

Optimization of the Return-to-Sport Paradigm After Anterior Cruciate
Ligament Reconstruction: A Critical Step Back to Move Forward

Peer-reviewed author version

DINGENEN, Bart & Gokelier, Alli (2017) Optimization of the Return-to-Sport
Paradigm After Anterior Cruciate Ligament Reconstruction: A Critical Step Back to
Move Forward. In: SPORTS MEDICINE, 47(8), p. 1487-1500.

DOI: 10.1007/s40279-017-0674-6

Handle: <http://hdl.handle.net/1942/23797>

Optimization of the return to sport paradigm after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a critical step back to move forward

Bart Dingenen^{1,2 *}, Alli Gokeler³

¹ UHasselt, Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences, Biomedical Research Institute, Agoralaan, 3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium. Telephone: +32 11 29920. E-mail: bart.dingenen@uhasselt.be.

² KU Leuven Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation Research Group, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences, Leuven, Belgium.

³ University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Center for Human Movement Sciences, Groningen, The Netherlands.

Running heading: Return to sport after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction

* Bart Dingenen

E-mail: bart.dingenen@uhasselt.be

ABSTRACT

Athletes who have sustained an anterior cruciate ligament injury often opt for an anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction with the goal and expectation to resume sports. Unfortunately, the proportion of athletes successfully returning to sport is relatively low, while the rate of second anterior cruciate ligament injury has been reported to exceed 20% after clearance to return to sport, especially within younger athletic populations. Despite the development of return to sport guidelines over recent years, there are still more questions than answers on the most optimal return to sport criteria after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. The primary purpose of this review is to provide a critical appraisal of the current return to sport criteria and decision-making processes after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. Traditional return to sport criteria mainly focus on time after injury and impairments of the injured knee joint. The return to sport decision-making is only made at the hypothetical “end” of the rehabilitation. We propose an optimized criterion-based multifactorial return to sport approach based on shared decision-making within a broad biopsychosocial framework. A wide spectrum of sensorimotor and biomechanical outcomes should be assessed comprehensively, while the interactions of an individual athlete with the tasks being performed and the environment in which the tasks are executed are taken into account. A layered approach within a smooth continuum with repeated athletic evaluations throughout rehabilitation followed by a gradual periodized re-integration into sport with adequate follow-up may help to guide an individual athlete toward successful return to sport.

1 **KEY POINTS**

2

3 No gold standard exists for evaluating return to sport readiness after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction.

4

5 Traditional return to sport criteria are mainly focused on time after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction and knee
6 impairments, while the return to sport decision-making process is only made at the hypothetical “end” of the
7 rehabilitation.

8

9 We propose an optimized criterion-based continuous and multifactorial return to sport approach based on shared-decision
10 making, with a focus on a broad spectrum of individual sensorimotor and biomechanical outcomes, within a
11 biopsychosocial framework.

1 **1 Introduction**

2 Most athletes who wish to continue sports after an anterior cruciate (ACL) injury are advised to undergo ACL
3 reconstruction (ACLR) [1]. Unfortunately, the overall secondary ACL injury risk after ACLR is around 15% [2]. For
4 young athletes (< 25 years) returning to competitive sports involving jumping and cutting activities, secondary ACL
5 injury rates of 23% have been reported, especially in the early return to sport (RTS) period [2]. Compared to their
6 uninjured adolescent counterparts, this indicates a 30 to 40 times greater risk of sustaining an ACL injury after ACLR
7 [2]. In addition, an ACL injury and ACLR are associated with an increased risk to develop tibiofemoral and patellofemoral
8 joint osteoarthritis [3], which can affect knee symptoms, function and quality of life 10-20 years after ACLR [4, 5].

9 The decision when an athlete is allowed to RTS is multifactorial, difficult and challenging [6, 7]. Despite the development
10 of RTS guidelines over recent years, there are still more questions than answers on the most optimal RTS criteria after
11 ACLR. There is a lack of a scientific consensus on the RTS criteria used to release a patient to unrestricted sport activity
12 after ACLR. Moreover, current RTS criteria may fail to identify residual biological, functional and psychological deficits.
13 As a result of all these factors, the current clinical approach used to release athletes to RTS after ACLR may contribute
14 to increased secondary ACL injury risk.

15 The primary purpose of this review is to provide a critical appraisal of current RTS criteria after ACLR. Recommendations
16 for future optimizations are then presented based on current trends in the literature.

17

18 **2 What is RTS?**

19 One of the most fundamental questions in terms of RTS is the definition of RTS. Do we consider a RTS successful even
20 when the athlete lowers the level of sports activity, returns to another less demanding sport, to the same sport with a lower
21 performance level, or sustains a second ACL injury, another subsequent injury or knee osteoarthritis a few months or
22 even years after RTS? A systematic review and meta-analysis by Ardern et al. [8] showed that on average 81% of athletes
23 returned to some sort of sports, but only 65% returned to the pre-injury level of sport activity. Barely 55% returned to a
24 competitive sports level.

25 The use of the term RTS must be accompanied by a detailed description of the individual characteristics of the athletes
26 being studied (e.g. sex and age), the use of protective equipment (e.g. taping, bracing), the intensity, duration and
27 frequency of each exposure, the type of activity (e.g. pivoting or non-pivoting, contact or non-contact sports), level of
28 activity (e.g. elite, competitive or recreational), performance level (e.g. match statistics) as well as the timing and duration
29 of sport participation after ACLR. It is unclear how long an athlete needs to maintain a specific level of sport activity

before it can be claimed that the RTS was successful. The RTS rate in men professional soccer players was very high (> 90%) at 1 year after ACLR, but only 65% were still playing at the highest level 3 years after ACLR [9]. Similarly, decreased player performances and significantly shorter career durations were reported after ACLR in professional basketball players compared to uninjured controls [10]. Furthermore, it needs to be clarified whether the athlete perceives the RTS as successful [11]. Some athletes may not be satisfied with the outcome after ACLR even after returning to their previous performance level because of pain, instability, stiffness or swelling, or in some cases despite a lack of any abnormal findings during physical examination [12]. The clearance to RTS by clinicians does not necessarily mean that patients go back to sport at the same time, or resume sports at all [13]. This can be due to practical, social or contextual reasons, that may modify the final RTS decision (e.g. end of the season, individual goals, lifestyle changes, a shift in priorities or external pressures) [14], but also due to a mismatch between the clinician's and the patient's understanding of when a person is ready to RTS. Success can mean different things to different people (e.g. athlete, trainer or clinician) and is context- and outcome-dependent [15]. Unfortunately, no gold standard exists for identifying an individual successful outcome after ACLR [16]. However, if the athlete has the goal to RTS, all people involved in the RTS decision-making process should prioritize a safe RTS, i.e. a RTS with minimal risk of sustaining a re-injury and/or developing long-term complications such as degenerative joint disease [17].

2.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

RTS after ACLR is complex and multifactorial. There is no gold standard for identifying an individual successful outcome after ACLR. A clear definition of RTS and detailed descriptions of the individual characteristics and sport participation after ACLR is needed.

3 RTS criteria

In line with the definition of RTS, no consensus exists on the most appropriate criteria for releasing patients to unrestricted sports activities after ACLR [18]. Of the 264 studies included in a systematic review by Barber-Westin & Noyes (studies published between April 2001 and April 2011) [18], 40% provided no criteria for RTS after ACLR, 60% used time postoperatively at least as one of the RTS criteria and 32% used time as the only criterion. Only 13% used objective criteria.

The ability to decide whether an athlete is ready to safely RTS is further compromised by the paucity of prospective studies in literature validating current RTS criteria. Among a group of 46 males and 54 females with a pre-injury participation in level 1 and level 2 sports, delaying RTS until 9 months after surgery and a more symmetrical quadriceps strength prior to return to level 1 sport were associated with a reduced secondary knee injury risk [19]. However, of the

74 patients who returned to level 1 sports, the 51 patients who did not sustain a second knee injury had a mean quadriceps limb symmetry index (LSI) of 84.4%, which was below the recommended LSI of > 90% [19]. Another recent prospective study of 158 professional male soccer players who returned to sport after ACLR showed that those players failing to achieve the proposed RTS criteria were 4 times more likely to sustain a secondary ACL injury compared to those who met all 6 proposed criteria (including quadriceps and hamstrings muscle strength tests, 3 hop tests, an agility test, and the completion of on-field sport-specific rehabilitation) [20]. However, 12 of the 26 players with a second ACL injury met the RTS criteria, while 28 of the 132 players with no second ACL injury were not discharged by the RTS criteria, leading to a sensitivity of only 53% and a specificity of 79%.

The RTS tests and criteria used to evaluate RTS readiness are mostly based on subjective opinions. There is a lack of evidence supporting the relation between RTS and standard subjective and objective assessments [21]. This raises the question whether the current RTS tests address the appropriate issues and cut-off values [13], or whether they are sensitive or demanding enough to elucidate clinically relevant differences [11].

Shrier [14] recently proposed a Strategic Assessment of Risk and Risk Tolerance framework for RTS decisions, where factors affecting injury risk are grouped in the assessment of health risk, activity risk and risk tolerance. Within this overview, we mainly focus on the first two steps within this framework (the risk assessment process). In the following paragraphs, a structural summary of individual potentially modifiable RTS criteria within this risk assessment process is presented. However, we acknowledge that focusing only on very specific factors in isolation within a linear and unidirectional way is probably too simplistic. Several factors that are individually related to RTS may be interrelated to each other. The use of non-linear, multivariate and complex models in future studies, where the interactions between the different individual RTS criteria are taken into account, may provide a better framework for understanding the complex decision-making process of RTS after ACLR [14, 22, 23]. The relative importance of each of these criteria may depend on the individual. Therefore other researchers have proposed that individual patient-tailored RTS criteria should be used instead of the traditional “one-size-fits-all” RTS approach [6, 24].

3.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

No consensus exists on the most appropriate criteria for releasing patients to unrestricted sports activities after ACLR. Only a paucity of prospective studies have validated RTS criteria after ACLR. Multivariate models should be used to unravel the complex RTS decision-making process. Prospective studies are needed to determine and evaluate evidence-based RTS criteria.

3.2 Time after ACLR

Time after ACLR is the most used criterion to assess RTS readiness [18]. Although this timing is highly variable (from 12 weeks to 12 months), the majority of studies traditionally allowed RTS after 6 months [18]. However, the risk of sustaining a second ACL injury is highest during the early period after RTS (6-12 months) [19, 20, 25-27]. Based on these data, and the persistence of biological and functional deficits until approximately 2 years after ACLR, other authors have proposed delaying high level unrestricted sport activity until 2 years after ACLR [28], which is in contrast with current RTS practices. However, time after ACLR is not necessarily related to functional outcome measures [29]. In a prospective study by Capin et al. [30], 14 young female athletes were only allowed to RTS after passing their RTS criteria (> 90% quadriceps strength LSI, > 90% LSI on hop tests, and > 90% on Knee Outcome Survey – Activities of Daily Living Scale (KOS-ADLS)). The 7 athletes who sustained a second ACL injury during a 2-year follow-up after ACLR had earlier normalization of gait biomechanics, met the RTS criteria more quickly and returned significantly earlier to sport compared to the 7 athletes who returned to sport without second ACL injury (mean \pm SD 6.8 ± 1.9 months versus 9.5 ± 1.9 months) [30]. These findings are in line with the study by Grindem et al. [19] and imply that an earlier RTS (before 9 months) should be avoided, even in the absence of clinical and functional gait impairments. We propose combining time after ACLR with other objective RTS criteria to guide the RTS decision-making process. Furthermore, the re-orientation from a “wait-and-see-policy” to a goal-oriented rehabilitation and RTS criteria-based decision-making approach might promote the autonomous athlete’s motivation and adherence to the rehabilitation program [31]. The implementation of more stringent objective RTS criteria across a broad spectrum of functional athletic capabilities will automatically delay the timing of RTS for the majority of athletes. Indeed, several studies have shown that most patients fail to achieve RTS criteria at 6 months after ACLR [19, 22, 32].

3.2.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

Time after ACLR is the most used RTS criterion. No consensus exists on the ideal time frame to RTS after ACLR, but recent studies have shown that a RTS before 9 months after ACLR increases ACL re-injury risk. Time after ACLR is not associated with functional outcome measures. Integrated criterion-based RTS assessments should be developed.

3.3 Patient reported outcome measures

Patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs) are self-report questionnaires that measure an individual’s perception of symptoms, function, activity and participation [16, 33]. Various PROMs have been developed that are specific for ACL injuries or more generic for knee injuries. In a survey the following PROMs were proposed: KOS-ADLS, Knee Outcome Survey - Sports Activities Scale (KOS-SAS), global rating of perceived function (GRS), Lysholm score, International Knee Documentation Committee 2000 Subjective Knee Form (IKDC2000), Cincinnati Knee Score, Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS), the Tegner Activity Scale and Marx Activity Rating Scale [16].

Although items like reliability, responsiveness and validity have been reported, it is currently unknown what the optimal cut-off scores are in the context of RTS after ACLR [34-36]. The decision to allow RTS after ACLR solely based on PROMs has been questioned [37]. Low IKDC2000 scores were reasonably indicative of failing on a battery of functional performance RTS tests including quadriceps strength and single-legged hop indices, while good IKDC2000 scores were not predictive of successfully passing the functional performance test battery [37]. These data indicate that PROMs and functional performance tests evaluate different aspects of athletic function. It has been suggested that a combination of PROMs and objective performance-based measurements is needed to evaluate an athlete's RTS readiness more comprehensively [33].

3.3.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

The most optimal combination and cut-off scores of PROMs are not known. RTS decision-making should not be based only on PROMs. Future studies should integrate PROMs with objective RTS measurements in the RTS decision-making process.

3.4 Clinical examination

Clinician-based assessment has traditionally focused on overall impairments of the knee (e.g. swelling, pain, strength, range of motion and joint laxity). Recent literature has called for increased attention to a more functional and whole-person health care approach in sports medicine within a biopsychosocial context [38]. Hence, RTS decision-making following ACLR requires consideration of not only physical but also psychosocial factors [15].

3.4.1 Muscle strength

Even though most athletes achieve an (what is currently considered) acceptable muscle function, the RTS rates after ACLR are disappointing [11]. The majority of studies measure the peak torque and/or total work of the hamstrings and quadriceps with isokinetic or isometric dynamometry to evaluate muscle strength after ACLR, even though debate exists on the most optimal outcome measures and the functional relevance of testing strength in an open chain situation [39]. Despite the fact that isokinetic knee strength evaluations after ACLR are commonly used to evaluate RTS readiness, these measures have not been sufficiently validated as useful predictors of successful RTS [39]. Kyritsis et al. [20] showed a 10.6 times greater ACL re-injury risk after ACLR for every 10% decrease in the hamstrings to quadriceps ratio of the involved leg. Greater asymmetric quadriceps muscle strength prior to level 1 RTS after ACLR was also a significant predictor of knee re-injury [19].

Most studies have exclusively focused on the evaluation of knee muscle strength after ACLR, although a systematic review of Petersen et al. [40] also revealed deficits in hip muscle strength after ACLR. A prospective study of

Khayambashi et al. [41] reported that a decreased hip external rotator and abductor strength increased primary non-contact ACL injury risk. Future studies should explore the value of including these parameters in the RTS decision-making process.

3.4.1.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

A decreased hamstrings to quadriceps strength ratio and a greater asymmetric quadriceps strength can increase ACL re-injury risk, but the most optimal outcome measures and criteria to evaluate muscle strength in function of RTS after ACLR are not known. Most studies have exclusively focused on the evaluation of knee muscle strength. The validity of including muscle strength measurements of other joints, such as the hip, should be evaluated. The most optimal outcome measures and criteria to evaluate muscle strength should be determined in future research.

3.4.2 Hop tests

Noyes et al. [42] developed a set of 4 hop tests (single-leg hop for distance, triple hop for distance, cross-over hop for distance and 6m timed hop) with the purpose of representing an objective measure of the functional capabilities of an athlete related to the demands of high-level sport activities. These hop tests can provide a reliable performance-based outcome for ACLR patients and only require a minimal amount of equipment [43]. However, Hegedus et al. [44] found limited and conflicting evidence for the measurement properties of hop tests, making it difficult to decide whether an observed result is meaningful for an individual athlete.

Another potential limitation of the original set of hop tests is that this test battery mainly consists of straight movements in the sagittal plane, thereby potentially hindering elicitation of clinically relevant functional performance deficits. During pivoting sport activities, an athlete has to move in multiple directions. The inclusion of a combination of hop tests whereby an athlete is forced to move as quickly as possible in multiple directions might better represent the challenges encountered during functional movements and increase the sensitivity for detecting deficits [45]. Examples here are the figure-of-8 hop [45], side hop [45, 46] or square hop test [46]. A systematic review by Abrams [47] indicated that discrepancies between the operated and non-operated leg became more apparent when using more challenging tests such as the fatigue single-leg hop and side hop tests. However, only the traditional hop tests have been related with RTS after ACLR [19, 20]. Another disadvantage of the traditional outcomes of hop tests is the strict focus on quantitative outcomes (distance, time and limb symmetry), while outcomes related to the quality of movement are not captured [48].

3.4.2.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

There is conflicting evidence regarding the measurement properties of hop tests. The most optimal hop test RTS criteria after ACLR are not known. Hop tests have mainly been performed in the sagittal plane for the purpose of RTS decision-

making. The measurement properties and most optimal criteria of hop tests, including multidirectional hop tests, should be determined to assess RTS readiness.

3.4.3 Limb symmetry index (LSI)

From a clinical point of view, using the LSI by comparing the operated and non-operated leg after ACLR is the most obvious way to evaluate RTS readiness. For quantitative outcomes of isokinetic muscle strength evaluations and hop tests, LSI > 85-90% were traditionally considered as safe cut-off values to RTS [49-51]. However, one may question the acceptance of 10-15% difference between legs. It is possible that these so called “small” differences in physical function may have a high impact on the ability to return to high-level sport activities. More stringent recommendations which were categorized based on type of activity (pivoting, contact or competitive versus non-pivoting, non-contact or recreational) have been presented [11]. For the pivoting/contact/competitive group, these authors recommended a 100% LSI for knee extensor and knee flexor muscle strength and a single-leg hop LSI > 90% on 2 maximum hop tests (e.g. single hop for distance, vertical hop, etc.) and 1 endurance hop test (e.g. triple hop, stair hop, side hop, etc.). For the non-pivoting/non-contact/recreational group, they recommended at least 90% LSI for the involved limb knee extensor and knee flexor muscle strength and at least 90% LSI for the involved limb hop performance on 1 maximum or 1 endurance hop tests [11]. At 6 months after ACLR, with success defined as those patients who scored LSI of > 90% in a set of 3 hop tests and 3 strength tests, none of the patients met the criteria [32]. In fact, only 23% of all patients were successful at 2 years in meeting the criteria [32].

Even though a more symmetrical hopping performance has been related to returning to pre-injury sport level [8], this symmetry-based approach is debatable and may lead to underestimations of clinical relevant deficits, as bilateral neuromuscular, biomechanical and functional performance deficits have been demonstrated after unilateral ACLR [52-57]. This implies that a clinician is forced to refer to “normal” performances on certain tasks or pre-injury data of the athlete. However, only very limited scientific data are available in the literature on normative absolute values for strength and hop tests. Caution is therefore warranted when generalizing data from a specific population to other study groups or individuals.

3.4.3.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

The most optimal LSI is unknown and might differ between individuals with varying type and level of sport activity. Caution is warranted when using LSI as bilateral deficits can be present. The validity of LSI during the RTS decision-making process should be further explored.

1 3.4.4 Assessment of movement quality

2 An increased knee valgus movement, a decreased internal hip external rotation moment, a greater asymmetrical internal
3 knee extensor moment at initial contact during a drop vertical jump, and postural stability deficits during single-leg stance
4 significantly increased second ACL injury in a group of 35 female and 21 male athletes who returned to sport after ACLR
5 [58]. Another prospective study by Paterno et al. [59], including 61 female athletes with an ACLR, showed an altered
6 hip-ankle coordination during a dynamic single-leg postural coordination task compared to similar athletes who did not
7 suffer a second ACL injury during follow-up. Although no other prospective biomechanical studies after ACLR exist,
8 these preliminary findings are in line with the trend in the current literature to emphasize the importance of movement
9 quality during rehabilitation of ACLR patients [51, 60-62].

10 It is increasingly recognized that a knee does not function as an isolated joint, but rather as an intermediate joint within a
11 linked system of segments which need to interact with each other within different planes of movement during dynamic
12 sport activities [63, 64]. However, multi-dimensional time-varying biomechanical data are often reduced to zero-
13 dimensional data (e.g. peak single-joint and single-planar joint angles or moments), which might compromise our
14 understanding of multi-joint and multi-dimensional athletic movement behavior. From this perspective, the use of vector
15 field statistical analysis approaches might provide additional insights in future studies [65].

16 In addition to this fundamental research, it is imperative that efforts are made to translate these complex laboratory-based
17 procedures to more clinical-friendly methodologies. Most currently available biomechanical studies after ACLR used
18 sophisticated equipment in laboratory environments. The use of two-dimensional video analysis and visual observational
19 scales to evaluate multi-segmental movement quality in clinical settings shows promising results [56, 66-69]. Future
20 studies should assess the value of these measures in relation to RTS readiness.

21 3.4.4.1 What is the reference?

22 From a movement quality point of view, a recent systematic review attempted to determine “normal” ranges of hip and
23 knee kinematics based on studies using three-dimensional motion analysis of females during athletic tasks commonly
24 used to assess ACL injury risk [70]. However, normal ranges of kinematic outcomes can be influenced by numerous
25 variables including sex, age, sport specificity, sports or activity level, injury history, individual anatomical
26 characteristics, the methodology used to measure kinematics, the tasks being performed and the natural variability of
27 human movement behavior [70]. It is therefore not surprising that wide ranges of normal values were reported [70].
28 Based on the current scientific literature, the “norm-based” approach is therefore not yet supported when evaluating an
29 individual athlete from a primary or secondary injury prevention perspective. Furthermore, only pursuing the
30 “normalization” of biomechanical and/or neuromuscular outcomes during interventions to decrease (re-)injury risk, and

neglecting the individual characteristics of an athlete, may again lead to suboptimal outcomes. When pre-injury data for an individual athlete were available, one would be able to refer to these outcomes, but in most cases these data are lacking. Furthermore, the pre-injury individual characteristics may have been less optimal, thereby contributing to the multifactorial reason why the initial injury would have occurred. A return to the same level after injury as before injury therefore cannot be a good enough outcome. The advanced clinical reasoning skills of a clinician remain essential when assessing an individual athlete.

3.4.4.2 Task and environmental constraints

Movement quality, objectively evaluated with biomechanical measurements, may vary according to the task being selected after ACLR [71]. During athletic activities, an athlete has to visually perceive the constantly and quickly changing, unpredictable environment (e.g. movement of another player, opponent or a ball), quickly process these situational-specific visual-spatial cues within the central nervous system and develop an appropriate physical response while maintaining dynamic stability of the body. Several studies have shown that experimentally visually cued temporal constraints can affect whole body kinematics and knee loading during athletic activities such as cutting [72, 73]. Therefore, one could argue that environments should be as realistic and context-specific as possible when evaluating the ability to RTS. However, most currently used dynamic RTS tests are performed within a predictable, fixed or “closed” environment. Training or testing in closed environments may decrease the ability to transfer the learned patterns towards highly unpredictable three-dimensional open environments encountered during athletic activities. In addition, most athletes are familiar with the tests, as the same movement tasks are often performed and learned during rehabilitation. As a consequence, an athlete may be aware of the criteria to perform these tests with an “optimal” movement quality. This may lead to situations whereby clinicians rather evaluate a conscious, internally focused and learned movement behavior of the athlete instead of the dynamic capabilities of an athlete which are related to real game situations.

Athletes recovering from injury typically have an increased internal focus of attention [74]. This can be a result of the fear to sustain a re-injury, lack of confidence in the injured body part or the predominantly internally focused instructions provided by the clinician during a prolonged time of rehabilitation. Nevertheless, during athletic activities it is highly important to be able to redirect attention to the most relevant environmental cues. Several studies have shown that the performance on postural control tasks decreases significantly more in ACL injured and ACLR patients compared to healthy controls when the neurocognitive loading increases [52, 53, 75-79]. This can be established by including temporal constraints, distracting or occluding the visual system, increasing the level of task uncertainty, performing dual tasks or including fatigue, psychological stressors, decision-making or combinations of those factors in RTS tests.

3.4.4.3 Sensorimotor system

1 The cascade of neurophysiological alterations after ACL injury, in combination with the reported deficits across the whole
2 spectrum of the sensorimotor system after ACL injury and ACLR, support the theory that an ACL injury should be
3 considered as a neurophysiological injury, and not as a “simple” musculoskeletal pathology with only local mechanical
4 or motor dysfunctions [80, 81]. These alterations may contribute to the increased need to rely on visual feedback and
5 conscious movement planning with an internal focus of attention after ACLR. The central nervous system may become
6 overloaded in these particular situations where task and environmental constraints are altered. This neurocognitive
7 overload may lead to a momentary loss of visual-spatial disorientation and decreased dynamic joint stability, potentially
8 increasing secondary ACL injury risk [82, 83]. However, the ability of an individual to handle neurocognitive overloading
9 may be missed with the traditional RTS test batteries. Most RTS batteries mainly focus on the motor end of the
10 sensorimotor system, and fail to comprehensively address the interaction of an individual with the task and environmental
11 constraints. This is in contrast with the current injury prevention and rehabilitation literature, where for example the
12 inclusion of an external focus of attention and visual-motor interaction training is increasingly supported to enhance motor
13 learning and stimulate the transfer of a learned motor behavior towards a variety of functional athletic tasks and dynamic
14 environments [81, 84, 85]. The recognition and application of this framework might allow developing more efficient RTS
15 criteria in the future.

16 *3.4.4.4 Fatigue*

17 RTS tests are mostly performed in a non-fatigued state. However, fatigue can have detrimental effects on multiple
18 biomechanical and neuromuscular variables during tests that are currently used to assess RTS readiness in ACLR athletes
19 [86-90]. In a study by Augustsson et al. [86], all ACLR patients met the RTS criteria (defined as a LSI > 90% on the
20 single-leg hop test) in a non-fatigued state, while 68% showed an abnormal LSI when fatigued. Similarly, Gokeler et al.
21 [89] found an increase in the Landing Error Scoring System score during a bilateral drop vertical jump when fatigued in
22 an ACLR and non-injured control group. Moreover, the influence of fatigue on lower extremity biomechanics is even
23 more pronounced during unanticipated landings, further emphasizing the interactive role of fatigue and decision-making
24 after ACLR [91]. Based on the current literature, it can be argued that testing athletes in a fatigued state may enhance
25 the ability to detect clinical relevant deficits after ACLR [92].

26 *3.4.4.5 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research*

27 Less optimal movement quality during functional movements can increase re-injury risk. Most RTS tests have mainly
28 focused on single-joint (the knee) and single-planar biomechanical outcomes, and on the motor end of the sensorimotor
29 system. The validity of RTS tests focusing on multi-segmental and multidirectional movement quality should be
30 evaluated. Athletes should be evaluated across a broad sensorimotor spectrum, including the interactions between an

individual and the task and environmental constraints. It is recommended to develop RTS tests that employ the effect of fatigue.

3.4.5 Psychological factors

Traditional rehabilitation after ACLR and subsequent RTS criteria has predominantly focused on the recovery of the physical capacity to cope with the physical demands of a specific sport, maximize performance and decrease re-injury risk [17]. During recent years, it has become clear that physical recovery alone is not sufficient to ensure successful RTS [7]. Many athletes with good physical function do not RTS after ACLR [93]. The importance of psychological factors after ACLR is increasingly recognized in the literature [7, 94]. A recent review on contextual factors affecting RTS after ACLR identified that lower fear of re-injury, greater psychological readiness and a more positive subjective assessment of knee function favored a return to pre-injury level of sport after ACLR [7]. Sonesson et al. [95] found that higher motivation during rehabilitation was associated with returning to pre-injury sport activity. Another study showed that patients who had returned to knee-strenuous sports after ACLR reported higher self-efficacy, evaluated with the Knee Self-Efficacy Scale (K-SES) [96], compared with those who had not returned [97]. The ACL-Return to Sport after Injury (ACL-RSI) scale has been developed to assess the athlete's psychological readiness to RTS [98]. This 12-item questionnaire assesses emotions, confidence and risk appraisals associated with RTS after ACLR and has been proved to discriminate between athletes who returned to sports after ACLR and those who did not [99]. At 4 months after ACLR, an ACL-RSI cut-off score of 56 points predicted RTS at 12 months with a sensitivity of 58% and specificity of 83% [99]. Nevertheless, psychological factors are typically not systematically evaluated during rehabilitation and RTS decision-making after ACLR [100]. A paradigm shift from the traditional physical-focused RTS evaluation towards a more holistic approach where psychological factors are comprehensively assessed as well has been proposed [100]. Early evaluation and recognition of maladaptive or dysfunctional psychological responses during rehabilitation may allow the clinician to address these modifiable deficits with targeted interventions before RTS [100, 101].

3.4.5.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

Psychological factors play a significant role in RTS outcomes but are typically not evaluated during the RTS decision-making process. It is advised to integrate psychological factors within a holistic biopsychosocial RTS decision-making approach.

4 How to organize a RTS decision process?

1 Nyland [102] considers the RTS decision-making process as a continuum, which is too large to perform in only 1 step.
2 Each rehabilitation exercise or phase can be considered as a small step in the direction of RTS [102, 103]. Pre-operative,
3 operative as well as post-operative factors during rehabilitation can affect RTS [103, 104]. This more layered approach
4 within a smooth continuum of recovery throughout the whole rehabilitation is in line with the contemporary criteria-based
5 rehabilitation approaches [103, 105, 106], but in contrast with the traditional “yes” or “no” question at the hypothetical
6 “end” of rehabilitation [102, 103, 107]. Repeated athletic evaluations during the rehabilitation should be considered as
7 small steps on the road to RTS. The decision to allow full return to unrestricted athletic activities should not be considered
8 as the endpoint of this continuum [15]. Even though we currently do not know how RTS criteria develop over time after
9 RTS, maintenance programs and longer follow-ups are advised to further improve or at least maintain functional levels
10 following an intense rehabilitation period [107]. Secondary prevention programs have been proposed [108, 109], but their
11 effectiveness for reducing re-injury risk and increasing RTS rates have yet to be investigated. A graphical overview of
12 the proposed continuum is presented in Figure 1.

13 Gradual planning and periodization to progress from training in a controlled environment in clinical practice to athletic
14 activities in highly uncontrolled environments is needed during rehabilitation. Too often, the end phase of the
15 rehabilitation is not extensive or specific enough, thereby exposing athletes to specific training loads and training
16 characteristics that they cannot handle from a physical, physiologically, neurocognitive as well as psychological
17 perspective. The failure to fully recover after ACLR, while allowing a RTS based on non-specific criteria without a
18 progressive re-integration into sport, may lead to a lack of confidence in the athlete, fear of re-injury and the persistence
19 of risk factors that ultimately increase the re-injury risk. To finally integrate an athlete into a team sport, progressions can
20 be made from (1) return to reduced team training without contact, (2) return to full (normal) team training with contact,
21 (3) return to friendly games (initially not over the full duration) and (4) return to competitive matches (initially not over
22 the full duration) [60]. This may reflect a more comprehensive phasic periodization of RTS, in line with the recently
23 proposed continuum of RTS [15].

24 In addition, exclusively focusing on the performance on the aforementioned RTS tests may fall short in terms of
25 effectively monitoring how an athlete can handle the increasing training and competition workloads [110, 111]. An athlete
26 may be able to successfully perform functional RTS tests, but when performing greater workloads than they are prepared
27 for, the risk for an unsuccessful RTS and re-injury is still increased [110]. For that reason, Blanch & Gabbett [110]
28 proposed the inclusion of the acute/chronic workload ratio in the RTS decision-making process. This ratio describes the
29 relation between the workload of the last week (acute workload), in relation to the rolling average workload of the last 4
30 weeks (chronic workload). This concept can be applied to a wide range of individually functional relevant training
31 variables representing external workload (e.g. number of jumps or high speed running covered) or internal workload (e.g.

rating of perceived exertion). Rapid spikes in acute/chronic workload ratios during the RTS process should be avoided. For a clinician, it is therefore important to know the physical demands of the specific sport and to gradually expose an athlete to the sport-specific workloads in order to successfully integrate a player back into sport. This concept highlights again the dynamic interaction between rehabilitation and the RTS decision-making process.

Taken together, these findings strongly argue for a close cooperation between all members within a multidisciplinary team, facilitating a shared decision-making process [17, 112]. A graphical overview of the aforementioned traditional and optimized RTS approach is presented in Figure 2.

4.1 Summary and Recommendations for Future Research

The RTS decision is typically made at the hypothetical “end” of rehabilitation, without adequate follow-up. Researchers should focus on the development of test batteries across the whole continuum of criterion-based rehabilitation, and not only at the hypothetical “end”. RTS decision should be based on shared decision-making. Workload should be objectively measured during the rehabilitation to enable a gradual periodized RTS after ACLR.

5 What RTS criteria can clinicians use now?

Numerous limitations in the literature have been presented in this manuscript, followed by suggestions for future research. Nevertheless, clinicians cannot wait for years of research to make daily clinical decisions. Until more evidence-based RTS criteria are available, shared decisions can be made based on the integration of the best available evidence, clinical experience and patient preferences [17]. While acknowledging the current limitations, we propose a combination of different existing parameters at the hypothetical “end” of rehabilitation in Table 1, which need optimization and validation across the whole continuum in the future, based on the suggestions proposed in the current manuscript. The definition of successful RTS outcomes should be discussed before and throughout the rehabilitation process to tailor an individual RTS decision-making process.

6 Conclusion

The critical appraisal of the current literature provided in this article has shown that no gold standard exists when evaluating RTS readiness after ACLR. The identification of the current limitations in the literature and the proposed optimizations within this review may serve as a solid baseline from which to improve the RTS decision-making process after ACLR in the future.

1 **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

2

3 **Funding**

4 No sources of funding were used to assist in the preparation of this article.

5

6 **Conflicts of interest**

7 Bart Dingenen and Alli Gokeler declare that they have no conflicts of interest relevant to the content of this review.

REFERENCES

1. Marx RG, Jones EC, Angel M, et al. Beliefs and attitudes of members of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons regarding the treatment of anterior cruciate ligament injury. *Arthroscopy*. 2003;19(7):762-70.
2. Wiggins AJ, Grandhi RK, Schneider DK, et al. Risk of secondary injury in younger athletes after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Am J Sports Med*. 2016;44(7):1861-76. doi:10.1177/0363546515621554.
3. Culvenor AG, Cook JL, Collins NJ, et al. Is patellofemoral joint osteoarthritis an under-recognised outcome of anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction? A narrative literature review. *Br J Sports Med*. 2013;47(2):66-70. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2012-091490.
4. Oiestad BE, Holm I, Engebretsen L, et al. The association between radiographic knee osteoarthritis and knee symptoms, function and quality of life 10-15 years after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Br J Sports Med*. 2011;45(7):583-8. doi:10.1136/bjism.2010.073130.
5. Risberg MA, Oiestad BE, Gunderson R, et al. Changes in knee osteoarthritis, symptoms, and function after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a 20-year prospective follow-up study. *Am J Sports Med*. 2016;44(5):1215-24. doi:10.1177/0363546515626539.
6. Zaffagnini S, Grassi A, Serra M, et al. Return to sport after ACL reconstruction: how, when and why? A narrative review of current evidence. *Joints*. 2015;3(1):25-30.
7. Ardern CL. Anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction-not exactly a one-way ticket back to the preinjury level: a review of contextual factors affecting return to sport after surgery. *Sports Health*. 2015;7(3):224-30. doi:10.1177/1941738115578131.
8. Ardern CL, Taylor NF, Feller JA, et al. Fifty-five per cent return to competitive sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery: an updated systematic review and meta-analysis including aspects of physical functioning and contextual factors. *Br J Sports Med*. 2014;48(21):1543-52. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2013-093398.
9. Walden M, Hagglund M, Magnusson H, et al. ACL injuries in men's professional football: a 15-year prospective study on time trends and return-to-play rates reveals only 65% of players still play at the top level 3 years after ACL rupture. *Br J Sports Med*. 2016;50(12):744-50. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2015-095952.
10. Kester BS, Behery OA, Minhas SV, et al. Athletic performance and career longevity following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction in the national basketball association. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc*. 2016:1-7. doi:10.1007/s00167-016-4060-y.

- 1 11. Thomee R, Kaplan Y, Kvist J, et al. Muscle strength and hop performance criteria prior to return to sports after ACL
2 reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2011;19(11):1798-805. doi:10.1007/s00167-011-1669-8.
- 3 12. Samitier G, Marcano AI, Alentorn-Geli E, et al. Failure of anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Arch Bone Jt*
4 *Surg.* 2015;3(4):220-40.
- 5 13. Feller J, Webster KE. Return to sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Int Orthop.* 2013;37(2):285-
6 90. doi:10.1007/s00264-012-1690-7.
- 7 14. Shrier I. Strategic assessment of risk and risk tolerance (StARRT) framework for return-to-play decision-making. *Br*
8 *J Sports Med.* 2015;49(20):1311-5. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2014-094569.
- 9 15. Ardern CL, Glasgow P, Schneiders A, et al. 2016 consensus statement on return to sport from the First World Congress
10 in Sports Physical Therapy, Bern. *Br J Sports Med.* 2016;50(14):853-64. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2016-096278.
- 11 16. Lynch AD, Logerstedt DS, Grindem H, et al. Consensus criteria for defining 'successful outcome' after ACL injury
12 and reconstruction: a Delaware-Oslo ACL cohort investigation. *Br J Sports Med.* 2015;49(5):335-42.
13 doi:10.1136/bjsports-2013-092299.
- 14 17. Ardern CL, Bizzini M, Bahr R. It is time for consensus on return to play after injury: five key questions. *Br J Sports*
15 *Med.* 2016;50(9):506-8. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2015-095475.
- 16 18. Barber-Westin SD, Noyes FR. Factors used to determine return to unrestricted sports activities after anterior cruciate
17 ligament reconstruction. *Arthroscopy.* 2011;27(12):1697-705. doi:10.1016/j.arthro.2011.09.009.
- 18 19. Grindem H, Snyder-Mackler L, Moksnes H, et al. Simple decision rules can reduce reinjury risk by 84% after ACL
19 reconstruction: the Delaware-Oslo ACL cohort study. *Br J Sports Med.* 2016;50(13):804-8. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2016-
20 096031.
- 21 20. Kyritsis P, Bahr R, Landreau P, et al. Likelihood of ACL graft rupture: not meeting six clinical discharge criteria
22 before return to sport is associated with a four times greater risk of rupture. *Br J Sports Med.* 2016;50(15):946-51.
23 doi:10.1136/bjsports-2015-095908.
- 24 21. Czuppon S, Racette BA, Klein SE, et al. Variables associated with return to sport following anterior cruciate ligament
25 reconstruction: a systematic review. *Br J Sports Med.* 2014;48(5):356-64. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2012-091786.
- 26 22. Gokeler A, Welling W, Zaffagnini S, et al. Development of a test battery to enhance safe return to sports after anterior
27 cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2016. doi:10.1007/s00167-016-4246-3.
- 28 23. Bittencourt NF, Meeuwisse WH, Mendonca LD, et al. Complex systems approach for sports injuries: moving from
29 risk factor identification to injury pattern recognition-narrative review and new concept. *Br J Sports Med.* 2016.
30 doi:10.1136/bjsports-2015-095850.

- 1 24. Karlsson J, Becker R. Return to sports after ACL reconstruction: individual considerations. *Knee Surg Sports*
2 *Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2015;23(5):1271-2. doi:10.1007/s00167-015-3600-1.
- 3 25. Schlumberger M, Schuster P, Schulz M, et al. Traumatic graft rupture after primary and revision anterior cruciate
4 ligament reconstruction: retrospective analysis of incidence and risk factors in 2915 cases. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol*
5 *Arthrosc.* 2015:1-7. doi:10.1007/s00167-015-3699-0.
- 6 26. Paterno MV, Rauh MJ, Schmitt LC, et al. Incidence of second ACL injuries 2 years after primary ACL reconstruction
7 and return to sport. *Am J Sports Med.* 2014;42(7):1567-73. doi:10.1177/0363546514530088.
- 8 27. Laboute E, Savalli L, Puig P, et al. Analysis of return to competition and repeat rupture for 298 anterior cruciate
9 ligament reconstructions with patellar or hamstring tendon autograft in sportspeople. *Ann Phys Rehabil Med.*
10 2010;53(10):598-614. doi:10.1016/j.rehab.2010.10.002.
- 11 28. Nagelli CV, Hewett TE. Should return to sport be delayed until 2 years after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction?
12 Biological and functional considerations. *Sports Med.* 2016. doi:10.1007/s40279-016-0584-z.
- 13 29. Myer GD, Martin L, Jr., Ford KR, et al. No association of time from surgery with functional deficits in athletes after
14 anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: evidence for objective return-to-sport criteria. *Am J Sports Med.*
15 2012;40(10):2256-63. doi:10.1177/0363546512454656.
- 16 30. Capin JJ, Khandha A, Zarzycki R, et al. Gait mechanics and second ACL rupture: implications for delaying return-
17 to-sport. *J Orthop Res.* 2016. doi:10.1002/jor.23476.
- 18 31. Chan DK, Lonsdale C, Ho PY, et al. Patient motivation and adherence to postsurgery rehabilitation exercise
19 recommendations: the influence of physiotherapists' autonomy-supportive behaviors. *Arch Phys Med Rehabil.*
20 2009;90(12):1977-82. doi:10.1016/j.apmr.2009.05.024.
- 21 32. Thomee R, Neeter C, Gustavsson A, et al. Variability in leg muscle power and hop performance after anterior cruciate
22 ligament reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2012;20(6):1143-51. doi:10.1007/s00167-012-1912-y.
- 23 33. Logerstedt D, Arundale A, Lynch A, et al. A conceptual framework for a sports knee injury performance profile
24 (SKIPP) and return to activity criteria (RTAC). *Braz J Phys Ther.* 2015;19(5):340-59. doi:10.1590/bjpt-rbf.2014.0116.
- 25 34. Anderson AF, Irrgang JJ, Kocher MS, et al. The International Knee Documentation Committee Subjective Knee
26 Evaluation Form: normative data. *Am J Sports Med.* 2006;34(1):128-35. doi:10.1177/0363546505280214.
- 27 35. Collins NJ, Misra D, Felson DT, et al. Measures of knee function: International Knee Documentation Committee
28 (IKDC) Subjective Knee Evaluation Form, Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS), Knee Injury and
29 Osteoarthritis Outcome Score Physical Function Short Form (KOOS-PS), Knee Outcome Survey Activities of Daily
30 Living Scale (KOS-ADL), Lysholm Knee Scoring Scale, Oxford Knee Score (OKS), Western Ontario and McMaster

1 Universities Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC), Activity Rating Scale (ARS), and Tegner Activity Score (TAS). *Arthritis*
2 *Care Res (Hoboken)*. 2011;63 Suppl 11:S208-28. doi:10.1002/acr.20632.

3 36. van Meer BL, Meuffels DE, Vissers MM, et al. Knee injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score or International Knee
4 Documentation Committee Subjective Knee Form: which questionnaire is most useful to monitor patients with an anterior
5 cruciate ligament rupture in the short term? *Arthroscopy*. 2013;29(4):701-15. doi:10.1016/j.arthro.2012.12.015.

6 37. Logerstedt D, Di Stasi S, Grindem H, et al. Self-reported knee function can identify athletes who fail return-to-activity
7 criteria up to 1 year after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a Delaware-Oslo ACL cohort study. *J Orthop Sports*
8 *Phys Ther*. 2014;44(12):914-23. doi:10.2519/jospt.2014.4852.

9 38. Parsons JT, Snyder AR. Health-related quality of life as a primary clinical outcome in sport rehabilitation. *J Sport*
10 *Rehabil*. 2011;20(1):17-36.

11 39. Undheim MB, Cosgrave C, King E, et al. Isokinetic muscle strength and readiness to return to sport following anterior
12 cruciate ligament reconstruction: is there an association? A systematic review and a protocol recommendation. *Br J Sports*
13 *Med*. 2015;49(20):1305-10. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2014-093962.

14 40. Petersen W, Taheri P, Forkel P, et al. Return to play following ACL reconstruction: a systematic review about strength
15 deficits. *Arch Orthop Trauma Surg*. 2014;134(10):1417-28. doi:10.1007/s00402-014-1992-x.

16 41. Khayambashi K, Ghoddosi N, Straub RK, et al. Hip muscle strength predicts noncontact anterior cruciate ligament
17 injury in male and female athletes: a prospective study. *Am J Sports Med*. 2016;44(2):355-61.
18 doi:10.1177/0363546515616237.

19 42. Noyes FR, Barber SD, Mangine RE. Abnormal lower limb symmetry determined by function hop tests after anterior
20 cruciate ligament rupture. *Am J Sports Med*. 1991;19(5):513-8.

21 43. Reid A, Birmingham TB, Stratford PW, et al. Hop testing provides a reliable and valid outcome measure during
22 rehabilitation after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Phys Ther*. 2007;87(3):337-49. doi:10.2522/ptj.20060143.

23 44. Hegedus EJ, McDonough S, Bleakley C, et al. Clinician-friendly lower extremity physical performance measures in
24 athletes: a systematic review of measurement properties and correlation with injury, part 1. The tests for knee function
25 including the hop tests. *Br J Sports Med*. 2015;49(10):642-8. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2014-094094.

26 45. Itoh H, Kurosaka M, Yoshiya S, et al. Evaluation of functional deficits determined by four different hop tests in
27 patients with anterior cruciate ligament deficiency. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc*. 1998;6(4):241-5.
28 doi:10.1007/s001670050106.

29 46. Gustavsson A, Neeter C, Thomee P, et al. A test battery for evaluating hop performance in patients with an ACL
30 injury and patients who have undergone ACL reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc*. 2006;14(8):778-88.
31 doi:10.1007/s00167-006-0045-6.

47. Abrams GD, Harris JD, Gupta AK, et al. Functional performance testing after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a systematic review. *Orthop J Sports Med.* 2014;2(1):2325967113518305. doi:10.1177/2325967113518305.
48. Xergia SA, Pappas E, Georgoulis AD. Association of the single-limb hop test with isokinetic, kinematic, and kinetic asymmetries in patients after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Sports Health.* 2015;7(3):217-23. doi:10.1177/1941738114529532.
49. Kvist J. Rehabilitation following anterior cruciate ligament injury: current recommendations for sports participation. *Sports Med.* 2004;34(4):269-80.
50. van Grinsven S, van Cingel RE, Holla CJ, et al. Evidence-based rehabilitation following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2010;18(8):1128-44. doi:10.1007/s00167-009-1027-2.
51. Barber-Westin SD, Noyes FR. Objective criteria for return to athletics after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction and subsequent reinjury rates: a systematic review. *Phys Sportsmed.* 2011;39(3):100-10. doi:10.3810/psm.2011.09.1926.
52. Dingenen B, Janssens L, Claes S, et al. Postural stability deficits during the transition from double-leg stance to single-leg stance in anterior cruciate ligament reconstructed subjects. *Hum Mov Sci.* 2015;41:46-58. doi:10.1016/j.humov.2015.02.001.
53. Dingenen B, Janssens L, Claes S, et al. Lower extremity muscle activation onset times during the transition from double-leg stance to single-leg stance in anterior cruciate ligament reconstructed subjects. *Clin Biomech (Bristol, Avon).* 2016;35:116-23. doi:10.1016/j.clinbiomech.2016.04.014.
54. Culvenor AG, Alexander BC, Clark RA, et al. Dynamic single-leg postural control is impaired bilaterally following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: implications for reinjury risk. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2016;46(5):357-64. doi:10.2519/jospt.2016.6305.
55. Clagg S, Paterno MV, Hewett TE, et al. Performance on the modified star excursion balance test at the time of return to sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2015;45(6):444-52. doi:10.2519/jospt.2015.5040.
56. Hall MP, Paik RS, Ware AJ, et al. Neuromuscular evaluation with single-leg squat test at 6 months after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Orthop J Sports Med.* 2015;3(3):2325967115575900. doi:10.1177/2325967115575900.
57. Chung KS, Ha JK, Yeom CH, et al. Are muscle strength and function of the uninjured lower limb weakened after anterior cruciate ligament injury? Two-year follow-up after reconstruction. *Am J Sports Med.* 2015;43(12):3013-21. doi:10.1177/0363546515606126.

58. Paterno MV, Schmitt LC, Ford KR, et al. Biomechanical measures during landing and postural stability predict second anterior cruciate ligament injury after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction and return to sport. *Am J Sports Med.* 2010;38(10):1968-78. doi:10.1177/0363546510376053.
59. Paterno MV, Kiefer AW, Bonnette S, et al. Prospectively identified deficits in sagittal plane hip-ankle coordination in female athletes who sustain a second anterior cruciate ligament injury after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction and return to sport. *Clin Biomech (Bristol, Avon).* 2015;30(10):1094-101. doi:10.1016/j.clinbiomech.2015.08.019.
60. Bizzini M, Hancock D, Impellizzeri F. Suggestions from the field for return to sports participation following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: soccer. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2012;42(4):304-12. doi:10.2519/jospt.2012.4005.
61. Engelen-van Melick N, van Cingel RE, Tijssen MP, et al. Assessment of functional performance after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: a systematic review of measurement procedures. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2013;21(4):869-79. doi:10.1007/s00167-012-2030-6.
62. Wilk KE, Macrina LC, Cain EL, et al. Recent advances in the rehabilitation of anterior cruciate ligament injuries. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2012;42(3):153-71. doi:10.2519/jospt.2012.3741.
63. Powers CM. The influence of abnormal hip mechanics on knee injury: a biomechanical perspective. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2010;40(2):42-51. doi:10.2519/jospt.2010.3337.
64. Mendiguchia J, Ford KR, Quatman CE, et al. Sex differences in proximal control of the knee joint. *Sports Med.* 2011;41(7):541-57. doi:10.2165/11589140-000000000-00000.
65. Pataky TC, Robinson MA, Vanrenterghem J. Vector field statistical analysis of kinematic and force trajectories. *J Biomech.* 2013;46(14):2394-401. doi:10.1016/j.jbiomech.2013.07.031.
66. Dingenen B, Malfait B, Vanrenterghem J, et al. The reliability and validity of the measurement of lateral trunk motion in two-dimensional video analysis during unipodal functional screening tests in elite female athletes. *Phys Ther Sport.* 2014;15(2):117-23. doi:10.1016/j.ptsp.2013.05.001.
67. Dingenen B, Malfait B, Vanrenterghem J, et al. Can two-dimensional measured peak sagittal plane excursions during drop vertical jumps help identify three-dimensional measured joint moments? *Knee.* 2015;22(2):73-9. doi:10.1016/j.knee.2014.12.006.
68. Dingenen B, Malfait B, Nijs S, et al. Can two-dimensional video analysis during single-leg drop vertical jumps help identify non-contact knee injury risk? A one-year prospective study. *Clin Biomech (Bristol, Avon).* 2015;30(8):781-7. doi:10.1016/j.clinbiomech.2015.06.013.
69. Padua DA, Marshall SW, Boling MC, et al. The landing error scoring system (LESS) is a valid and reliable clinical assessment tool of jump-landing biomechanics: The JUMP-ACL study. *Am J Sports Med.* 2009;37(10):1996-2002. doi:10.1177/0363546509343200.

- 1 70. Fox AS, Bonacci J, McLean SG, et al. What is normal? Female lower limb kinematic profiles during athletic tasks
2 used to examine anterior cruciate ligament injury risk: a systematic review. *Sports Med.* 2014;44(6):815-32.
3 doi:10.1007/s40279-014-0168-8.
- 4 71. Chua EN, Yeung MY, Fu SC, et al. Motion task selection for kinematic evaluation after anterior cruciate ligament
5 reconstruction: a systematic review. *Arthroscopy.* 2016;32(7):1453-65. doi:10.1016/j.arthro.2016.01.057.
- 6 72. Brown SR, Brughelli M, Hume PA. Knee mechanics during planned and unplanned sidestepping: a systematic review
7 and meta-analysis. *Sports Med.* 2014;44(11):1573-88. doi:10.1007/s40279-014-0225-3.
- 8 73. Almonroeder TG, Garcia E, Kurt M. The effects of anticipation on the mechanics of the knee during single-leg cutting
9 tasks: a systematic review. *Int J Sports Phys Ther.* 2015;10(7):918-28.
- 10 74. Gray R. Differences in attentional focus associated with recovery from sports injury: does injury induce an internal
11 focus? *J Sport Exerc Psychol.* 2015;37(6):607-16. doi:10.1123/jsep.2015-0156.
- 12 75. Okuda K, Abe N, Katayama Y, et al. Effect of vision on postural sway in anterior cruciate ligament injured knees. *J*
13 *Orthop Sci.* 2005;10(3):277-83. doi:10.1007/s00776-005-0893-9.
- 14 76. Dingenen B, Janssens L, Luyckx T, et al. Postural stability during the transition from double-leg stance to single-leg
15 stance in anterior cruciate ligament injured subjects. *Clin Biomech (Bristol, Avon).* 2015;30(3):283-9.
16 doi:10.1016/j.clinbiomech.2015.01.002.
- 17 77. Dingenen B, Janssens L, Luyckx T, et al. Lower extremity muscle activation onset times during the transition from
18 double-leg stance to single-leg stance in anterior cruciate ligament injured subjects. *Hum Mov Sci.* 2015;44:234-45.
19 doi:10.1016/j.humov.2015.09.007.
- 20 78. Negahban H, Hadian MR, Salavati M, et al. The effects of dual-tasking on postural control in people with unilateral
21 anterior cruciate ligament injury. *Gait Posture.* 2009;30(4):477-81. doi:10.1016/j.gaitpost.2009.07.112.
- 22 79. Negahban H, Ahmadi P, Salehi R, et al. Attentional demands of postural control during single leg stance in patients
23 with anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Neurosci Lett.* 2013;556:118-23. doi:10.1016/j.neulet.2013.10.022.
- 24 80. Kapreli E, Athanasopoulos S. The anterior cruciate ligament deficiency as a model of brain plasticity. *Med*
25 *Hypotheses.* 2006;67(3):645-50. doi:10.1016/j.mehy.2006.01.063.
- 26 81. Grooms D, Appelbaum G, Onate J. Neuroplasticity following anterior cruciate ligament injury: a framework for
27 visual-motor training approaches in rehabilitation. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2015;45(5):381-93.
28 doi:10.2519/jospt.2015.5549.
- 29 82. Swanik CB. Brains and sprains: the brain's role in noncontact anterior cruciate ligament injuries. *J Athl Train.*
30 2015;50(10):1100-2. doi:10.4085/1062-6050-50.10.08.

83. Swanik CB, Covassin T, Stearne DJ, et al. The relationship between neurocognitive function and noncontact anterior cruciate ligament injuries. *Am J Sports Med.* 2007;35(6):943-8. doi:10.1177/0363546507299532.
84. Benjaminse A, Gokeler A, Dowling AV, et al. Optimization of the anterior cruciate ligament injury prevention paradigm: novel feedback techniques to enhance motor learning and reduce injury risk. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2015;45(3):170-82. doi:10.2519/jospt.2015.4986.
85. Gokeler A, Benjaminse A, Hewett TE, et al. Feedback techniques to target functional deficits following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: implications for motor control and reduction of second injury risk. *Sports Med.* 2013;43(11):1065-74. doi:10.1007/s40279-013-0095-0.
86. Augustsson J, Thomee R, Karlsson J. Ability of a new hop test to determine functional deficits after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2004;12(5):350-6. doi:10.1007/s00167-004-0518-4.
87. Santamaria LJ, Webster KE. The effect of fatigue on lower-limb biomechanics during single-limb landings: a systematic review. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2010;40(8):464-73. doi:10.2519/jospt.2010.3295.
88. Webster KE, Santamaria LJ, McClelland JA, et al. Effect of fatigue on landing biomechanics after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery. *Med Sci Sports Exerc.* 2012;44(5):910-6. doi:10.1249/MSS.0b013e31823fe28d.
89. Gokeler A, Eppinga P, Dijkstra PU, et al. Effect of fatigue on landing performance assessed with the landing error scoring system (LESS) in patients after ACL reconstruction. A pilot study. *Int J Sports Phys Ther.* 2014;9(3):302-11.
90. Frank BS, Gilsdorf CM, Goerger BM, et al. Neuromuscular fatigue alters postural control and sagittal plane hip biomechanics in active females with anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Sports Health.* 2014;6(4):301-8. doi:10.1177/1941738114530950.
91. Borotikar BS, Newcomer R, Koppes R, et al. Combined effects of fatigue and decision making on female lower limb landing postures: central and peripheral contributions to ACL injury risk. *Clin Biomech (Bristol, Avon).* 2008;23(1):81-92. doi:10.1016/j.clinbiomech.2007.08.008.
92. Bien DP, Dubuque TJ. Considerations for late stage ACL rehabilitation and return to sport to limit re-injury risk and maximize athletic performance. *Int J Sports Phys Ther.* 2015;10(2):256-71.
93. Ardern CL, Webster KE, Taylor NF, et al. Return to sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the state of play. *Br J Sports Med.* 2011;45(7):596-606. doi:10.1136/bjsm.2010.076364.
94. Everhart JS, Best TM, Flanigan DC. Psychological predictors of anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction outcomes: a systematic review. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2015;23(3):752-62. doi:10.1007/s00167-013-2699-1.

- 1 95. Sonesson S, Kvist J, Ardern C, et al. Psychological factors are important to return to pre-injury sport activity after
2 anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: expect and motivate to satisfy. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol Arthrosc.* 2016.
3 doi:10.1007/s00167-016-4294-8.
- 4 96. Thomee P, Wahrborg P, Borjesson M, et al. A new instrument for measuring self-efficacy in patients with an anterior
5 cruciate ligament injury. *Scand J Med Sci Sports.* 2006;16(3):181-7. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0838.2005.00472.x.
- 6 97. Hamrin Senorski E, Samuelsson K, Thomee C, et al. Return to knee-strenuous sport after anterior cruciate ligament
7 reconstruction: a report from a rehabilitation outcome registry of patient characteristics. *Knee Surg Sports Traumatol*
8 *Arthrosc.* 2016. doi:10.1007/s00167-016-4280-1.
- 9 98. Webster KE, Feller JA, Lambros C. Development and preliminary validation of a scale to measure the psychological
10 impact of returning to sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery. *Phys Ther Sport.* 2008;9(1):9-
11 15. doi:10.1016/j.ptsp.2007.09.003.
- 12 99. Ardern CL, Taylor NF, Feller JA, et al. Psychological responses matter in returning to preinjury level of sport after
13 anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction surgery. *Am J Sports Med.* 2013;41(7):1549-58.
14 doi:10.1177/0363546513489284.
- 15 100. Ardern C, Kvist J. What is the evidence to support a psychological component to rehabilitation programs after
16 anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction? *Curr Orthop Pract.* 2016;27(3):263-8.
- 17 101. te Wierike SC, van der Sluis A, van den Akker-Scheek I, et al. Psychosocial factors influencing the recovery of
18 athletes with anterior cruciate ligament injury: a systematic review. *Scand J Med Sci Sports.* 2013;23(5):527-40.
19 doi:10.1111/sms.12010.
- 20 102. Nyland J. Update on rehabilitation following ACL reconstruction. *Open Access J Sports Med.* 2010:151.
21 doi:10.2147/oajsm.s9327.
- 22 103. Wilk KE, Arrigo CA. Rehabilitation principles of the anterior cruciate ligament reconstructed knee: twelve steps for
23 successful progression and return to play. *Clin Sports Med.* 2017;36(1):189-232. doi:10.1016/j.csm.2016.08.012.
- 24 104. Ellman MB, Sherman SL, Forsythe B, et al. Return to play following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *J*
25 *Am Acad Orthop Surg.* 2015;23(5):283-96. doi:10.5435/JAAOS-D-13-00183.
- 26 105. Herrington L, Myer G, Horsley I. Task based rehabilitation protocol for elite athletes following anterior cruciate
27 ligament reconstruction: a clinical commentary. *Phys Ther Sport.* 2013;14(4):188-98. doi:10.1016/j.ptsp.2013.08.001.
- 28 106. Myer GD, Paterno MV, Ford KR, et al. Rehabilitation after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction: criteria-based
29 progression through the return-to-sport phase. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2006;36(6):385-402.
30 doi:10.2519/jospt.2006.2222.

- 1 107. Nyland J, Mattocks A, Kibbe S, et al. Anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction, rehabilitation, and return to play:
2 2015 update. *Open Access J Sports Med*. 2016;7:21-32. doi:10.2147/OAJSM.S72332.
- 3 108. Hewett TE, Di Stasi SL, Myer GD. Current concepts for injury prevention in athletes after anterior cruciate ligament
4 reconstruction. *Am J Sports Med*. 2013;41(1):216-24. doi:10.1177/0363546512459638.
- 5 109. Di Stasi S, Myer GD, Hewett TE. Neuromuscular training to target deficits associated with second anterior cruciate
6 ligament injury. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther*. 2013;43(11):777-92, A1-11. doi:10.2519/jospt.2013.4693.
- 7 110. Blanch P, Gabbett TJ. Has the athlete trained enough to return to play safely? The acute:chronic workload ratio
8 permits clinicians to quantify a player's risk of subsequent injury. *Br J Sports Med*. 2016;50(8):471-5.
9 doi:10.1136/bjsports-2015-095445.
- 10 111. Windt J, Gabbett TJ. How do training and competition workloads relate to injury? The workload-injury aetiology
11 model. *Br J Sports Med*. 2016. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2016-096040.
- 12 112. Shrier I, Safai P, Charland L. Return to play following injury: whose decision should it be? *Br J Sports Med*.
13 2014;48(5):394-401. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2013-092492.

14

1 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

2

3 **Fig. 1** A graphical overview of the proposed return to sport (RTS) continuum after anterior cruciate ligament (ACL)
4 injury and ACL reconstruction. A layered individual continuous approach starting with the ACL injury, followed by
5 preoperative rehabilitation, the ACL reconstruction, a criterion-based postoperative rehabilitation, RTS testing, a careful
6 shared decision-making process and gradual periodized re-integration into sport-specific activities with adequate follow-
7 up is presented.

8

9 **Fig. 2** A graphical overview of the most important differences between components of the traditional and proposed
10 optimized return to sport (RTS) approach after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction (ACLR). Traditionally, the RTS
11 decision-making process is mainly based on time after ACLR (1) and impairments of the knee (2). The RTS decision is
12 only made at the hypothetical “end” of the rehabilitation without adequate follow-up (3), which may lead to a narrow
13 view of RTS readiness after ACLR (4). The optimized criterion-based (1) and multifactorial (2) approach presented in
14 this paper focuses on a wider spectrum of individual sensorimotor (3) and biomechanical outcomes, including for example
15 the evaluation of multi-segmental movement quality (4), but also takes into account the interactions of an individual with
16 the task and environmental constraints (5) (e.g. multi-directional single-legged RTS tests, inclusion of task uncertainty,
17 decision-making, external focus of attention and open environments). The RTS decision is not simply made at the
18 hypothetical “end” of the rehabilitation, but is considered as a step-by-step continuous process (6) (Figure 1). The whole
19 RTS decision-making process is made within a broad multifactorial biopsychosocial framework, and based on shared
20 decision-making (7). This optimized RTS approach may allow a “big picture view” of the RTS readiness of an individual
21 athlete (8).

Table 1. Return to sport criteria that clinicians can use today

Time after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction > 9 months [19, 30]

Patient reported outcomes measures:

Symptoms, function, activity, participation:

IKDC2000: 18-24 years (> 89.7 males; > 83.9 females), 25-34 years (> 86.2 males; > 82.8 females), 35-50 years (> 85.1 males; > 78.5 females), 51-65 years (> 74.7 males; > 69.0 females) [37]

Tegner Activity Scale: according to the desired activity level

Psychological factors:

Anterior cruciate ligament return to sport after injury (ACL-RSI) scale > 56 [99]

Knee self-efficacy scale (K-SES): males > 7.2; females > 6.8 [97]

Objective measures:

Clinical evaluation of knee impairments [49, 51]:

Full range of motion

No pain

No swelling

No abnormal laxity: KT-1000 arthrometer < 3 mm increased anterior laxity compared to contralateral side, < 3 mm Lachman test, grade 0 pivot-shift test

Quantitative outcomes [11, 19, 20, 22]:

Muscle strength:

Pivoting, contact, competitive sports: > 100 % LSI on knee extensor and knee flexor strength evaluated with concentric isokinetic dynamometry at 60°/s, 180°/s and 300°/s.

Non-pivoting, non-contact, recreational sports: > 90 % LSI on knee extensor and knee flexor strength evaluated with concentric isokinetic dynamometry at 60°/s, 180°/s and 300°/s.

Hamstrings/quadriceps strength ratio > 58% evaluated with concentric isokinetic dynamometry at 60°/s [20]

Hop tests: multidirectional: LSI > 90%

Movement quality:

Evaluation of multi-segmental movement quality during double- and single-leg dynamic activities: individual assessment with advanced clinical reasoning

Inclusion of sport-specific fatigue

Sport re-integration:

Gradual training towards real game situations

Gradual increase workloads (avoid rapid spikes) [110]

Assess tolerance of sport-specific training: no pain, swelling, stiffness, giving way

Medical and sport risk modifiers [14]:

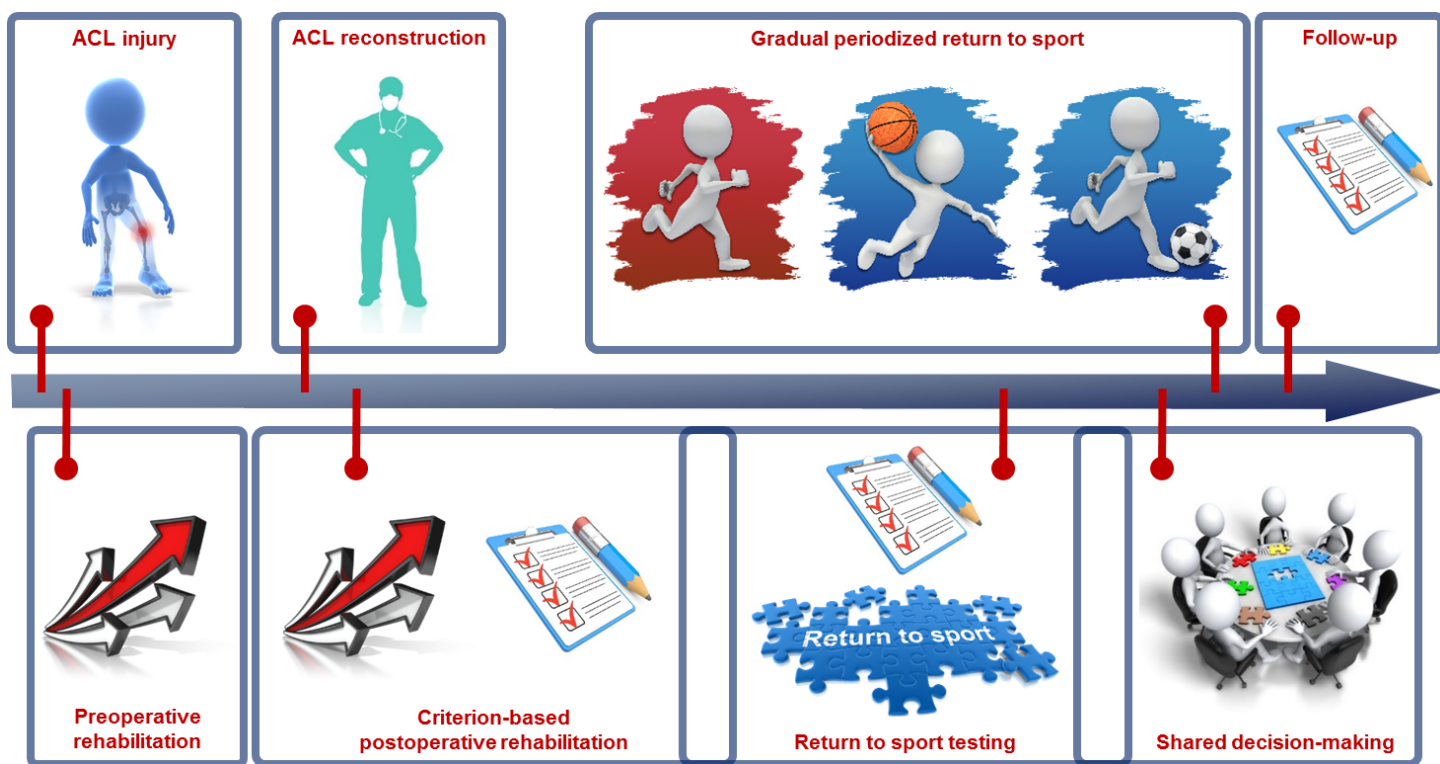
Age, sex, personal medical history, type of sport, level of sport, position played, ability to protect (e.g. taping / bracing).

Decision modifiers [14]:

Timing of the season, external pressure from club, trainers, parents, conflict of interest (e.g. financial), lifestyle changes, priorities, individual goals.

Shared decision-making [112]

IKDC2000: International Knee Documentation Committee 2000 Subjective Knee Form; LSI: limb symmetry index





(1) Time-based



(2) Knee-focused



(3) A yes or no RTS decision only at the hypothetical "end" of the rehabilitation



(4) Narrow view of RTS readiness after ACL reconstruction

Traditional return to sport approach

Biopsychosocial framework



(1) Criterion-based



(2) Multifactorial



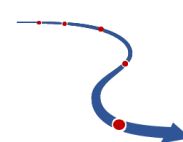
(3) Sensorimotor spectrum



(4) Multi-segmental



(5) Interaction individual - task - environment



(6) RTS continuum



(7) Shared decision



(8) Big picture view

Optimized return to sport approach