

Entropy measures reveal collective tactical behaviours in volleyball teams: how variability and regularity in game actions influence competitive rankings and match status

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1 **Entropy measures reveal collective tactical behaviours in volleyball teams: How**
2 **variability and regularity in game actions influence competitive rankings and match**
3 **status**

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Pre-Publication Version

1 **Abstract**

2 This study analysed and compared the influence of match status and final team rankings on
3 variability of tactical performance behaviours within complex I, in female volleyball teams of
4 different competitive levels. Performance data were analysed from matches (n=8 in each
5 level) in the 2012 Olympic women's volleyball competition (elite level) and the Portuguese
6 women's league (national level) in the 2014-2015 season, with a total of 1496 rallies
7 observed. Variability of setting conditions, attack zone, attack tempo and block opposition
8 was assessed using Shannon entropy measures. Magnitude-based inferences were used to
9 analyse and compare values of selected variables. Results showed that current match status
10 had no influence on tactical performance of elite teams showing that they adapted their
11 collective organization without losing their game patterns. Analysis of final team rankings
12 showed that, at national level, the highest ranked teams revealed greater unpredictability in all
13 tactical performance measures (mainly in attack tempo and block opposition), emphasizing
14 the importance of the setter to differentiate performance of national teams. These findings
15 may guide coaches in designing practice contexts for developing specific game patterns
16 (setting conditions) and in seeking greater variability in other game actions (in attack),
17 regardless of competitive level of performance.

18

19 **Keywords:** performance analysis, entropy, match status, final team rankings, volleyball

20

1 **1. Introduction**

2 From an ecological dynamics perspectives, team sports have been viewed as
3 dynamical and complex systems, endowed with 'degeneracy', signifying that the same
4 competitive performance outcomes can be achieved in different ways (Duarte, et al., 2013;
5 Seifert, Komar, Araújo, & Davids, 2016a). This inherent property of complex adaptive
6 systems provides sports teams with the capacity of explore different technical and tactical
7 solutions during competition (Ramos, Coutinho, Silva, Davids, & Mesquita, 2017; Seifert, et
8 al., 2016a; Travassos, Araújo, Duarte, & McGarry, 2012). Since competitive environments
9 are changing constantly, the system property of degeneracy enables teams to adapt and self-
10 organize in response to changing performance constraints systematically (Rein, Davids, &
11 Button, 2009). To achieve this functional adaptation, a balance between variability and
12 stability of game actions is needed (Seifert, Komar, Araújo, & Davids, 2016b). Therefore,
13 increases and decreases in performance variability may result in the loss of a team's
14 adaptability (Araújo & Davids, 2016; Frencken, Poel, Visscher, & Lemmink, 2012).

15 In volleyball, the importance of promoting adaptive variability in some game actions
16 (i.e., attack actions) has been recognised by coaches to avoid predictability, highlighting the
17 need to help performers exploit different performance solutions when competitive conditions
18 change (Ramos, et al., 2017; Silva, et al., 2015; Travassos, Araújo, Vilar, & McGarry, 2011).
19 However, as the first contact is usually directed for one specific zone on court, only in the
20 second contact can the setter (player that executes the setting action) introduce variability in
21 an attack action (for instance, by manipulating tempo and zone of attack). This is mostly
22 noted in complex I (the side-out, game-phase that comprises the actions of service-reception,
23 setting and attacking) (Martín & Santandreu, 2009; Mesquita, Paolo, Marcelino, & Afonso,
24 2012). In this complex, the setter has more time to prepare a pattern of attack where
25 performance variability can be increased.

1 Research on performance analysis in sport has recently examined the variability of
2 game actions and game-phases using non-linear measures (e.g., Shannon entropy) in order to
3 understand how teams vary their tactical behaviours under different performance constraints
4 (Duarte, et al., 2013b; Silva, et al., 2014a; Vilar, Araújo, Travassos, & Davids, 2014; Vilar,
5 Santos, Araújo, & Davids, 2011). Indeed, the use of Shannon entropy measures has revealed
6 how the need to satisfy different performance constraints might lead to the emergence of
7 specific patterns of behaviours. For instance, a study by Vilar, Araújo, Davids, and Bar-Yam
8 (2013) applied Shannon entropy measures to analyse the local numerical relations between
9 competing players during a competitive professional football match, showing that the greatest
10 uncertainty in numerical relations emerged in the central midfield area of play. Additionally,
11 Ramos, et al. (2017) used Shannon entropy measures to assess the variability of volleyball
12 game actions, highlighting that variability of tactical behaviours was expressed differently
13 between distinct competitive levels, as well as within critical game phases (during a
14 decisional set and final set period). However, the findings of this previous study highlighted
15 other important issues to investigate further. For instance, the data raised questions about the
16 required differences in tactical behaviours to adapt to key, emergent contextual constraints
17 (e.g., match status and final teams ranking). Analyses of these variables are scarce in
18 literature, and undertaking this investigation could reveal a deeper understanding of the
19 tactical behaviours of sports teams at different levels of competition.

20 Indeed, match status (i.e., the game score when specific tactical indicators were
21 recorded) is considered a core situational variable that can influence the emergence players'
22 tactical behaviours during competition (Lago, 2009; Marcelino, Mesquita, & Sampaio, 2011).
23 Various studies in team sports, such as football (Almeida, Ferreira, & Volossovitch, 2014;
24 Baranda & Lopez-Riquelme, 2012; Taylor, Mellalieu, James, & Shearer, 2008), handball
25 (Prieto, Gómez, Volossovitch, & Sampaio, 2016) and basketball (Gomez, Jimenez, Navarro,

1 Lago-Penas, & Sampaio, 2011) have shown that match status is a contextual constraint that
2 shapes the emergent strategic behaviours of teams. Considering team sports as complex
3 adaptive systems (Araújo & Davids, 2016), several studies have analysed the influence of
4 match status on a team's emergent technical and tactical performance (Almeida, et al., 2014;
5 Baranda & Lopez-Riquelme, 2012; Lago, 2009; Palao, Manzanares, & Valadés, 2015). For
6 instance, the study of Gomez, et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of coaches analysing
7 offensive and defensive performances according to game period and score differences when
8 considering whether to call a timeout. Specifically in volleyball, a study by Marcelino, et al.
9 (2011) concluded that male teams take more risks in asymmetric score situations (i.e., when
10 teams are clearly winning or losing).

11 Research in volleyball has also studied the association between a final team rankings
12 (i.e., final standings in a given competition) and their performance outcomes (i.e., quantitative
13 analysis of game actions) (Drikos, Kountouris, Laios, & Laios, 2009; Medeiros, Oliveira,
14 Afonso, Loureiro, & Mesquita, 2011; Stutzig, Zimmermann, Büsch, & Siebert, 2015). For
15 instance, Marcelino, Mesquita, and Sampaio (2008) verified that, at an elite level, the most
16 successful teams fault on a higher number of serves, but also win more points with the service
17 action. Notwithstanding, little is known in volleyball research about the level of variability
18 which emerges in teams' tactical behaviours as a function of their final rankings at different
19 competitive levels of performance (e.g. international teams compared to national level teams).

20 Thus, the aims of the present study were twofold. First, we sought to examine the
21 performance variability of volleyball teams at different competitive levels (i.e., elite and
22 national level) in complex I according to ongoing changes in match status (i.e., in winning
23 and losing situations). Second, we sought to analyse whether variability of these key
24 performance indicators could be related to each final team rankings at the different
25 competitive levels.

1 **2. Methods**

2 *2.1 Participants*

3 Convenience and purposive sampling criteria (Patton, 2002) were used to select the teams
4 from the Portuguese national league. The Olympic competition was chosen because it
5 includes the most elite international volleyball teams globally. Two competitive levels were
6 considered: an Elite Level (EL), which comprises the top eight ranked teams in the Olympic
7 Games 2012; and a National Level (NL), comprising the top eight ranked teams in the
8 Portuguese 2014-2015 national league. For the EL group, all matches from the quarter-finals
9 to the final of the Olympic competition were analysed, yielding a total of eight matches
10 observed. For the NL group, we observed the last three games of the top four ranked teams in
11 the league and the final game of the four teams ranked from fifth to eighth, with a total of
12 eight matches examined. Performance in a total of 60 sets (30 from each group) and 1496
13 rallies was observed. This study was approved by the local Institutional Research Ethics
14 Committee and followed to the recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki.

15

16 *2.2 Variables*

17 The variables analysed in this study were: *setting conditions*, *attack zone*, *attack*
18 *tempo*, and *block opposition*. These variables were selected since they conveniently
19 characterize the complex I phase of play (Lobiatti, Cabrini, & Brunetti, 2009; Paulo, Zaal,
20 Fonseca, & Araújo, 2016). Additionally, these variables were analysed with respect to the
21 current *match status* and the *final teams raking*.

22 The *setting conditions* corresponded to the place where the setter executed the setting
23 action and was assessed by the number of attack options accessible: excellent conditions
24 (EC), the setter had all attack options fully accessible (i.e. all players were available to
25 participate in an attack, through all zones and tempos of attack and yet with the possibility of

1 using simple and complex offensive combinations); reasonable conditions (RC), the setter had
2 fewer attack options but still afforded quick attacks involving a middle-attacker (i.e. attack
3 tempos 1, 2 and 3, but not tempo 0) and simple offensive combinations; weak conditions
4 (WC) that only afforded setting with slowest tempos of attack (i.e. tempos 2 and 3) to the
5 wings of the court, which is more predictable for opponents to defend against. The *attack*
6 *zone* corresponds to the zone where the hitter contacts the ball during the attack action. In this
7 analysis, we considered the six formal zones of the volleyball game established by the FIVB.
8 The *attack tempo* is defined as the temporal relation between the approach of the attackers and
9 the moment the ball leaves the setter's hands (Afonso & Mesquita, 2007b). According to
10 Ramos, et al. (2017) four attack tempos were considered: tempo 0 (very fast, the attacker
11 jumped before the set); tempo 1 (fast, the attacker jumped immediately after the set); tempo 2
12 (slow, the attacker took three-steps and jumped after the set); tempo 3 (very slow, the attacker
13 had time to wait after the set and then started a three-step approach to the jump position). The
14 *block opposition* corresponds to the number of opponent blockers involved in defending
15 against an attack: no-block (0), single block (1), double block (2) and triple block (3). The
16 *match status* was considered in terms of sets (i.e., winning or losing at least one set) and two
17 possible scenarios were considered: winning (WIN) and losing (LOS) situations. The *final*
18 *team rankings* corresponds to the final competitive standings of each team, and two sub-levels
19 were created within each competitive level: elite level 1 (EL1) and national level 1 (NL1),
20 that corresponds to the first four ranked teams; elite level 2 (EL2) national level 2 (NL2) that
21 comprises the last four ranked teams. Both sub-levels comprise four teams to provide equal
22 samples.

23 The variability in the values of the four dependent variables (setting conditions, attack
24 zone, attack tempo and block opposition) was assessed using Shannon entropy measures. This
25 measure assesses the uncertainty of an informational variable (Shannon, 1948) and quantifies

1 their level of complexity (Silva, Duarte, Esteves, Travassos, & Vilar, 2016). For instance,
2 considering the attack zone with N possible variants (e.g. zone, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6), and setting
3 p_i as the measured probability of occurrence for this specific action in one game set through
4 the form of variant i (e.g., zone 1), the entropy S of this game action for this set is:

$$S = - \sum_{i=1}^N p_i \log p_i$$

5 The higher the entropy value (i.e., the closer to $\log N$, which is the maximum entropy value
6 for a given game action with a uniform distribution), the more uncertainty (or variability) is
7 associated with that variable (Silva, et al., 2016). On the other hand, when entropy values
8 approximate zero, it signifies that a variable contains more predictability (i.e., low
9 variability). Thus, the entropy value of selected variables was interpreted as specifying higher
10 or lower levels of spatial variability (or uncertainty) between the attacking zones and setting
11 conditions and higher or lower levels of action variability (or uncertainty) in attack tempo and
12 block opposition organisation.

13

14 *2.3 Procedures*

15 Matches from the 2012 Olympic Games competition were obtained and examined through
16 DVD in a high definition format (1080p). The Portuguese national league matches (2014-15)
17 were video recorded with a static video camera positioned laterally to provide a side view of
18 the court. Reliability of the data were measured through intra- and inter-observer testing
19 procedures. Three different games were reviewed by each researcher after a one-month period
20 to avoid any learning effects. Intra-observer reliability revealed Kappa values ranging from
21 0.814 to 1.000. Inter-observer reliability levels ranged from 0.900 to 1.000, values which, in
22 all cases, satisfied the minimum of level of 0.75 recommended (Fleiss, 2003).

23

1

2 *2.4 Data Analysis*

3 Existence of significance differences in setting conditions, attack zone, attack tempo and
4 block opposition were investigated using magnitude-based inferences via pooled standard
5 deviations. Effect sizes (standardised mean difference – SMD) with 90% confidence intervals
6 were calculated between EL and NL participants (i.e., elite–national, EL1–EL2 and NL1–
7 NL2) (Hopkins, Marshall, Batterham, & Hanin, 2009). Threshold values adopted for analysis
8 of effect sizes were > 0.2 (small), > 0.6 (moderate) and > 1.2 (large) (Cohen, 1988).
9 Probabilities were assessed to estimate whether true effects found represented substantial
10 changes in performance behaviours (Batterham & Hopkins, 2006). In this study, the smallest
11 standardised change in each variable was considered to be 0.2, multiplied by the between-
12 individual standard deviation value, based on Cohen’s effect size principle (Buchheit &
13 Mendez-Villanueva, 2014). Quantitative probabilities of higher or lower differences were
14 evaluated qualitatively as: $< 1\%$, almost certainly not; 1–5% very unlikely; 5–25%, unlikely;
15 25–75%, possible; 75–95%, likely; 95–99%, very likely; $> 99\%$, almost certain (Hopkins,
16 2002). If the probability of the effect being higher or lower than the smallest worthwhile
17 difference was simultaneously $> 5\%$, the observed effect was considered unclear. Otherwise,
18 the effect was proposed as clear and reported as the magnitude of the observed value.

19

20 **3. Results**

21 This study analysed 491 EL rallies (232 in WIN and 259 in LOS) and 401 NL rallies
22 (193 in WIN and 208 in LOS). In total, we observed 425 sequences in WIN and 467
23 sequences in LOS. Regarding final team rankings, we examined 850 rallies (439 from EL1
24 and 411 from EL2) for elite level and 646 rallies (492 from NL1 and 154 from NL2) for

1 national level participants. A descriptive analysis of setting conditions, attack zone, attack
2 tempo and block opposition taking into account the match status and final team rankings is
3 presented in table 1.

4 Figure 1 (a) represents the standardised mean difference between EL and NL in
5 winning situations. Concerning setting conditions, results revealed that differences between
6 both groups were moderate (with changes of greater/similar/lower values of 1/0/99), with EL
7 teams showing more regularity in setting conditions than NL teams. Analysis of attack tempo
8 revealed a possible small effect (66/3/31), with EL players displaying greater regularity in this
9 variable. In terms of attack zones, EL teams demonstrated a likely trivial effect (92/1/7),
10 characterised by greater spatial variability. Regarding block opposition, differences between
11 groups were likely moderate (8/1/91), with NL players exhibiting higher variability in the
12 number of block opponents used.

13 Figure 1 (b) illustrates the standardised mean differences between both groups (i.e.,
14 EL-NL) in losing situations. Results indicated that differences were very likely moderate
15 (2/0/98) and likely small (20/2/78) for setting conditions and block opposition, respectively.
16 For these variables, the NL teams expressed a greater variability than EL teams. Concerning
17 attack tempo and zone, EL teams displayed a possible trivial (50/3/47) and a likely trivial
18 (76/2/22) effect, respectively, showing greater unpredictability in these game actions.

19 Figure 1 (c) portrays the standardised mean differences between the first four (EL1
20 and NL1) and the last four (EL2 and NL2) ranked teams of each group. In the elite level
21 group, EL1 (first four ranked) teams revealed a likely moderate effect (5/1/94) in setting
22 conditions and attack tempo, which suggested greater predictability in these game actions,
23 compared to EL2 (last four ranked) teams. At this competitive level, results still indicated a
24 likely moderate effect for attack zone and block opposition (83/1/16 and 94/1/5, respectively),
25 with EL1 displaying greater spatial unpredictability in the attack zone and a greater variability

1 in the number of blockers used. In the national level group, the NL1 (first four ranked) teams
2 revealed a possible small effect (72/2/26) in setting conditions, a likely moderate effect
3 (88/1/11) in attack tempo, a possible trivial effect (58/3/39) in attack zone and a very likely
4 large effect (98/0/2) in block opposition, compared to NL2 (last four ranked) teams. In short,
5 the NL1 teams displayed greater spatial variability in setting conditions and block opposition
6 as well as greater unpredictability in zones and tempos of attack.

7

8 *** please insert table 1 and figure 1 around here ***

9

10 **4. Discussion**

11 The present study sought to build on previous research by analysing effects of match
12 status (winning and losing situations) and the final team rankings on variability of emergence
13 of tactical performance indicators in female volleyball teams, within complex I. Overall,
14 results showed that elite teams maintained their pattern of tactical behaviours, independent of
15 match status. Additionally, analysis of final team rankings displayed clear differences within
16 each competitive level in all key performance variables (i.e., setting conditions, attack zone
17 and tempo and block opposition).

18 Contrary to our initial expectations, results showed that independent of being in
19 winning and losing situations, when compared to national-level players, elite teams were less
20 variable (i.e., more regular) in setting conditions, attack tempo and block opposition, and
21 more variable (i.e., unpredictable) in selecting zones of attack. While elite level teams
22 displayed greater frequency of excellent setting conditions (i.e., all hitters fully available) and
23 used faster attack tempos, national level teams used slower attack tempos in WIN and faster
24 attack tempos in LOS. Moreover, elite level teams increased the number of attacks in zone 3
25 (which is the frontal central zone of the court, featuring faster attacks tempos) in LOS, with
26 the opposite occurring in national level teams. All these tactical behaviours showed how elite

1 teams increased their scoring opportunities (Castro, Souza, & Mesquita, 2011). These
2 findings are in line with data reported in a study by Ramos, et al. (2017) in female volleyball
3 that revealed how high stability (i.e., lower variability) in setting conditions promoted a
4 greater unpredictability in attack actions, limiting the defensive organization of opponents. It
5 seems that match status has no influence on tactical performance in elite teams showing that
6 they adapted their collective organization without losing their preferred tactical patterns. Such
7 findings do not corroborate data reported by Marcelino, et al. (2011) in elite male volleyball
8 teams. They concluded that teams modify their behaviours according to match status, taking
9 more risks in games with asymmetric scores. The focus of the present study was on female
10 teams and our findings are aligned with arguments of Costa, Afonso, Brant, and Mesquita
11 (2012), who proposed how game patterns may substantially diverge according to gender of
12 players, entailing technical and tactical implications for coaches. A possible explanation for
13 this contrast in team tactical behaviours is the fact that female volleyball is predominantly
14 played in complex II (the counter-attack, game-phase that comprises the actions of defence,
15 setting and attacking). Thus, the results of the present study suggest that women teams are not
16 so affected by contextual constraints in complex I.

17 The maintenance of tactical behaviours by elite players was not strongly influenced by
18 contextual constraints. This finding appears to suggest the functional adaptation of elite teams
19 in response to the greater competitive demands (Kinrade, Jackson, & Ashford, 2015). These
20 ideas imply key principles for understanding performance in team sports from a dynamical
21 systems viewpoint. The results reported here highlight the dynamical interactions that emerge
22 between a range of performance variables under the ecological constraints of competitive
23 performance (Davids, 2015; Davids, Araújo, Seifert, & Orth, 2015; McGarry, Anderson,
24 Wallace, Hughes, & Franks, 2002). Here, using a non-linear measure (Shannon entropy), it
25 was possible to assess the uncertainty and variability of tactical behaviours, allowing us to

1 comprehend how teams systematically self-organized in response to the intrinsic constraints
2 of competition. So, the assessment and analysis of performance variability allowed us to
3 recognize the game patterns of teams at different performance levels (Ramos, et al., 2017;
4 Silva, et al., 2016; Silva, et al., 2014). In this respect, the data shed insights into the role of
5 different levels of expertise in the team sport of volleyball.

6 The current study is innovative in that it analyses whether variability could be related
7 with final team rankings, at distinct competitive levels. Our analyses revealed some relevant
8 differences, at each competitive level, which contradict results reported in a study by Stutzig,
9 et al. (2015). They suggested that the impact of performance indicators in complex I are
10 marginal in predicting the expertise level of male volleyball teams. At elite level, the highest
11 ranked teams played regularly (i.e., with lower variability) creating excellent setting
12 conditions, and using faster attack tempos, varying selected attack zones and the number of
13 players used in their blocks. Our findings support the idea that teams with excellent setters,
14 which can play with quick attack tempos, strongly increase the probabilities of scoring points
15 in attacks (Bergeles, Barzouka, & Nikolaidou, 2009; Bergeles & Elissavet, 2011). Indeed,
16 attack tempo is a decisive factor in destabilising the block opposition. This idea implies that
17 the velocity of the attack plays a major role in destabilizing the oppositions defence, which in
18 turn raises the odds of penetrating the defensive formation (Afonso, Mesquita, Marcelino, &
19 Silva, 2010).

20 At national level, the highest ranked teams revealed greater unpredictability in all
21 tactical performance indicators (mainly in attack tempo and block opposition). Such findings
22 suggested that, even with increased variability in setting conditions (i.e., more reasonable and
23 weak, conditions for setting), setters from the best national teams are capable of maintaining
24 greater levels of unpredictability in attack organization (by manipulating the attack zone and
25 tempo). Therefore, at national levels of competition, the greater variability observed in setting

1 conditions and block opposition was less functional than that observed at elite levels of
2 performance. What this means is that the performance unpredictability noted at national
3 performance levels did not induce adaptive flexibility of team tactical behaviours) (Ramos, et
4 al., 2017).

5 **5. Conclusions**

6 This study showed that elite teams were more consistent, and their performance was
7 less dependent on match-status when they were leading or trailing in games. Results
8 suggested that variability in attacking actions was a key factor in the success of the top four
9 elite teams, which was predicated on greater performance stability in other game actions (i.e.,
10 setting conditions). Finally, results emphasized the importance of the setter in differentiating
11 performance of national level teams.

12 Future studies should continue to examine team tactical behaviours using non-linear
13 measures. Such analyses should be extended to analysis of other tactical performance
14 indicators, such as attack efficacy, type and zone of service, setter's starting position, and
15 effects of different phases of the competitive season. Moreover, future studies could focus on
16 other game complexes (i.e., complex II and V) since they might reveal different performance
17 features that could be influenced by competitive performance constraints. It is also
18 recommended that researchers can use longitudinal designs, analysing different training
19 approaches, in order to understand how different methods continuously shape team tactical
20 behaviours and athlete performance over extended periods of time.

21 Results reported here highlight the importance for coaches of stabilizing specific game
22 patterns (setting conditions) as well as creating greater variability in other game actions
23 (attack), regardless of competitive level of performance. Additionally, it also seems relevant
24 for coaches to manipulate match status during practice and to develop the setters' capacity for
25 playing at faster tempos in diversified attack zones.

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