

# Long-Distance Travelling of Athletes Prior Matches with its Reported Consequences on Players Performance in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, players are required to travel both locally and internationally including short distances of less than 3 hours and long distances. The subsequent travel fatigue may result in several consequences. Football leagues all over the world thrive on a lot of travelling by clubs, supporters, spectators and officials. In Nigeria, travelling from the Northern part of the country to the southern part can take as much as eight hours, while a journey from the North to the South lasts sometimes more than 24 hours due to poor road networks of Nigeria roads and other unforeseen circumstances like robbery, traffic congestion and road traffic accident. The incidence of travelling by road transportation with its consequences have remained unabated over time in Nigeria. The situation can be said to be due to several factors such as dearth of funds, poor road network and inconsistency and non-adherence to calendar/time table over the past five football seasons in Nigeria league. It is therefore recommended that players should have adequate rest before and after each match, The government should improve the road infrastructure and league managers committee should have a working calendar for effective date of kick off and end time of each season.

**Keywords:** Stakeholders, Travel, Fatigue, Calendar, Unabated, Transportation.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, athletes are required to travel both locally and internationally including short distances of less than 3 hours and long distances of above 3 hours journey. The subsequent travel fatigue may result in several consequences: daytime fatigue, decreased concentration, sleep disruption and digestive disturbances and these could lead to risk of injuries, illness, and underperformance of athlete during this period as earlier reported by several scholars (Duf?eld & Fowler2018). Football leagues all over the world thrive on a lot of travelling by clubs, supporters, spectators and officials. The higher the number of participating football clubs the larger the distance between the venues, the more kilometers the participants have to cover. In more advanced countries of the world such as Europe and America, moving from one match venue to another is not so much of a problem because their exists system of transportation and variety methods of transport like road, train and air transportations.

In Nigeria, travelling from the Northern part of the country to the southern part can take eight hours, A journey from the North to the South lasts sometimes more than 24 hours due to poor road networks of Nigeria roads and other unforeseen circumstances like robbery, traffic congestion and road traffic accident. While the longest a club can fly from one end of the country to the other is not more than three hours, most clubs cannot afford the luxury of air travel because they lack the finances to accomplish that. Athletes are increasingly required to travel domestically and internationally, often resulting in travel fatigue, elite team sport athletes regularly undertake long travel and recovery from travel is important for competition success, for example, the Nigeria Professional Football League (NPFL) regular season consists of 38 matches (18 home, 18 away) played over a 6-month period. With inconsistencies in calendar, this could have physical, physiological and psychological effect on athletes and affect their performance. Since lengthy traveling is

common in elite sport (Flatt et al., 2019), it is recommended that coaches and applied sports scientists consider the following key points in order to minimize injury risk, enhance recovery, optimize performance and reduce the effect of traveling and sleep disturbance on performance with elite team sports players (Vitale et al., 2019).

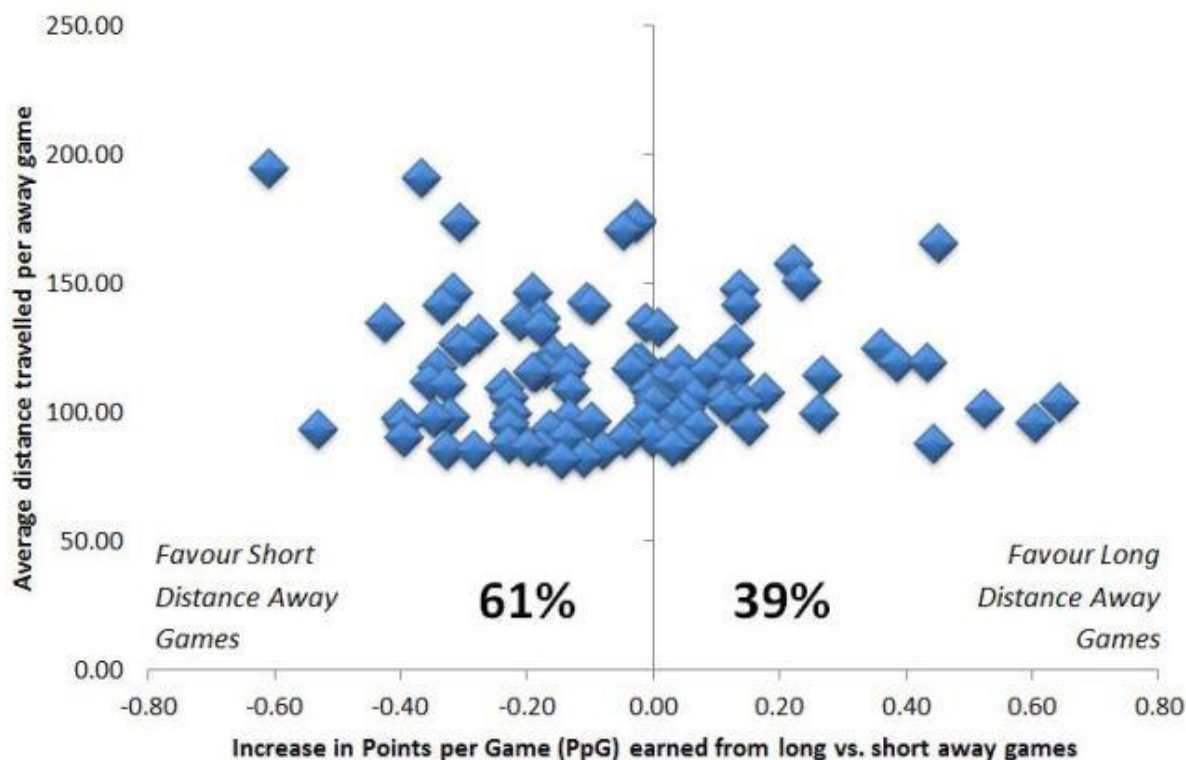
Football leagues are often played during the weekend globally, Throughout the world, live coverage of major football and sports games which occurs during weekdays and weekends has become one of the most popular forms of a television broadcast. It has become a veritable source of revenue for the broadcast rights holders, the Sporting Federations and the individual teams (Nwabueze, 2020). The nature of the game in elite football permit between 34 to 38 matches in a football season. The Nigerian league is not exception, but it has adverse effect on Nigeria football clubs due to reported cases of maladministration of the league such as inconsistencies in football calendar, irregular payment of indemnities to match officials and delay in payment to club winning a given competition. The aforementioned scenario, leads to accumulations of matches to be played withing short period of time. With the level of inconsistency in Nigeria football league, kick off and end of season which is not always made known early enough to participation clubs to afford them the required time for proper preparation. Therefore, football clubs are forced to make hasty preparation which is not always good for them in all ramifications. Some times each football club had to play two matches in a week one at home and one away within seven days after travelling on road for two to three days to make it to match venues. While playing away to other club the concern football club have to travel long distance journey by road and had to stay on road sometimes for two to three days with its attendant consequences before reaching the match venue due to infrastructural deficit of Nigeria road and security challenges, given them little or no time to train ahead of the intending match. While playing such match fatigue set in for the players and most time, they end up losing such match and in rare cases the match could end in draw. For the past few years there had been inconsistency in the commencement of Nigeria football league. On many occasions, the league next season won't commenced until after 4 to 5 months after the stoppage of the previous season instead of two months after the last league which is the global best practice. It is a practice by Nigeria league managers usually based on failed promises on the commencement date of the annual league events.

For instance, the 2018/2019 Nigeria professional football league season started on 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2019, The 2019/2020 league season commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2019 but was cancelled in July 2020 due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The 2020/2021 season started on 27 December 2020 after much delay and concluded on 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2021. Finally, the 2021/2022 season started on 17 December 2021 and was concluded on 17 July 2022. Furthermore 2022/2023 NPFL commenced in January 2023 to May 2023, scheduled to be played in an abridge league format to enable the Nigeria football federation catch up with the Confederation of Africa Football calendar. It will also to give enough room for the participating clubs at continental level to give enough time to prepare adequately for the continental football the above calendar is an indication that the league managers cannot rigidly adhere to international time table leading to several inconsistencies.

In England, for instance, English premier league (EPL) commences in August and end in May of the following year. The English football clubs have 3 trophies to compete for each season namely, English Premier League, English FA Cup and English Carabao Cup. A Few weeks after the end of an English premier league's season the date and fixtures for the following season would be rolled out by the English football Association which is at variance with the Nigeria practice. Each competition has a date of commencement at the beginning of each season. Before the commencement of each competition, each club already knows the number of matches they are to play and the date and time to play the match and changes occur very rarely due to some environmental unforeseen circumstances. With such by the English Football Association, it makes each football club to prepare adequately for the season.

Data from top four divisions of English football between the start of 2010/2011 to 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 2016 a total 11,261 games have been played and, in that time, home teams have combined 17,468 points or 1.55

points per game, compared to the away total of 13,271, which equates to 1.18 points per game.



Distribution of teams: PPG Long Away Trips vs. Short Away Trips vs. Average Distance Travelled Source: BBC 2016

The above chart shows that each team individually has 61% chance to score more points on shorter journey and 39% will score more points on longer journey, although only 40% of teams will favour either short or long journey per game over the other (BBC, 2016).

**Reasons for Long-Distance travelling by football clubs**

In spite of several reports on the negative effects of long-distance travelling few hours prior to matches by players in Nigeria, the incidence of travelling by road with its consequences have remained unabated over time in Nigeria. The situation can be said to be due to several factors that requires the attentions of all the stakeholders in the field football. The first and the main umbrella factor is dearth of funds which has hindered good planning and management of the club activities in so many ways including travelling arrangements. Road transport which is the cheapest means of transportation is often employed with its several identified consequences. Also, inconsistency and non-adherence to calendar/time table is another major factor affecting planning of club travels, which has been a major problem in Nigeria where league matches were arbitrarily fixed and postponed not minding the effects on the club’s participating in the league. It also on record that change in home location of football clubs have also been reported to have affected travelling schedule of both the visiting and home football clubs. Lastly delay in the fund release by the government have been implicated to have caused long-distance travelling on roads by player and this is because air travelling requires long term planning which include purchase of air ticket of both the player and the club officials.

**Effects of Long-distance Travelling Prior to Matches on Physical Performance**

Travelling generally on the road especially on Nigeria road is energy sapping. Travelling on the road by

football clubs have led to several cases of kidnapping, road traffic accident, delay on arrival to match venue and several other issues that makes road travelling unhealthy for sport men and woman to participate in Nigeria competition. Rest period between one match and another have significance impact on outcome of the next match. Football clubs' recovery hours play a major role in player level of performance during game. Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) recommends at least 2 days between two matches, but this is not a rule, it is solely a recommendation that may not always be applicable in this part of the world considering our geographical, administrative protocols and environmental factors that may not support adequate rest within two days. An insufficient recovery time between football matches could reduce the player's ability to effectively perform on the field of play and might result in underperformance, fatigue or injury. Dupont et al (2010) reported that there would be higher injury rate in players who played two matches per week compared with those who played only one match per week. During a match, players perform some tasks which includes: sprints, jumps, dribble, changes of direction, shoots and tackles leading to skeletal muscle functions. During a match, fatigue occurs temporarily after short-term intense periods in both halves towards the end of the match and after the match. Many non-contact injuries occur during the latter stages of each half (Hawkins RD et al., 2001; Ekstrand et al., 2011). A single match leads to an acute fatigue, characterised by a decline in maximal muscle strength (Magalhães et al., 2010), which requires several days to fully recover. When the schedule is congested (two matches per week over several weeks) physiologically, playing more than a single match in a week could lead to chronic fatigue among the players who play regularly, as the recovery time between two successive matches may be too short. However, road travelling by players prior the matches will further complicate the above scenario of several physical and physiological effects on players, it is therefore important for player to rest well before and after match.

### **Is This Scenario Abatable in Nigeria?**

From the forgoing, it has been established that lack of adequate rest before and after match players performance decline. Long distance travelling on road by Nigeria football clubs have been implicated on abysmal performance. It is therefore important that all the stakeholders in the game of football to search for workable solutions to this scenario. league manager should be better up and doing by improving their administrative protocols such as: putting in place workable calendar that would be strictly adhere to by all the stakeholders in football and the decisions to put the calendar in place should be participatory, club managers should look inward and think outside box to raise enough funds for the their various football clubs so that they can travel sometimes by air to match venue especially when matches are close and when the match venue are far.

Football club should avoid late travel for long distance matches and should apply for match postponement for 12 to 24 hours when need be. Football clubs should partner with airlines to allow them to get to some of their match venue by air transportation. The clubs can sign up with airlines for sponsorship or deals that would make it possible for their teams to travel by air. Finally, government (State and Federal) should improve road infrastructure in Nigeria to make road travelling more conducive and less stressful to both players and other stakeholders to reduce the health consequences, road traffic accident, kidnapping and robbery.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

For optimal performance of clubs during the league players should have adequate rest before and after each match, travelling to a long distance by road should be avoided by clubs to position players in a well-prepared form devoid of fatigue and injuries. It is important for the football clubs to raise adequate funds, the league managers to have a working calendar and for government to improve the road infrastructure.

It is therefore recommended that all football stakeholders to work together, and collaborate efforts towards improving the welfare of sport men and women in Nigeria.

During travel It is recommended that adequate rest should be scheduled according to when it is night at the destination, practice good sleep hygiene in the lead up to travel to ensure no sleep debt is accumulated. Accumulations of matches will have adverse effect on players performance and could lead to injuries of players, while the football clubs tend to have loose more points during the period of the game. The interim management committee should ensure work on effective date of kick off and the end time of each season to allow each club to prepare adequately for each football season.

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