Estimation of temporal parameters during sprint running using a trunk-mounted inertial measurement unit

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify consistent features in the signals supplied by a single inertial measurement unit (IMU), or thereof derived, for the identification of foot-strike and foot-off instants of time and for the estimation of stance and stride duration during the maintenance phase of sprint running. Maximal sprint runs were performed on tartan tracks by five amateur and six elite athletes, and durations derived from the IMU data were validated using force platforms and a high-speed video camera, respectively, for the two groups. The IMU was positioned on the lower back trunk (L1 level) of each athlete. The magnitudes of the acceleration and angular velocity vectors measured by the IMU, as well as their wavelet-mediated first and second derivatives were computed, and features related to foot-strike and foot-off events sought. No consistent features were found on the acceleration signal or on its first and second derivatives. Conversely, the foot-strike and foot-off events could be identified from features exhibited by the second derivative of the angular velocity magnitude. An average absolute difference of 0.005 s was found between IMU and reference estimates, for both stance and stride duration and for both amateur and elite athletes. The 95% limits of agreement of this difference were less than 0.025 s. The results proved that a single, trunk-mounted IMU is suitable to estimate stance and stride duration during sprint running, providing the opportunity to collect information in the field, without constraining or limiting athletes’ and coaches’ activities.

1. Introduction

Temporal parameters, i.e., flight and stance duration, during sprint running represent basic, yet very useful information for track and field coaches and their correlation with performance has been widely investigated in the literature (Čoh et al., 2006; Hunter et al., 2004a, 2004b), stereophotogrammetric systems (Ciacci et al., 2010), optical bars (Čoh et al., 2006), or video-analysis (Ito et al., 2006) have been used to measure or estimate these parameters during sprint running. These instruments, however, are either limited in terms of acquisition volume or require long post-processing time.

As an alternative, wearable inertial measurement units (IMUs) allow in-the-field performance monitoring without constraining athletes’ movements. Recently, stance duration has been estimated during sprint running using shank-mounted accelerometers (Purcell et al., 2005). However, more information concerning the overall strategy of the locomotor act could be provided mounting the unit close to the body centre of mass (Cavagna et al., 1971). Trunk-mounted IMUs have been used to estimate temporal parameters only during walking (Kavanagh and Menz, 2008) and distance running (Auvinet et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2010; Wixted et al., 2010), by identifying event-related features in the signals. During walking, for example, the peak forward acceleration of the centre of mass is related to foot-strike (Verkerke et al., 2005) or, during both walking and distance running, a repeatable change in the direction of trunk rotation about its longitudinal axis occurs prior to foot-off (Saunders et al., 2005; Schache et al., 2002).

However, robustness and reliability of any feature-identification approach rely on the accurate and consistent detection of such features within and across subjects. This highly depends on the signal-to-noise ratio, which, in turn, is influenced by the movements of the soft tissues separating the IMU from the skeleton. These movements are both subject-dependent
The purpose of this study was to identify recognisable and consistent features in the waveform of the signals supplied by a laboratory-embedded single IMU for the same athlete of the trials, the stride duration during the maintenance phase of sprint running. To this aim, maximal sprint runs were performed on tracks by both amateur and elite athletes. Data provided by an IMU were compared with force platform data or high-speed videos.

### Materials and methods

Two groups of athletes participated in the study during two different experimental sessions, after giving their written informed consent, approved by the University Ethics Committee (Table 1).

The first experimental session involved six amateur athletes (group A). Tests were carried out on an indoor track. The facility was provided with six adjacent force platforms (2207404A, Kistler, Switzerland; total surface: 6.6 × 6.6 m) embedded in the track and covered with tartan. The force signals were acquired at 200 samples/s and low-pass filtered at 70 Hz using a 4th-order Butterworth filter. All athletes sprinted with a forefoot strike technique.

A second session involved elite athletes (group E) of the Italian National Track and Field Team, tested on their outdoor training track. Reference data were collected using a high-speed camera (Casio EXILIM EX-F1, Japan; 512 × 384 pixels, 300 frames/s), positioned 5 m away from the lane.

In both experimental sessions, each athlete was equipped with an IMU (FreeSense, Sensorex, Italy) containing a 3D accelerometer and a 3D gyroscope (±6 g and ±500 deg/s of full range, respectively; 200 samples/s) providing linear acceleration and angular velocity components, respectively and along the axes of a unit-embedded coordinate system. The IMU data were stored in the unit. Care was paid to the fixation of the IMU on the lower back trunk (L1 level) to limit its oscillations relative to the skeleton (Forner-Cordero et al., 2008). The low lumbar area was avoided, since it is more affected by muscular masses wobbling and a memory foam material was used as an interface between the paravertebral muscles and the IMU. An ad-hoc elastic belt was used to mount the device without limiting the athletes’ movements.

Force platform and IMU samples were synchronised by recording the same impulsive event (a hammer strike on one platform upon which the IMU was positioned). For group E, no interference with the athletes training schedule was permitted and, therefore, no camera-IMU synchronisation could be performed.

The experimental protocol was the same in both sessions and consisted of 20 min warm-up followed by three sprint runs of 60 m starting from the blocks. To avoid fatigue, a 10 min rest period was given between runs. For each athlete, two strides were analysed at 40 m from the start, during the maintenance phase. Data obtained in the first session were analysed to identify features related to the foot- and follow-off instants of time (tFO, tFS) and used to create algorithms for their automatic detection.

The acceleration and the angular velocity vectors were represented in the unit-embedded coordinate system, and their magnitude (a and ω, respectively) was computed. Since increasing the number of time-series could be useful for evaluating the absolute difference between reference and IMU estimates for both factors: group, athlete and trial.

### Results

No consistent feature was detected for group A on a (Fig. 1(A)), its derivatives, or ω (Fig. 1(B)) that could consistently be related to tFO and tFS. These instants of time were instead related to positive peaks (assumed to coincide with foot-off) and negative peaks (corresponding to foot-strike) on the ω waveform (Fig. 1(C)) and were used to estimate tFS and tFO.

A feature-based estimate of the cycle duration was performed based on a consistent positive peak (ωpeak), detectable even by simple visual inspection in ω (Fig. 1(B)). Distance between odd ωpeak was used to estimate tFS.

Repeated-measures ANOVA showed that all time intervals differed between groups (p < 0.05), but not across athletes (p > 0.05) and trials (p > 0.05) of the same group. Mean values (± SD) for tFS across all athletes, trials and strides were 0.125 s (± 0.015) for group A and 0.105 s (± 0.010) for group E. Equivalent means for tFO were 0.495 s (± 0.040) and 0.455 s (± 0.015).

Normality and non heteroscedasticity were found for tFS and tFO (correlation = 0.01 and 0.07). Bland–Altman plots indicated the agreement between reference and IMU estimates for both groups, the mean errors being close to the IMU temporal resolution (0.005 s) (Fig. 2). No statistical differences were found between groups, athletes, and trials. 95% LOA were lower than

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th></th>
<th>Group E</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass (kg)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height (m)</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed (m/s)</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal best (s)</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
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0.025 s for both groups. Their symmetry demonstrated the absence of systematic differences of the errors between devices.

4. Discussion

The feature-identification analysis performed on trunk-mounted IMU signals obtained during the maintenance phase of sprint running showed that neither the magnitude of the acceleration, nor its first and second derivatives provide any consistently identifiable feature correlated with $t_{FS}$ and $t_{FO}$. This result is in contrast with previous studies using trunk-mounted accelerometers during distance running (Auvinet et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2010; Wixted et al., 2010). Speculation on Auvinet et al. and Wixted et al. results is limited by the absence of reference measurements to support feature detection; while the discrepancy with validated results by Lee et al. can be accounted for by both a different foot position at ground contact and the higher explosiveness of sprint running. In the referenced studies selective gait events related to heel strike could probably be detected as the ankle cannot damp/filter the shock/vibration. During a sprint, the forefoot strike entails considerable damping through the multiarticular anatomy of the foot. Moreover, the movement of the muscular masses at the trunk level is characterised by a larger translational component with respect to the rotational component which, consequently, may be assumed to affect the acceleration more than the angular velocity. It is suggested that results obtained in distance running studies using IMUs not to be automatically extended to sprint running.

The magnitude of the angular velocity signal, as well as its wavelet-mediated second derivative, are characterised by repeatable and consistent events that allow for the estimate of stride and stance duration. The angular velocity peak proved to be consistent across levels of expertise, athletes, and trials. As reported in the literature, this peak is associated to a trunk rotation about its longitudinal axis, which occurs during walking as well as during distance running (Schache et al., 2002; Saunders et al., 2005). Our results evidenced the presence of this rotation during sprint running and its potential use in estimating stride duration, but not $t_{FS}$ and $t_{FO}$. Such instants were consistently associated only with the positive and negative peaks of the wavelet-mediated $\ddot{\omega}$ waveform. It is worth to underline that signal inconsistencies preventing easy feature identification can be present as well in other contexts such as, for example, some types of pathological walking. Given the efficacy of this method...
on highly noisy data, there is a potential for widening its fields of application.

The absolute difference between IMU and reference measurements was of the same order as the temporal resolution of the criterion measure, as well as of the unit estimates (0.005 s) for both stride (< 2% of \( d_{\text{stride}} \)) and stance (< 8% of \( d_{\text{stance}} \)) duration. The latter result is consistent with those obtained during sprint running using shank-mounted accelerometers (Purcell et al., 2005). This error does not prevent discrimination of amateur from elite athletes’ temporal parameters (the average difference of \( d_{\text{stance}} \) between groups is 0.020 s). It may allow the analysis of the race strategy through observation of step frequency (Salo et al., 2011) or of stance times profile (Fig. 3).

In conclusion, the proposed method presents the potential to provide reliable estimates of temporal parameters during sprint training sessions. To provide coaches with reliable and automatic information, validation of the method for different phases of the sprint run during the whole race is required.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors do not have any financial or personal relationships with other people or organisations that could inappropriately influence the manuscript.

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