

# Quantitative Time Profiling of Children's Activity and Motion

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## ABSTRACT

BARNES, C. M., C. C. T. CLARK, M. D. HOLTON, G. STRATTON, and H. D. SUMMERS. Quantitative Time Profiling of Children's Activity and Motion. *Med. Sci. Sports Exerc.*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 183–190, 2017. **Introduction:** The aim of this study was to establish children's mechanical movement patterns during a standardized assessment of fitness by using an accelerometer. Further to this, our objective was to use the information from the accelerometer to profile individual time courses of exercise, across the cohort. **Methods:** A multistage fitness test study was performed with 103 children (mean  $\pm$  SD age = 10.3  $\pm$  0.6 yr). Children wore an ankle-mounted accelerometer, and gait data were collected on radial acceleration traces obtained at a frequency of 40 Hz. Time-resolved metrics of foot impact force, maximum leg lift angle, and stride frequency were used to profile children's performance across the test duration. A whole-history metric of stride quality, based on the changing ratio of stride length to stride frequency, was used in bivariate analyses of physical performance and body metrics. **Results:** Stride angle derived by our protocol was found to have a strong positive correlation with integrated acceleration, synonymous with counts, widely used in the sport science community ( $r = 0.81, 0.79,$  and  $0.80$  across different stages of the multistage fitness test). Accelerometer data show that differing performance in the test is related to the children's ability to accurately control their gait, with high performers displaying a linearly increasing speed, delivered through stride extension and well matched to the demand level of the test. A negative correlation was found between stride quality and body measures of body mass index ( $r = -0.61$ ) and body mass ( $r = -0.60$ ). **Conclusion:** Profiles of the gait parameters provide information on the mechanics of child's motion, allowing detailed assessment of multiple parameter during increasing intensities of exercise. **Key Words:** PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, POPULATION PROFILING, ACCELEROMETRY, TIME SERIES ANALYSIS, GAIT ANALYSIS

Physical activity levels, particularly in children, are an important, well-established area of research (20,21). Much of the literature up to this point has focused on the correlation between quantity of physical activity and outcomes such as obesity, depression, or anxiety (2). However, applying this approach to child populations is problematic as few have multiple risk factors, and so these correlations become less important. Of equivalent interest to the quantity is the quality of physical activity. Qualitative

aspects of physical activity are more akin to child development and can give a meaningful picture. We consider any measure of how much activity a child has done to be quantity measures whereas measures about how they performed the activity (the mechanics of exercise) to be quality measures. In this study, we record the quantity of activity as this is a valuable metric, but we supplement this with a wider collection of more informative descriptors that may be called “quality” metrics, e.g., the mechanics of gait, agility, balance, and coordination. Indeed there is a growing body of research which suggests that promoting an increase in the quality of physical activity is as important, if not more so, than simply increasing amount (6,7). At present, there is no established protocol to define quality of movement in the field that has been validated for use in populations.

Accelerometers have become the *de facto* standard for objectively measuring physical activity (16,20) with the ActiGraph (ActiGraph, LLC, Fort Walton Beach, FL) being the most commonly used, commercially available device. A major limitation with commercially available accelerometers is that they provide manufacturer-dependent output values commonly called “counts” (22). These are integrative values that sum up activity levels (integrated acceleration)

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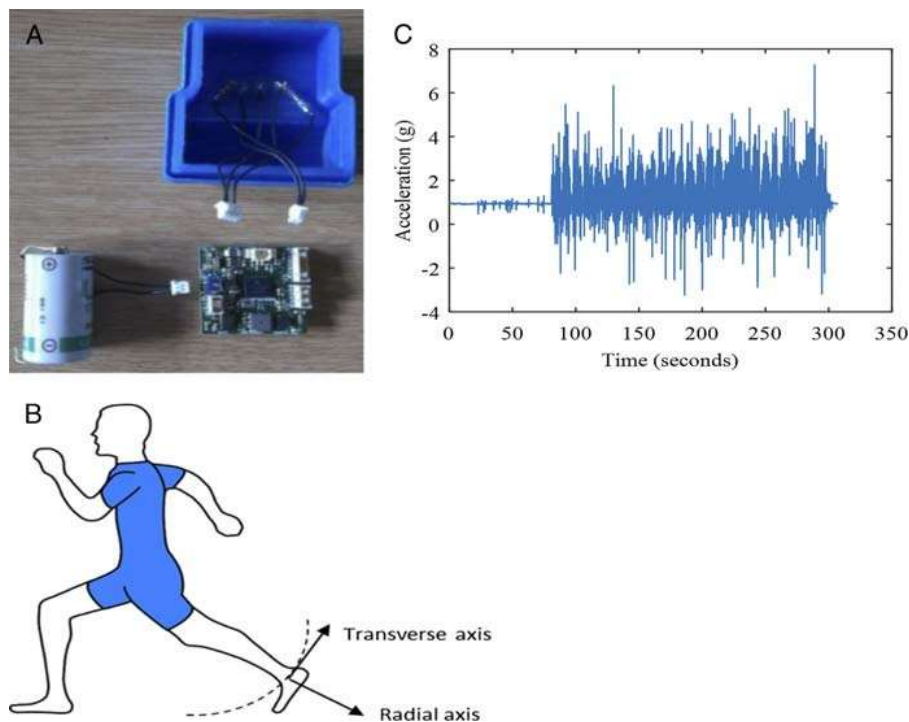
usually averaged over user-defined time periods, resulting in activity being quantified. However, the raw data are typically collected at frequencies of 10–100 Hz and, hence, contain sufficient detail to resolve components within typical movement cycles such as gait or radial acceleration and report on the kinetics of motion. The use of this high-density time data together with data logging allows a transformation in the study of activity patterns.

The aim of this work was to derive a series of robust measures that could give accurate information on the quantity and quality of a child's physical activity within a semicontrolled environment (i.e., outside a testing laboratory). Further to this, we wanted to quantify multiple time-dependent activity metrics, within large cohort studies ( $n > 100$ ). An accurate and objective quantification of activity from a raw acceleration trace provides a rich data set that is robust enough to allow multidimensional profiling. The motion metrics describing gait may be correlated to measures of physiologic importance or profiled against socioeconomic factors as well as psychological factors that have been derived through health and lifestyle questionnaires. Previous research has undertaken detailed analyses of accelerometer traces taken from subjects while walking and running, and much of this work has involved measures of gait (18,19) and foot impact (9). Although these reports clearly show the depth of information available from a raw accelerometer trace, it is important to note that there is often a considerable computational load as complex models based on multiple accelerometers are used to reconstruct walking or running motion (3). The associated

algorithms require exhaustive human input along with significant amounts of computer time and memory. Thus, to date, activity profiling has had to rely on broad based measures of physical activity because detailed analysis of gait has been confined to studies involving small cohorts in controlled settings (5,16). In this study, our aim was to demonstrate the use of ankle-worn accelerometers in a semicontrolled activity environment: within the framework of a 20-m multistage fitness test (MSFT) (11). The objective being to deliver a detailed quantitative analysis of the relation between the mechanics of the children's motion and their overall performance. Staged fitness tests such as this provide in-field information on the quantity and intensity of activity, but to date, they have not been used to investigate the mechanics of how the children adapt their physical motion in response to changing demands in performance.

## METHODS

**Participants and settings.** A total of 103 children volunteered to take part in this study (mean  $\pm$  SD, age =  $10.3 \pm 0.6$  yr, height =  $1.42 \pm 0.08$  m, mass =  $37.8 \pm 9.3$  kg, body mass index [BMI] =  $18.5 \pm 3.3$  kg·m<sup>-2</sup>, boys = 58 and girls = 45). Participants were required to attend an indoor training facility, have anthropometric measurements recorded, and take part in the MSFT. Further, BMI centiles were used to classify children as either underweight (<5th percentile,  $n = 7$ ), normal weight (5th to 85th percentile,  $n = 73$ ), overweight (>85th to <95th percentile,  $n = 14$ ), or obese ( $\geq 95$ th percentile,



**FIGURE 1**—A, An image of the accelerometer system. B, Measurement coordinate reference system in which the radial axis is along the line of the lower leg, the transverse axis is perpendicular to the leg in the plane of motion, and the lateral axis is perpendicular to the leg and the direction of whole body motion. C, A typical acceleration trace from the radial axis, recorded at a data collection frequency of 40 Hz for 300 s.

$n = 9$ ) (5). This research was conducted in agreement with the guidelines and policies of the institutional ethics committee. Parents/guardians gave full written informed consent, and children gave full written informed assent to take part in the study.

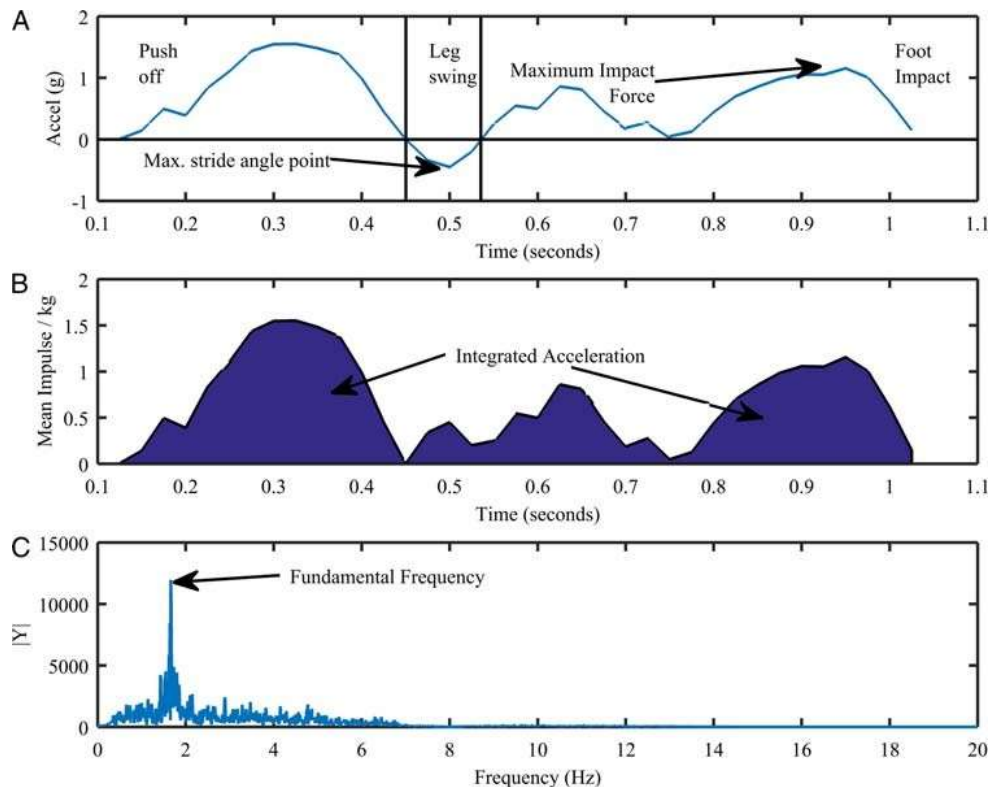
**Instruments and procedures.** After a standard familiarization and a 5-min warm-up, children performed the MSFT (10) while wearing a custom built motion tracking and recording device (Fig. 1A), which incorporated a triaxial accelerometer with a  $\pm 16g$  dynamic range, a 3.9-mg point resolution, and a 13-bit resolution (with an amplitude coefficient of variation of 0.004 at 40 Hz) (ADXL345 sensor, Analog Devices). The device was housed in a small plastic case. As we are assessing gait, we decided to affix it via a Velcro strap to the lateral malleolar prominence of the fibula of the right leg. There is a body of work that suggests that this is the best location to assess gait patterns (4,8). A coordinate system referenced to the lower leg was used (motion space rather than absolute space), in which acceleration in the axis along the lower leg toward the origin of motion (knee or hip),  $A_{\text{radial}}$ , is used for all measurements—termed the radial axis (Fig. 1B). The device was set to record at 40 Hz, and data were recorded onto a micro-SD card (Fig. 1C).

**Twenty-meter MSFT.** Participants completed the MFST by running back and forth along a 20-m course and were required to touch the 20-m line at the same time that a sound signal was emitted from a prerecorded audio disk. The

frequency of the sound emissions increased to produce a corresponding increase in running speed. The test stopped when the participant reached volitional exhaustion and was no longer able to follow the set pace, or participants were withdrawn after receiving two verbal warnings to meet the required pace (12).

**Data extraction and analysis.** Data extraction and analysis was conducted using custom algorithms written in the MATLAB software environment. Low- and high-frequency device noise was removed by passing the raw data through a broadband-pass filter (0.5–12 Hz), i.e., only frequencies within the normal range of walking and running frequencies were accepted. To remove breaks in the signal caused by participants stopping at the end of each 20-m shuttle and before the next bleep trigger, a simple process of data removal from redundant time periods was used. To this end, the acceleration trace was integrated to give an activity “count.” When a child’s reading dropped below a threshold, 25% or lower of the average “count” level during the main activity of running, the child was deemed to be inactive and waiting at the end of one of his/her 20-m shuttle runs. This period of trace was then deleted from that which is analyzed.

The radial acceleration trace for one stride is shown in Figure 2. There are three regions corresponding to the push off, leg swing, and foot impact phases of the stride. Several defining metrics were extracted from the traces. The maximum impact force generated upon foot strike,  $F_{\text{max}}$ , corresponds to the peak positive value of acceleration (force vector pointing



**FIGURE 2**—A, The radial acceleration trace for a single stride can be divided into a “push off,” a “foot impact,” and a “leg swing” section. B, The integrated acceleration metric quantifies the amount of activity and corresponds to the commonly used “count” measure. C, Transformation of the radial acceleration into the frequency domain readily identifies the fundamental frequency of the gait cycle. Spectra derived for a trace incorporating running for 1 min.

from foot to knee). When converting the force data to absolute values, the background static signal of 1g is subtracted, and the remaining signal is converted to a force through multiplication by the subject's body mass. Confirmation of the accuracy of the impact force value,  $F_{\max}$ , derived from the accelerometer was obtained by comparison with that measured by a Kistler force platform, model number 9286AA, which uses piezoelectric sensors to determine force applied in multiple axes (Figs. 3A and B). The force plate was set to sample at 1000 Hz and is calibrated to give a value of the force applied in newtons.

The maximum angle of foot lift,  $\alpha_{\max}$ , is obtained from the peak acceleration value in the negative direction. At this point of maximum leg lift, the dynamic acceleration is zero, and the radial acceleration is wholly determined by the vector component of the gravitational field, as determined by the angle of the accelerometer relative to the vertical axis. Thus, to determine the angle to which the subject's leg swings, the minimum point during the acceleration trace of the stride,  $A_{\text{radial}}$ , is used in the following expression:

$$\alpha_{\max} = \arccos(A_{\text{radial}}/g). \quad [1]$$

To validate the accelerometer-derived value of maximum angle of foot lift,  $\alpha_{\max}$ , comparison was made to a video analysis (Fig. 3C). A video sequence was recorded for a subject running on a treadmill at speeds ranging from 7 to

13 km·h<sup>-1</sup>. Manual measurement of the leg position from the image frames was then used to determine angle. It is important to note that the angle of foot lift is defined to be that of the lower leg as it rotates around the knee position. To derive measures from the frequency domain, a discrete fast Fourier transform was applied to the data. The stride frequency,  $f$ , is identified as the first amplitude maxima.

## RESULTS

**Analysis of an individual's activity profile.** The participants were classified into three groups (low, moderate, or high performers) according to their performance in the shuttle run test. The “low” performers were the first third of the group to drop out of the test. The “moderate” performers were the middle third of the group. The “high” performers were the top third of the group, staying in the test the longest. To demonstrate the potential of our accelerometer-derived metrics for a detailed assessment of activity, we present a sample comparison between two children with differing performance. The response profiles from the children are shown in Figures 4A and B. These represent typical individuals from the “moderate” and “high” performance categories. Data are shown for several metrics, across the duration of each child's test. All measures are normalized to the value

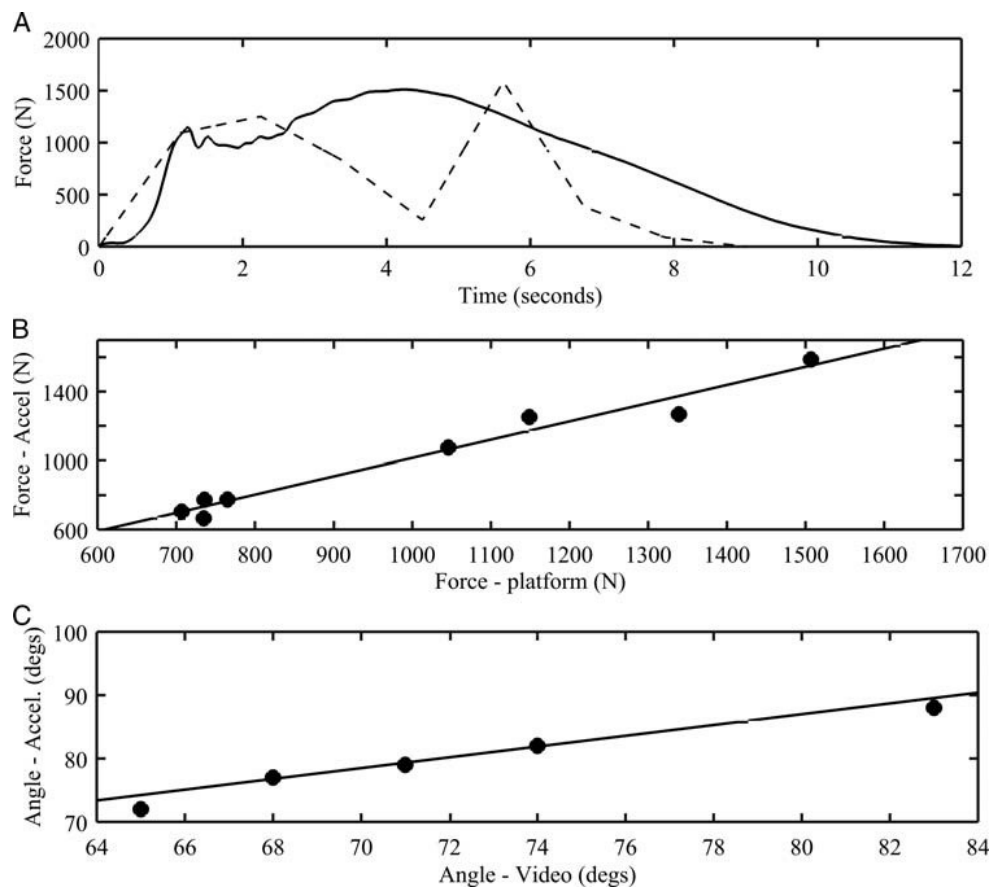


FIGURE 3—A, Force profiles generated by foot impact during running, force plate (solid line), and accelerometer (dashed line). B, Correlation plot of peak impact force as measured by force plate and accelerometer. C, Correlation plot of maximum foot lift angle, measured by accelerometer and video sequence.

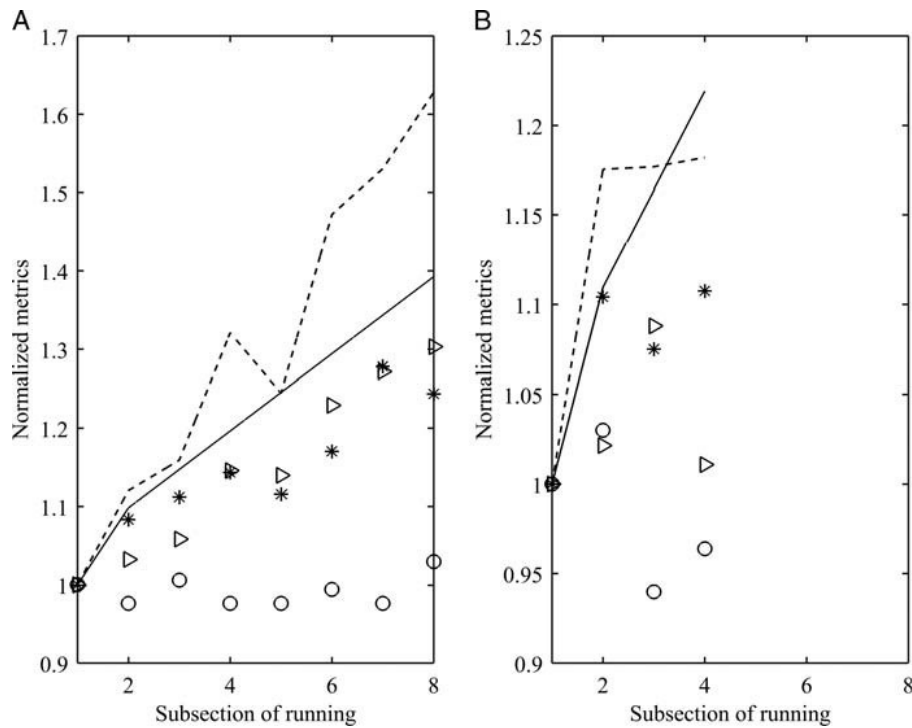


FIGURE 4—A, Typical activity profile of a high performance child. The normalized bleep frequency (solid line), integrated acceleration (dashed), peak impact force (triangles), maximum angle of inflexion (stars), and stride frequency (circles) are shown for the first eight sections of the test. B, Typical activity profile of a moderate performance child.

obtained in the first running section and illustrate how gait and activity level are altered in response to the increasing demands of the test. The “demand line” is the normalized running speed imposed and, thus, the speed at which the children should be running. Alongside this are plotted the response metrics of integrated acceleration,  $\alpha_{\max}$ ,  $F_{\max}$ , and  $f$ . The high performer (Fig. 4A) has a consistent approach, increasing the work done per stride as they progress through the exercise, while maintaining a constant stride frequency. This results in linearly increasing impact force and foot lift angle. The close alignment of the gait metrics and the overall physical effort to the demand line indicate an efficient expenditure of energy for this individual. By contrast, the profile for a lower performance child (Fig. 4B) is more erratic, indicating a less controlled and hence less energy efficient response to the test. There is no clear trend in stride extension or frequency, and the overall work rate (integrated acceleration) remains constant after the first MSFT section. As soon as the relative demand of the test passes this fixed work rate (at the fourth section), the child dropped out of the test. Further evidence of the poor physical control exhibited here can be obtained by analyzing the raw acceleration trace for the low performer. This child is representative of many in their performance group who, early on in the exercise, ran at a higher speed than required and then took extended breaks in activity at each end of their 20-m shuttle.

**Analysis of activity across a cohort.** A bivariate analysis of integrated acceleration and  $\alpha_{\max}$  was performed for a single exercise section, at three key time points in the fitness test: i) the first section of running (all children

active), ii) the section at which two thirds of the original cohort remain in the activity (two-thirds active, three of eight sections of running), and iii) the section of running at which just one third of the original cohort remain active (one-third active, five of the eight sections). Correlation plots of the data are shown in Figures 5A–C. These relate the work done within a level of the test (equivalent to counts in standard accelerometry) to  $\alpha_{\max}$ , a metric that is a surrogate of stride length. From the outset of the activity session, there is a significant “strong” correlation between the  $\alpha_{\max}$  and the integrated acceleration, with increasing activity being linearly related to an increased stride length. This correlation holds throughout the activity (all active,  $r = 0.81$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; two-thirds active,  $r = 0.79$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; one-third active,  $r = 0.80$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). As the activity progresses, the increased running speed translated to a shift of the data set to the upper right quadrant of the plots.

**Profiling the correlation between activity and body metrics.** To describe a child's overall performance in the test, a summative quality measure was extracted from plots of mean stride frequency versus mean foot lift angle from each section of the test. Two examples, chosen to indicate differing responses from two children, are shown in Figure 6A. The line defined by this series of data points tracks the changes in gait and so describes the physical response of the child to the demands of the MSFT. More specifically, the performance line indicates the relative weighting of increased stride frequency to increased stride length, made in response to the need for increased running speed. This response is parameterized using the angle,  $\alpha$ , of the data line relative to the  $x$ -axis to

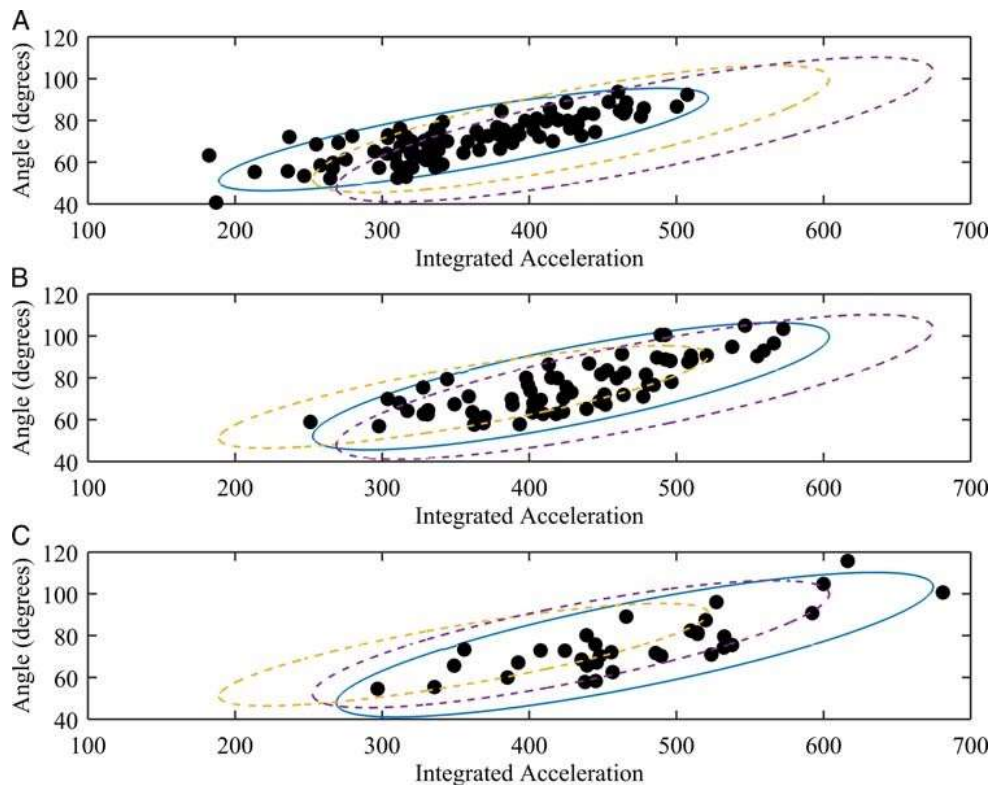


FIGURE 5—A, Correlation plot of  $\alpha_{\max}$  versus integrated acceleration for the first running section of the fitness test. B, Correlation plot of  $\alpha_{\max}$  versus integrated acceleration for the third section. C, Correlation plot of  $\alpha_{\max}$  versus integrated acceleration for the fifth section. The 95% confidence ellipse shown on each graph is constructed such that the major and minor axes are determined by the variation in X and Y directions of the plots and the angle at which the ellipse sits in relation to the x-axis is determined by the covariance between the variables. The ellipse is shown in all subplots for the specific section (solid line) and for the other two analyzed sections (dashed line).

define a stride profile quotient,  $Q = \sin \alpha$ . This ranges in value according to the activity profile of the child with extreme values of 0 (constant stride frequency with increasing stride length) and 1 (constant stride length with increasing stride frequency).

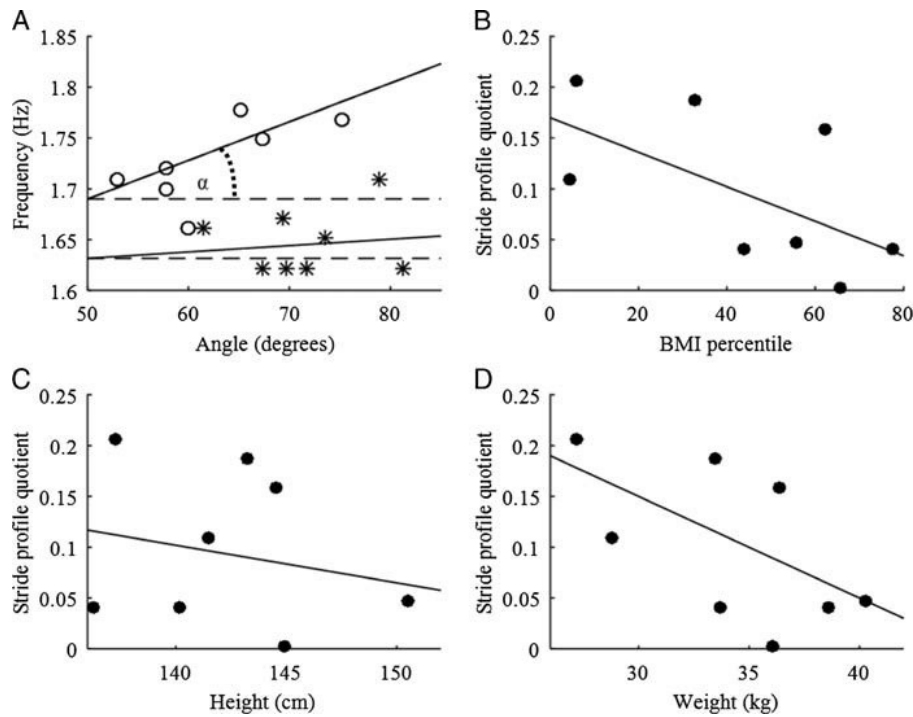
The correlations between a child's stride profile quotient and their body measures are shown in Figures 6B–D. Only those children who had remained in the test for more than 350 s were compared as this set have a sufficiently long time trace from which to make an accurate determination of  $Q$  (measured for eight sections). The comparison of stride profile to BMI percentile resulted in a “moderate” negative correlation ( $r = -0.61$ ,  $P = 0.11$ ), indicating that as BMI increases, stride extension is favored over increased frequency when adjusting to the increased speed demand (resulting in a lower quotient value). The negative correlation remains when splitting the BMI into its component metrics, although the correlation between height and stride profile ( $r = -0.22$ ,  $P = 0.60$ ) is much weaker than that between mass and stride profile ( $r = -0.60$ ,  $P = 0.12$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Physical activity assessment for groups of children is typically limited to measurements of duration or intensity (15,20);

thus, a single end point total or quantity of activity is obtained allowing the researcher to answer the question “How much?” In this work, we present an approach that provides a much richer data set, reporting on how an activity was completed and when physical motion was undertaken. The main aim of the study was to derive a set of robust measures capable of accurately detailing both the work done in physical exercise (activity quantity) and the mechanics of the physical motion involved (activity quality). These measures were also quasi-continuous and logged so that an unbroken historical assessment of performance could be made.

We provide validation evidence that these measures can be obtained, in quantified units, from ankle-worn acceleration sensors and that they allow multiparameter analysis of children's activity within the semicontrolled environment of a standard MSFT. Accelerometer data traces, recorded at rates of 10s of hertz, adequately capture the kinetics of physical motion, allowing us to differentiate stride patterns as they alter during an activity sequence and vary between children. The study demonstrates that through the adoption of low cost, wearable sensors allied to automated data analysis, investigations of the kinetics of motion can be undertaken outside a sports performance laboratory, within a field setting. The technology platform and protocols are also robust enough to implement in large cohort studies. Thus, our approach



**FIGURE 6**—A, Stride frequency versus  $\alpha_{\max}$  of two children as they progress through the sections of activity. Solid lines indicate lines of best fit. B, Stride profile quotient versus BMI percentile of eight children taking part in the test. C, Stride profile quotient versus height. D, Stride profile quotient versus weight.

bridges the disciplines of gait biomechanics and exercise science, introducing for the first time in-field, detailed motion analysis into studies of children's activity.

The usual result of the MSFT is a duration—time spent in the test. Thus, as an activity assessment, this presents a black box approach in which the mechanisms influencing a child's performance and the causes that lead them to drop out from the test remain hidden. Here we show that by recording physical motion through accelerometry, we can reveal the driving influences on performance. Time-resolved gait analysis, based on multiple metrics of foot impact force, leg lift angle, and stride frequency, provides a record of the physical responses made in reaction to the workload demands of the test. This temporal profiling provides a holistic assessment of performance as it describes the accuracy with which an individual can control their physical exertion to meet a specific performance level. This reveals the influence of physical competence, taken in their totality and relate to “physical literacy,” which is an important area of research. Our results demonstrate that high performers exhibit a tight and accurately controlled increase in work rate to match the running speed of the test whereas poor performers displayed widely varying gait speed often mismatched to the test level. The frequency spectra of the running traces did also show a gender difference. Boy and girl subgroups were compared by the cross correlation of their frequency spectra to form a correlation matrix for the population. Statistical differences between girl and boy subgroups were present ( $P = 0.05$ ).

This work brings together measures of aerobic fitness and physical literacy and enables the assessment of both from the MSFT, which has historically only been used to assess the former. The quantitative description of physical activity provided by the accelerometer data also allows profiling across a cohort. The physical motion history recorded within the fitness test can be used to parameterize each child's performance in terms of their adaptation to the intervention of increased running speed. We use this to rank the children according to their use of increased stride length or stride frequency. A bivariate analysis of this physical performance parameter to BMI demonstrates a significant negative correlation between the two. Further analysis of the shows that body mass is the primary determining factor in this correlation (17). Literature has highlighted limitations associated with the MSFT, particularly when used for assessing children and a case for submaximal testing has been made (1,14). Measures of gait along with descriptive measures of how an individual performs in a running test such as these derived as part of this protocol may go on to inform the design of better submaximal tests in the future.

These findings are novel in that they report quality metrics of children's physical activity in a field setting. Moreover, this approach takes gait analysis to a population level allowing movement quality to be added to the widely reported metric of movement quantity at scale. Further, these findings have demonstrated that movement quality differs according to body weight, adding more detail to factors that contribute to movement. This is important in

children's studies where the development of quality as well as quantity of movement is apparent in clinical groups (13,23) but is largely missing from descriptive and intervention literature. Further investigations are required to apply this approach to other frequently occurring fundamental movements that can be measured at a population level.

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