMs showed higher TD-D ($p = 0.010$; moderate ES). For WMs, higher TD-A values were observed in First Division players compared with Second Division players ($p < 0.05$; small-to-moderate ES), while no significant between-division differences were identified for HSR, SPR, N°SPR, or VMax. Finally, FWs from the Second Division displayed greater values for HSR and HSR-D compared with First Division FWs ($p = 0.029$ – 0.001 ; moderate-to-large ES). No meaningful between-division differences were found for TD or VMax in this position.

Table 2. Between-division differences in match physical performance (mean $\pm$ SD) by playing position.

	CDs		WDs		CMs		WMs		FWs	
	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES
TD	1.6	0.25; ± 0.35	1.2	0.19; ± 0.37	−0.4	−0.07; ± 0.37	−0.4	−0.05; ± 0.53	3.8	0.43; ± 0.68
TD-A	−11.4	−0.64; ± 0.34 **	−9.5	−0.57; ± 0.37 *	−17.9	−1.02; ± 0.37 **	−12.5	−0.68; ± 0.53 *	−9.8	−0.72; ± 0.74
TD-D	12.0	0.62; ± 0.34 **	13.9	0.75; ± 0.37 *	18.2	0.80; ± 0.38 **	11.2	0.59; ± 0.53	17.0	0.61; ± 0.72
HSR	−4.4	−0.14; ± 0.35	−4.8	−0.19; ± 0.37	−7.1	−0.19; ± 0.38	8.4	0.31; ± 0.53	24.5	0.85; ± 0.76 *
HSR-A	−12.2	−0.18; ± 0.35	−9.5	−0.20; ± 0.37	−24.8	−0.36; ± 0.37 *	11.2	0.35; ± 0.53	−4.7	−0.10; ± 0.78
HSR-D	1.8	0.05; ± 0.35	−0.8	−0.03; ± 0.36	−13.0	0.28; ± 0.37	15.6	0.33; ± 0.53	97.2	1.25; ± 0.75 **

Table 2. Cont.

	CDs		WDs		CMs		WMs		FWs	
	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES	MD (%)	ES
SPR	−11.6	−0.29; ±0.35	−4.6	−0.14; ±0.36	−20.5	−0.33; ±0.38	18.1	0.51; ±0.53	22.0	0.48; ±0.75
N°SPR	−7.9	−0.22; ±0.34	−5.7	−0.21; ±0.36	−13.1	−0.24; ±0.37	16.5	0.47; ±0.52	25.2	0.59; ±0.73
VMax	−2.3	−0.47; ±0.34 *	−0.8	−0.21; ±0.37	−1.2	−0.20; ±0.37	2.4	0.62; ±0.53	−2.5	−0.47; ±0.77

CDs: central defenders; WDs: wide defenders; CMs: central midfielders; WMs: wide midfielders; FWs: forwards; TD: total distance accumulated during match play; TD-A: distance covered while the team was in possession of the ball; TD-D: distance covered during phases without ball possession; HSR: distance performed at running speeds above 21.0 km·h^{−1}; HSR-A: high-speed running distance during in-possession phases; HSR-D: high-speed running distance during out-of-possession phases; SPR: distance covered at sprinting velocities (>24.0 km·h^{−1}); N°SPR: count of sprint actions performed above 24.0 km·h^{−1}; VMax: highest running speed reached during the match. * Significant level set at $p < 0.05$; ** Significant level set at $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion

The present study examined how physical performance varies by playing position across in-possession and out-of-possession phases when teams from the Spanish First and Second Divisions directly compete. The main results were as follows. In relation to physical performance in ball possession, higher TD-A was exhibited by CDs, WDs, CMs, and WMs from the First Division, and greater HSR-A was exhibited by First Division CMs. In the out-of-possession phase, higher TD-D was recorded by CDs, WDs, and CMs from the Second Division, and greater HSR-D was exhibited by Second Division FWs. Moreover, for CDs, greater VMax was exhibited in the First Division. Higher HSR was exhibited by Second Division FWs. Overall, these findings largely support the initial hypothesis, as no substantial differences were observed in overall physical demands between divisions, while First Division teams tended to exhibit greater demands during in-possession phases and Second Division teams during out-of-possession phases. The partial inconsistencies observed across specific variables and playing positions may be explained by the context-dependent and position-specific nature of physical performance in football.

In line with previous research, the present results indicate that distances covered during ball possession may represent an important differentiating factor between players competing at different competitive standards [35,36]. This contrasts with earlier investigations reporting greater distances covered at high intensity (21–24 km/h) and sprinting speeds (>24 km/h) by First Division players compared with those from the Second Division [23]. These discrepancies may be attributed to the inclusion, in the present study, of performance analyses conducted in matches where players from different competitive tiers directly compete against each other, thereby introducing a more complex and context-specific framework for data interpretation. Similarly, the analysis of performance according to in- and out-of-possession phases, which accounts for effective playing time, may further contribute to the observed differences.

Firstly, greater TD-A and VMax were observed in First Division CDs, whereas higher TD-D was recorded in Second Division CDs. Previous studies have indicated that the physical demands of CDs are not substantially affected by match outcome (win/loss) or match location (home/away) [15], indicating that physical performance in this position may have limited relevance as an indicator of competitive success or playing level. The present findings are consistent with this notion, as total distance was the only variable showing differences between First and Second Division players, and only when the analysis was conducted by game phase. Ju et al. (2023) indicated that players competing at higher levels display superior technical performance [35], which may explain the differences observed in the present study. In First Division CDs, this enhanced technical–tactical capacity may allow them to exert greater influence and control during the in-possession phase, resulting in higher TD-A demands. Conversely, Second Division CDs exhibited greater TD-D, which may reflect increased defensive exposure and greater opposition dominance during

attacking phases. Regarding the observed differences in VMax, greater ball possession by First Division CDs may position the defensive line higher up the pitch, requiring these players to cover larger spaces behind them. This tactical arrangement, derived from increased in-possession dominance, could explain the higher peak velocities observed, as CDs may be required to reach greater speeds when defending in open-play situations.

Secondly, First Division WDs displayed higher TD-A values, whereas greater TD-D was recorded in Second Division WDs. Although WDs are required to actively participate in both attacking and defensive phases [37], teams of lower competitive status may be forced to adopt more defensive playing strategies when facing First Division opponents due to the superior technical–tactical quality of higher-level teams. This increased defensive demand may explain the observed physical differences between divisions. Additionally, a relevant finding was that no differences in HSR were observed between WDs, despite this position being one of the most demanding in terms of high-intensity activity [1]. Although teams competing at higher standards typically exhibit more demanding physical profiles [23], the present results indicate that inter-category differences tend to diminish when WDs directly compete within the same match context. This suggests that physical performance may be situationally adjusted to the specific demands of the match, regardless of the team's competitive status.

Thirdly, First Division CMs demonstrated higher TD-A and HSR-A values compared with Second Division CMs, whereas only TD-D was higher in Second Division CMs. Consistent with these findings, recent research has shown that CMs from higher-ranked teams (1st–5th) covered between 78% and 112% more high-intensity distance during attacking actions than CMs from lower-ranked teams (6th–15th) ($p < 0.01$), despite covering similar overall HSR distances [35]. Teams competing at higher competitive standards are likely to adopt a build-up playing style, characterized by greater ball possession [19,35,36]. This tactical side of the game often results in increased involvement in the final third, where offensive actions such as carrying the ball forward or penetrating the penalty area are frequently required to create scoring opportunities [35,38]. This may reflect a greater offensive responsibility for First Division CMs and, consequently, higher TD-A and HSR-A demands compared with Second Division CMs, which may explain the present findings.

Fourthly, only higher TD-A values were observed in First Division WMs. Greater involvement in the attacking phase, reflected by a higher number of ball touches and greater ball possession by First Division WMs, may explain these results, in line with previous evidence indicating that players competing at higher standards display similar characteristics [36,39]. Although previous studies have identified HSR as a key performance indicator for this position [1,40,41], no differences were observed in this variable in the present investigation. This contrasts with prior research reporting that WMs from higher-ranked teams (1st–5th) covered greater high-intensity distances during offensive actions such as “run in behind/penetrate” and “break into the box” compared with WMs from lower-ranked teams (6th–15th) ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, WMs from the lowest-ranked teams (16th–20th) performed greater high-intensity distances during defensive actions such as “covering” than WMs from higher-ranked teams (1st–5th) ($p < 0.05$) [35]. The fact that these comparisons were conducted within a single competitive category and context (Premier League), rather than between two distinct competitive standards, may partly explain the discrepancies with the present findings.

Lastly, greater demands in HSR and HSR-D were observed in Second Division FWs compared with their First Division counterparts. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that forwards from teams with very high ball possession (as may be the case for First Division teams) cover fewer meters per minute across all speed thresholds than forwards from teams with low or very low possession [42], which may correspond

to Second Division FWs. Although sprinting represents the most frequent action in goal-scoring situations, both for the goal scorer and the assisting player [43], Second Division FWs may accumulate greater HSR and HSR-D due to a stronger defensive orientation, operating within deeper defensive blocks rather than applying high pressing when facing First Division teams. The superior technical–tactical quality of higher-level teams [19,44,45] may force FWs to perform their tactical roles, both defensive and offensive, across larger playing spaces, thereby explaining the greater high-intensity distances observed in FWs.

The main limitation of this study was the absence of match-specific technical–tactical variables. Future research should integrate these factors to adopt a more holistic approach, enabling a more precise understanding of the physical demands required to compete at the highest level of professional football. Similarly, the consideration of tactical formations and playing styles may provide additional contextual information for the interpretation of the results. In addition, the inclusion of team possession metrics and their relationship with position-specific physical demands (e.g., in- and out-of-possession intensity indicators) could further clarify the extent to which physical performance is influenced by match dominance and contextual factors.

5. Conclusions

The results of the present study indicate that physical performance is modulated by competitive level and playing position when teams from different divisions compete against each other. Players from First Division teams (CMs, WDs, WMs, and CMs) tend to accumulate greater total distances during in-possession phases, whereas Second Division players (CDs, WDs, and CMs) record greater distances covered during out-of-possession phases. From an interpretative perspective, it is important to consider that the physical differences observed between competitive standards in this context may be more closely related to match context and the tactical role performed by football players than to their isolated physical capacity.

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